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Ally Blue

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#### Warning

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#### **Chapter One**

Eli Rains walked out of the cold December afternoon and into the warmth of the I Heart That City bar with a sigh of relief. Catching Bridget's eye across the packed room, he waved and started making his way through the lunch crowd to the bar.

"Hi, gorgeous." He leaned his elbows on the bar and gave her a grin. "I have a delivery for Emmy."

"Hey, Eli." Bridget smiled at him as she held a pitcher under the faucet and filled it with water. "She's in the middle of a 'temperamental recipe,' whatever that means. Can I sign for it?"

"Yeah." He shrugged off his waterproof backpack, opened it, then fished out the small box containing whatever exotic spices Emmy had ordered this week. With a quick glance around him, he leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Is he here today?"

"Yep. Same booth as usual." Bridget's green eyes cut toward the corner booth next to the hallway leading to the bathrooms. "He doesn't have his laptop this time. What do you think that means?"

"I don't know, Bridget. Why don't you ask him?" He handed her the delivery slip and a pen. "Here."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Oh, please. You're just as curious as I am about our mystery man there. More, even, because I just want to know why he always looks like he's up to something, and you want in his pants."

Since that was perfectly true, Eli didn't say anything. While Bridget signed for the package, Eli darted a glance at the man in question. Sure enough, the MacBook he usually had open on the scarred wooden table was missing. Instead, the stranger sat hunched over last week's copy of *Newsweek*, a hank of dark brown hair half obscuring his face. Only his sharp chin and the soft, sweet curve of his mouth showed beneath his long bangs.

Eli swallowed and looked away. His long bike pants, though warm enough for even the coldest winter day, fit him like a second skin and thus did not do a damn thing to hide his predictable reaction to the sight of the stranger. Ever since the guy first showed up at I Heart That City just over a week ago, Eli'd been having wet dreams about those damned beautiful lips wrapped around his cock.

Across the bar, Bridget snickered as she handed back the signed delivery slip. "Think of your grandma naked. Zach says it works for him."

The image popped into Eli's head before he could stop it. He shuddered. "Yeah, thanks for that. You're a real friend."

She laughed. "Why don't you just ask him out? The worst he can do is say no."

"Actually, the worst he can do is shoot me in the head or something." Eli tucked the delivery slip into the pouch on the inside of his backpack. "No, thanks."

"Jeez, you're paranoid." She gave him a critical once-over. "Come to think of it, today wouldn't be a great time to ask him out anyway. You're not exactly dressed for it."

"I'm a bike messenger, Bridget. I'm always dressed like this."

"Yeah, but that shirt's awful. Makes you look like a bumblebee."

"It does not." He glanced down his body. The black bike pants looked good hugging his muscular legs, but he had to admit she had a point about the black-and-yellow-striped fleece shirt. "Okay, so maybe it does."

She shook her head, lips quirked into a fond smile. "You own your own company. Why don't you buy some expensive suits, get yourself a Mercedes, and pay some other poor sap to ride a bicycle around Richmond delivering shit?"

He laughed out loud. "Even if Rainy Day Deliveries made enough money for me to buy those things—which it doesn't— I don't want to be cooped up in an office all day. I'd rather do my own deliveries and pay some poor sap to do all the boring stuff."

"Rains, you're crazy." Picking up her water pitcher, she walked around the end of the bar. "You coming here for dinner tonight?"

"Yep. Got nothing else to do."

"You might, if you'd grow a pair and ask Mr. Mysterious out."

He rolled his eyes. "Bye, Bridget."

"Bye, hon. Wear that red bike shirt next time; it suits your skin tone." She gave him a wink and a wave before heading off to check on her customers.

Chuckling to himself, Eli wove his way through the tables to the door. The fine rain that had been falling on and off all

morning had started up again when he walked outside. Sighing, he jogged around the corner of the building to where he'd chained his bike to a small metal rack; he pulled his poncho out of his saddlebag and shrugged it on. Most of the time, he loved pedaling through Richmond's lively streets. But damn, he hated this cold, gray drizzle. It made him feel numb right through.

He unlocked the bike chain and tucked it into his saddlebag, then mounted his bike. As he glided down the short alley to the road, he narrowly avoided hitting a massive man in a pale gray suit who walked out in front of him. He swerved to a stop.

"Watch where you're going, jerk," the man snarled without slowing his pace.

Eli glared after the retreating back. "Asshole," he muttered under his breath, thinking the man wouldn't hear.

Apparently his assumption was wrong. The man flipped Eli off over his shoulder. Fuming, Eli stepped hard on his right pedal to continue on his way. The bike shot forward. Eli caught a glimpse of a black coat, a pale face, and a pair of wide eyes before his front wheel collided with the person who'd suddenly walked past the corner of the building into his path. Eli, his bike, and whoever he'd hit tumbled over the curb and into the road, landing in a heap at the entrance to the alley.

The impact knocked all the air from Eli's lungs. He lay there for a moment, trying to breathe and mentally checking himself for possible injuries. His left knee felt scraped raw, but that seemed to be it.

Eli aimed a deadly glare in the direction the rude man had gone. If that jackass hadn't distracted him, he wouldn't have just mowed down some poor innocent bystander. And if he'd broken his bike...

Shutting his eyes, Eli took a couple of slow, deep breaths to calm the fury boiling inside him. He hated getting this angry. It didn't happen often, but when it did, he had a tendency to say and do very bad things. He really didn't want to have to kick his own ass later because he lost his temper.

Something under his legs stirred and let out a hiss. "Ah, crap. Ow."

Shit. Eli's eyes sprang open. Disentangling himself, he scrambled to his feet. A man in black jeans and coat lay facedown on the pavement with Eli's bike on top of him. Eli pulled the bike off, deposited it on the sidewalk, and knelt beside the huddled form.

"Hey, are you okay?" Eli grasped the man by the shoulders and rolled him gently onto his side. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Let go of me, dammit." The stranger struggled out of Eli's grip, sat up, and leveled a deadly glare at him. "What the hell's your problem? You nearly killed me."

Eli didn't answer. He was too busy staring slack-jawed into the angry blue-gray eyes of the man he'd been lusting after for the past week.

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#### **Chapter Two**

Oh my God, he's even more gorgeous up close. It wasn't the most appropriate first thought when he'd just run over someone—especially when that person might be injured—but Eli couldn't help it. This close, the stranger's mouth looked more sinful than sweet, and the curve of his neck gave Eli a strong urge to bite.

He didn't realize he'd leaned a little too close until the man planted a palm in the center of his chest and pushed. "Back. The fuck. Off."

Shaking himself out of his daze, Eli stood up. "Sorry. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

Eli had his doubts about that, considering the angle at which the man's right leg was twisted, but he kept it to himself. The stranger pushed to his feet. He took a single step and yelped as his leg collapsed.

Lunging forward, Eli caught the man before he could fall. "What is it? Where are you hurt?"

"My knee." The man leaned against Eli's chest, keeping his right foot off the ground. "Shit."

The stranger was the perfect height for Eli to bury his face in the thick brown hair. He settled for taking a surreptitious sniff. God but the man smelled good.

Inappropriate, Eli. Get a grip.

Eli cleared his throat. "Let's get you inside, and I'll get some ice for your knee." Shifting the stranger's weight, Eli

cinched an arm around his waist and pulled him close. "I am so, so sorry I hit you, uh..." He darted a glance at the pain-pinched face next to him. "What's your name?"

"Tyron." A slender arm slid around Eli's back to grasp his shoulder.

"Tyron." Eli lifted the man over the curb and onto the sidewalk. The tough-guy name didn't match the slight body, the large, pale eyes, or the heart-shaped face. Not that it mattered, really. Just one more fascinating thing about him, as far as Eli was concerned. "Tyron what?"

"Sebers."

Eli waited for more, but Tyron just limped along in tightlipped silence. Not a big surprise, since most people weren't too keen on making small talk with someone who'd just run over them with a bicycle. Eli gave a mental shrug. He'd gotten Tyron's attention, even if it wasn't exactly the way he would've planned to do it. Maybe once Tyron got over being mad at him, they could get to know each other.

He refused to think any further ahead. One step at a time. After all, he didn't even know whether Tyron was gay. The odds were against it.

The door opened as they approached. The bartender, Zach, held it ajar for them. "What happened? Bridget said you ran into someone with your bike. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but the fall hurt Tyron's knee." Eli tightened his arm around Tyron's waist and guided him through the doorway. "Can you get me an ice bag?"

"Sure thing." Zach shut the door behind them. "Be right back."

While Zach jogged off, Eli snagged an empty chair from a nearby table and lowered Tyron into it. "I'm gonna roll your pants leg up and have a look at your knee, okay?"

Tyron looked distinctly uncomfortable but allowed Eli to kneel at his feet and ruck up the right leg of his jeans. He winced when Eli revealed the knee, which was already swollen and starting to bruise. "Shit. I was hoping it wouldn't look as bad as it feels."

Eli prodded at the purpling flesh as gently as he could. Tyron flinched, and Eli yanked his hand back. "You should get that x-rayed."

"Hell no. I'm not sitting around the damn ER for the rest of the afternoon."

"But-"

"I'll go to the doctor tomorrow." Tyron's lips curved into a wan smile. "Are you always this much of a mother hen?"

"Only with guys I run over on my bike." *Especially the ones I want to get into bed*. He kept that part in his head where it belonged.

Tyron's smile widened. His eyes warmed, and Eli felt a thread of heat curl in his gut.

A swath of emerald green fabric swirled at the periphery of Eli's vision. He glanced up. Emmy smiled and knelt gracefully on the floor beside him, her long skirt settling into a gauzy green puddle around her. "Zach said we had an injury out here and asked me to take a look." She handed a dish towel and a plastic bag full of ice to Eli. "By the way, Eli, Zach said to tell you he's taking care of your bike."

"Oh, good. Thanks." Eli took the bag and towel. "Emmy, this is Tyron. Tyron, this is Emmy."

"Hi, Tyron." She pressed her fingers to the bruised skin on the front of his knee before he could greet her in return. He hissed, and she looked up at him. "Does that hurt?"

"Yeah." Tyron swore and shoved Emmy's hand away when she palpated around the inside edge of his kneecap. "Shit. Sorry. That hurts a *lot*."

"Hm." Taking the ice bag from Eli, Emmy wrapped the towel around it and pressed it to Tyron's knee. "It's probably just a minor sprain, but it's possible you might have torn ligaments or something. You really need an X-ray just to make sure nothing's broken, then an MRI to check out the ligaments and see if there's any substantial injury."

"Um. Okay." Tyron put a hand over the ice bag to hold it in place. "I was just telling Eli that I'd go to the doctor tomorrow."

Emmy pursed her lips. "It's better if you go to the emergency room now."

"I don't have all day to sit in a damn waiting room."

Sighing, Emmy rose to her feet. "I think you're making a mistake. But it's your decision." She snagged a discarded drink napkin from a nearby table, pulled a pen from the pocket of her skirt, then scribbled for a moment. "Here. This is the number of a Reiki practitioner I know. I think it'll help. Tell her Emmy sent you."

Tyron took the napkin she handed him and stared after her as she glided off. "What the hell is Reiki?"

Eli stood, stretching out his cramped legs. "From what I understand, it's a type of healing touch. Balancing the body's energy or something."

"Oh." Tyron frowned at his knee. "Who was that, one of those homeopathic healers or something?"

"No. Emmy's the cook here."

Tyron's eyes widened. "The cook?"

"Yeah. She knows a little bit about everything, first aid included." Eli grinned. "Don't worry. She knows what she's talking about. I think she lets people believe she's a flake just to keep 'em off balance."

"Oh. Okay." Tyron ran his free hand through his hair. The thick bangs were swept aside for a moment, then fell right back over his eyes. "Look, I appreciate your help, and everyone being so nice and all, but I really, *really* need to go. Could you call me a cab?"

Eli bit his lip, unsure of how to answer. On the one hand, he had no legitimate reason to keep Tyron here, especially when he'd made it obvious he wanted to leave. On the other hand, once he was gone there was no guarantee he'd ever be back, and Eli found the thought of never seeing Tyron again intolerable. Embarrassing but true.

A burst of inspiration hit. Eli laid a hand on Tyron's good knee. "Why don't you let me take you to the urgent care clinic? The wait probably won't be as long as at the ER, and they can x-ray your knee and give you something for pain." To Eli's relief, he didn't sound as pathetically eager as he felt. Just because Tyron made him feel like a teenage girl with a crush didn't mean he had to announce it to the world.

Tyron darted a questioning glance at Eli's hand but didn't say anything or try to make Eli move. "I guess that's okay. But I can take a cab there."

The crafty gleam in Tyron's eyes told Eli that once he got in a taxi, Tyron would bypass the urgent care and go straight home. Eli shook his head. "Nope. No cab. This whole thing is my fault, and I'm going to take care of it."

Tyron's eyebrows went up. "What're you going to do? Ride me to the urgent care on your handlebars?"

"Ha-ha." Pulling off his poncho, Eli unzipped the pocket of his shirt, fished out his cell phone, and brought up the cell number for one of the few other delivery people he employed. "I'm calling someone to take over for me so I can drive you."

"Oh, come on. I—"

When his employee answered her cell, Eli held up a hand, silencing Tyron's protest. "Hey, Kaylee. Listen, where are you with your deliveries? Can you take over the bike route for me?"

"A cab could've gotten here faster," Tyron said after Eli explained the situation to Kaylee and cut off the call. "And you and whoever you were talking to wouldn't have to interrupt what you're doing."

"Kaylee can be here in five minutes. And she can handle the rest of the deliveries with no problem. There's nothing left for today that won't fit on a bike." Eli stuck the phone back in his pocket and flashed his very best dazzling smile. "Give it up, Tyron. You're stuck with me."

Tyron crossed his arms and scowled, but Eli didn't miss the flash of heat in those big, pretty eyes or the way they darted a swift, appreciative look up and down his body.

Grinning, Eli pulled up a chair and parked himself next to Tyron. It looked like his day had just gotten much more interesting.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours and twenty-five minutes later, Eli pulled his car into a miraculously empty spot on the street in front of Tyron's apartment building. It was an older structure, located on a bustling street only three blocks from I Heart That City. Eli wondered why he'd never seen Tyron at the bar before the past week. Under normal circumstances, he would've just asked, but evidently urgent care centers made Tyron cranky and uncommunicative.

Unbuckling his seat belt, Eli twisted around to face Tyron, who sat in the back with his right leg resting on the seat. "Hang on, I'll come around and help you out."

"I can manage myself." Tyron scooted carefully forward and stretched his arm toward the door. The brace covering his leg from hip to ankle meant he couldn't bend the knee, which in turn meant he couldn't reach the door. He slid forward another few inches, and his foot hit the door handle. "Ow! Shit."

Shaking his head, Eli swung his door open and climbed out. "Just be still and wait, will you? I'll be there in five seconds."

Tyron's head swiveled around. He aimed a frustrated glare at Eli. "One. Two. Thr—"

Eli shut the door, cutting off Tyron's countdown. He trotted around to the right rear door and opened it.

"Seven." Tyron pointed an accusing finger as Eli leaned into the car to help him out. "You told me five. Liar."

Chuckling, Eli took hold of Tyron's hand and helped him scoot across the seat toward the open door. "Anyone ever told you you're a smart-ass?"

"Occasionally." Cradling his right leg in his free hand, Tyron rested his foot on the curb. "You'll have to get the crutches out."

Eli thought about mentioning the swift turnaround from "I can manage myself" to ordering him around but decided against it. If he'd learned anything in the last couple of hours, it was that Tyron had a hair-trigger temper and didn't always see the humor—or the irony—in his own words.

Good thing he also possessed such a frighteningly keen intellect and sharp sense of humor, or Eli would've been forced to go after him based on looks alone. Eli liked to think he wasn't that shallow.

He opened the front passenger door, pulled out the crutches, and leaned them against the side of the car, then bent and hooked an arm through Tyron's. "Hang on to me."

Brow furrowed and teeth digging into his lower lip, Tyron used Eli's arm to lever himself to a standing position. Working together, they managed to get Tyron balanced on the curb with his crutches under his arms.

"Okay." Eli locked the car and shoved the keys into his shirt pocket. "I hope your building has an elevator." He'd worried about that as soon as he noticed the age of the place. Not that he wouldn't enjoy trying to carry Tyron, but the guy wasn't *that* light, and Eli's muscles didn't get anywhere near Mr. Universe territory.

"There is." Tyron took a tentative step with his crutches, face screwed up in concentration. "But there's no need for you to come up. I can take it from here."

Eli stared at Tyron, his mind racing. Now more than ever, he wanted to get to know Tyron better. And judging by how much Tyron had relaxed around him over the course of the afternoon, the feeling might be mutual. Eli couldn't bring himself to walk away from that possibility. The problem was, he had no idea how to say such a thing to someone he'd only just met.

Tyron cleared his throat. "Well. Um. Okay. I guess I'll go now." He glanced away. When his gaze met Eli's again, the uncertainty Eli thought he'd seen in Tyron's eyes was gone. He held out his hand. "Thanks for everything."

Not knowing what else to do, Eli took Tyron's hand and shook. When Tyron's slim fingers slid away from his, sheer desperation loosened Eli's tongue. "Can I see you again?"

Tyron's eyes widened just enough to give away his surprise at the question. Eli cringed inside. *Oh, good plan, genius. Scare him off*.

To his relief, Tyron nodded, a sweet little smile on his lips. "Yeah, okay."

Yes! Eli resisted a crow of triumph with a huge effort. "Great. Why don't I stop by tomorrow on my bike route?"

"Sounds good. I work at home, so I'm there most of the time. I'm in apartment three sixteen." A sheepish expression crossed Tyron's face. "It's kind of a wreck. I just moved in a couple of weeks ago, and I haven't really unpacked yet."

That explained why he'd only just started to hang out at I Heart That City. Eli nodded. "Hey, I can't say a thing about anyone else's mess. You should see my place. Oh, hang on a sec."

Going back to his car, Eli opened it and leaned in to rifle through the glove compartment. He found his business card case and took out a card. As he turned around again, Tyron's gaze shifted upward and he blushed. Eli blinked. Was he just checking out my ass?

Something about that made Eli feel bold. Stepping much closer than was strictly necessary, he snaked his arm around Tyron's waist and tucked the card into the back pocket of his jeans. "My card." He drew his hand out of Tyron's pocket, letting his fingers brush Tyron's hip on the way out from under his jacket. "Call me if you need anything."

Tyron's breath hitched. His lips parted, and Eli had to fight the urge to kiss him.

"Um. All right." Tyron's words came out rough and shaky. Eli liked to think his closeness was to blame for that, though he supposed pain and fatigue might be contributing factors as well.

Speaking of which. Eli drew back with great reluctance. "Okay, well, I'll go and let you get some rest. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah. See you." With a quick little smile, Tyron turned and made his painstaking way to the door of his building.

Eli stood and watched until Tyron disappeared inside. Then he stood awhile longer, gazing at the door and thinking. Tyron intrigued him as few people had ever done. He wasn't even certain why. Sure, Tyron was smart, clever, witty, and undeniably attractive in the geeky, bookish way that Eli had always found alluring in a man. But Eli had known plenty of those types over the years, including the lover who'd drawn him to Richmond in the first place before dumping him. What was it that made Tyron so fascinating?

Eli had no idea. With any luck, though, he'd have plenty of time to find out. Starting tomorrow.

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#### **Chapter Three**

Eli's doorbell rang. As with every other time it had rung in the last hour, his heart lurched and his pulse sped up. He knew why—because this time, it might be Tyron at the door.

Pathetic, really. He couldn't help it, though. Over the past two weeks, he and Tyron had gotten into the habit of having dinner together most nights, and Eli had become hopelessly addicted to the man's company. He tried to tell himself he hadn't invited Tyron to his New Year's Eve party in the hope of getting him into bed, but it didn't work. He knew damn well that was exactly what he hoped would happen.

Excusing himself from the group of neighbors he'd been talking to, Eli hurried to the front door of his house and flung it open. Kaylee and her husband, Dennis, stood on the covered porch.

"Hi, Eli." Kaylee stood on tiptoe to kiss Eli's cheek. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you too." Eli hugged Kaylee, then shook hands with Dennis. "Hi, Dennis. Glad you could make it."

"Eli." Dennis grinned. "Thanks for inviting us."

"Hey, no party would be complete without you guys."

Stepping back, Eli swept his arm toward the rec room at the end of the front hall. "Come on in.

Kaylee and Dennis brushed past Eli and into the hall. Eli was about to close the door when a taxi pulled up to the front of the house. He paused, one hand on the door. His pulse was

galloping again, his palms sweaty and his mouth dry. This had to be Tyron. Everyone else he'd invited either lived close enough to walk or had a car.

Sure enough, the back door of the cab opened and Tyron climbed out. He retrieved his crutches and shut the cab door. Eli watched, smiling, as Tyron swung himself along the walkway. He'd gotten the hang of the crutches pretty quickly. Having spent six weeks on the damn things several years before, Eli knew exactly how hard it could be to get around on them. He admired the hell out of the other man for making it look not only easy, but downright graceful.

"Hey," he called as Tyron made his way up the steps. "I was starting to think you weren't gonna show."

Tyron's gaze shifted sideways. "Yeah, sorry about that. I, uh, I had some stuff to take care of before I came over."

Eli bit back the questions he wanted to ask. He'd seen that veiled, cautious look in Tyron's eyes before, every time he got another vague nonanswer in response to a question about Tyron's work. He knew Tyron did freelance Web security and design work for various high-profile companies. What he didn't know was what *else* Tyron did. Instinct told him Tyron had something on the side. Something he didn't share with anyone.

Lately, Eli had become rather obsessed with learning Tyron's secrets.

"I tell you what. I've been swamped these last few days." Tyron levered himself over the last step and onto the porch. He flipped his hair out of his eyes and grinned up at Eli. "I'm sure as shit ready for a party."

Eli's insides fluttered the way they did every time Tyron looked at him like that. He smiled. "Well then, come on in and relax."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

Tyron crossed the porch and went through the front door. Eli followed, hands clasped together to keep himself from molesting the man right there in the foyer. God but he looked good enough to eat, in ass-hugging black pants and a black leather bomber jacket.

Inside, Eli closed the door. "Here, give me your jacket."

Balancing on his left foot, Tyron leaned his crutches against the wall and shrugged out of his coat. He handed it to Eli. "How many people did you invite? There must be two-dozen cars out there."

Eli swallowed, trying not to notice how Tyron's maroon sweater clung to his chest. "I'm not sure. Fifty, maybe?"

"Good grief." Tyron retrieved his crutches while Eli hung the jacket on the coat tree. "You sure have a lot of friends."

Was that a hint of melancholy in Tyron's voice? Eli wasn't sure. He'd never met any of Tyron's friends, but surely he had plenty of them. He might not be as outgoing as Eli, but he was fantastic company once you got to know him.

Eli shrugged as they started down the hall together. "I invited all my regular clients, my employees, and my neighbors. I guess you could call most of them friends."

"That's really cool."

This time, Eli heard the wistfulness in Tyron's words loud and clear. It hurt his heart to think that Tyron might be lonelier than he'd let on.

Acting on impulse, Eli laid a hand on Tyron's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Well, I hope you don't mind being introduced to all fifty-something of them, because you're about to be."

Tyron shot him an uncharacteristically shy smile. "No, I don't mind."

"Good." Leaving his hand on Tyron's shoulder, Eli steered him to where the handful of employees of Rainy Day Deliveries sat talking. "Guys, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Tyron Sebers. Tyron, this is my business manager, Stewart Hammond, and his life partner, Joe Wells, my receptionist, Trish Simmons, and Kaylee's husband, Dennis Fleming. You remember Kaylee? She's my delivery driver." A chorus of "hello" and "nice to meet you" greeted them. Eli plopped onto the empty love seat and patted the cushion beside him. "Here. Sit."

Tyron shook hands with everyone, then lowered himself onto the love seat beside Eli and rested his crutches against the wall. "Nice to meet you all. Good to see you again, Kaylee."

"You too." She nodded toward his injured leg. "How's the knee?"

"Better. I'm still not allowed full weight-bearing on it, but at least I'm in a hinged brace now instead of that stupid long leg brace." Tyron grimaced. "It got really old trying to get around without ever bending my leg."

"I bet." Kaylee leaned forward and lowered her voice.
"Speaking of which, did anybody read yesterday's Naked Richmond?"

"Oh yeah." Trish took a sip of her orange juice. "He really skewered that new department store, didn't he?"

Eli frowned. "What's Naked Richmond?"

"Oh my God, Eli." Stewart shook his head. "You need to get off your bike once in a while and get online."

"Naked Richmond is a blog," Joe explained with an exasperated glance at Stewart. "The blogger, whoever he or she is, goes by the name 'The Flasher.' The blog's all about Richmond. Where to go, what to do, who's crooked, and who's honest. Anything and everything about our fair city. In fact, the Flasher's the one who first broke the story about the county clerk embezzling from the mayor's office last year, remember?"

"I remember that being on the news for weeks on end. It was huge. That broke on this blog you're talking about?" Eli was impressed in spite of himself. He'd never spent much time on the many local blogs, but he thought he might have to give this one a try.

"Yeah. He's always doing shit like that. Yesterday's post rated the top-ten best and worst handicap access in downtown-area businesses. Norton's new department store got a minus-three out of ten and a new asshole ripped out of it." Trish downed the rest of her juice and set the empty cup on the nearby windowsill. "Excuse me. I'm going to the bathroom."

While Trish rose and headed off down the hall, Tyron tilted his head sideways in a way Eli found disturbingly adorable and eyed the rest of the group with curiosity. "I've read Naked Richmond. I think it's interesting, but I know a lot of

people who think the guy's just stirring the pot for the hell of it. What do you guys think?"

"I'm a fan," Joe declared. "The Flasher tells it like it is." Stewart snorted. "He's a damn troublemaker."

"You only say that because he got your favorite taco bar shut down." Winding an arm around Stewart's shoulders, Joe pecked his partner on the cheek. "The place had roaches, Stew."

"Small price to pay for the best damn tacos in town." Stewart sighed. "Well, at least it's never a *dull* blog."

"This is true." Dennis stood, his empty glass in his hand.
"Hey, Tyron, you want a drink? Eli's got the best-stocked bar in town."

Tyron nodded. "A bourbon and Coke would be great, thanks."

"I'll get it." Eli rose to his feet. "Be right back." Tyron smiled. "Okay."

"I'll come with you. I'm after some of that fine scotch you've got." Dennis nudged his wife's leg with his foot. "You want a beer, babe?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind."

As he and Dennis threaded their way through the crowded rec room to the bar, Eli heard Kaylee asking Tyron what he did for a living. Eli chuckled. "I hope they don't pick him apart while I'm gone."

"Naw, they'll be gentle. Joe'll keep Kaylee and Stewart in line." Dennis shot Eli a sly glance. "So. Eli."

"Dennis."

"Tyron seems like a nice guy."

Warmth blossomed in Eli's chest. He smiled. "He's great."
"Uh-huh." Dennis followed Eli around the back of the bar
and reached into the refrigerator for a bottle of beer. He
twisted the cap off. "So, is this a thing?"

Eli raised his eyebrows. "A thing?" Bending down, he grabbed the best bottle of bourbon he owned from the shelf. "What do you mean?"

"C'mon, you know what I mean." Dennis snagged the Coke from the refrigerator and handed it to Eli. "Are you two an item?"

"Not yet." Eli took a glass from the cabinet above the sink and half filled it with ice and Coke.

"Not yet, huh?" Dennis chuckled. "Meaning you'd like to be."

Eli poured a healthy portion of bourbon into the glass. "Well, I can't say I haven't thought about it."

"Hm." Dennis splashed Scotch into a glass, grabbed Kaylee's beer bottle around the neck, and started back toward the group. "My friend, you want that boy so bad you were practically drooling down his neck. I hope he's ready for Hurricane Eli to hit him."

Eli's cheeks heated in spite of himself. "Shut up."

Dennis snickered but didn't say anything else, much to Eli's relief. He really didn't feel like having a heart-to-heart with Dennis about his feelings for Tyron, whatever they might be. Especially now, with the man in question close enough to spot the soppy smile Eli knew damn well he wore.

As he and Dennis approached the group, Tyron was laughing at something Kaylee had said. Eli stood there for a

moment, watching. Tyron's wide smile lit his face from the inside. The sight made Eli's heart thud against his sternum. Tyron was a serious, intense person much of the time. Seeing him laugh like this was a rare thing. Eli thought he might easily become addicted to it.

Stepping carefully over Tyron's feet, Eli reclaimed the empty spot beside him. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Tyron took the glass and sipped at the amber liquid. "Mm. Wow, Eli, you didn't have to use the good stuff. Any brand would've been fine."

"Hey, I'm still making up for nearly killing you." Eli bumped Tyron's shoulder with his. "I had no idea you knew so much about liquor."

"I know about lots of things." Tyron took another swallow of his drink, licked his lips, and pinned Eli with a sharp, searching look. "And you didn't even come close to killing me. Besides, we'd probably never have met if you hadn't run me over, and I kind of like hanging out with you."

Tyron's tone was light and teasing, but his gaze was not. Eli's cock jerked with a sudden rush of desire. He shifted in his seat. As if in reaction to Eli's arousal, heat flared in Tyron's eyes.

They stared at each other. The sounds of music and conversation seemed to fade. Eli imagined he could hear the thud of Tyron's heartbeat, as rapid as his own. Then Tyron blushed and looked away, and the moment was broken.

Eli leaned back against the love seat cushions, trying to get his breath back. He glanced at his watch. Still three hours until midnight and he knew he wouldn't be able to think of a

damn thing the whole time but kissing Tyron when the clock struck twelve.

\* \* \* \*

The hours passed in a blur of beer, chips, laughter, and conversation. In spite of his natural reserve, Tyron blended right in with the friendly, boisterous crowd. Eli trailed after him for a while, lost track of him, and eventually found him in the kitchen as the clock crept to within a couple of minutes of the New Year. He and Eli's neighbors, Julia and Sandy, were involved in a fierce debate over some computer-related subject. Eli caught something about firewalls and cookies and knew he'd better bust it up before the three of them missed the big moment altogether.

"All right, kids." Eli strolled up and slung an arm around Tyron's shoulder in what he hoped was a casual manner. "It's almost midnight. Everyone's gathering in the rec room for the countdown. You guys better come on."

"Oh yeah! Don't wanna miss that." Leaning against Eli's shoulder, Tyron tilted his head back and flashed a wide, mischievous smile. "You're gonna kiss me, right?"

Shock at hearing his own hopes coming out of Tyron's mouth had Eli gaping like a fish for a moment. He stared at Tyron while Julia and Sandy nearly fell over each other laughing. It took Tyron's grin fading into a heartbreaking uncertainty for Eli to shake off his paralysis.

Tightening his arm around Tyron, Eli used his free hand to brush the curtain of hair away from those big, beautiful eyes. "The idea had occurred to me, yes."

The smile came back, bigger and brighter than ever. Tyron hummed and tucked his head under Eli's chin. "Good. Been wanting to kiss you forever."

Eli's head spun as all the blood in his brain went rushing southward. "Jesus."

Julia cackled. "Go, Eli! You're gettin' some tonight."

"Well, we're not gonna be watching." Grabbing Julia's wrist, Sandy tugged her toward the kitchen door. "Come on. Let's get back to the party and let these two have their own private party."

The women left the kitchen, Julia complaining the whole time that she wanted to watch the two men make out. Eli tilted Tyron's chin up and searched his face. "Are you drunk? Because I'm not taking advantage of you if you are."

The fuzzy look vanished from Tyron's eyes. He stared up at Eli with an intensity that made his palms sweat. "I'm not drunk. And you wouldn't be taking advantage of me even if I was."

Eli dipped his head enough to catch the faint, fresh scent of Tyron's hair. "Please be sure about this."

"I'm sure." Tyron raised both arms and draped them around Eli's neck. The crutches clattered to the floor. "I can't wait till midnight, Eli. Kiss me, right now, then take me to bed."

Eli's knees wobbled. *Oh God*. Finally. Unable to speak, he cradled the back of Tyron's head in one hand, wound the other arm around his waist, and fused their mouths together.

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#### **Chapter Four**

Ever since before they'd met, Eli had been thinking of this moment. He'd pictured it in his head over and over. Woken from vivid dreams of it with heart racing and the sheets damp with sweat. The real thing, however, blew his fantasies out of the water. Tyron's lips were warm and pliant, his slick tongue spiced with bourbon. And God, the sweet, desperate noises he made were enough to destroy any control Eli might have had left.

Ignoring the whoops and shouts of "Happy New Year" from the next room, Eli broke the kiss, swooped down, and lifted Tyron over his shoulder. Tyron yelped in surprise. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Taking you to bed." Eli adjusted his hold so he wouldn't hurt Tyron's knee. "Thought you wanted me to."

"Yeah, but there's no need to go all caveman on me."

Tyron squirmed in Eli's grip, both hands clenched in his shirt.

"I can walk; I just need my crutches."

"I know, but I don't want to let go of you that long." Eli gave Tyron's ass a smack. "Be still."

A sharp intake of breath sounded from behind Eli's back. Tyron didn't say anything, but the iron hardness digging into Eli's collarbone told him all he needed to know.

Eli considered going upstairs to the master bedroom, but he didn't think he could make it that far. Instead, he hurried across the deserted dining room, opened the door to the

guest suite—currently not in use, thank God—and deposited Tyron on the bed as gently as he could.

He took the time to shut the door and switch on the bedside lamp before turning his full attention to the man he'd been lusting after for weeks. Even with his clothes still on, Tyron looked sexy as hell sprawled across the burgundy comforter, cheeks flushed and lips swollen from kissing. His cock formed a noticeable ridge beneath his zipper. Eli wanted to yank the man's jeans off, shove his legs apart, and eat him one bite at a time.

The tip of Tyron's tongue snaked out to wet his lips. "Eli?" "Yeah?" Eli watched, mesmerized, as that pink tongue traced the outline of Tyron's mouth.

Tyron grinned. "Why don't you undress me now?"

Oh, hell yeah. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, Eli shoved Tyron's sweater up, bent, and sucked one pink nipple into his mouth. Tyron gasped, back arching. Eli drew back with a smile. "Arms up."

Tyron obediently raised his arms over his head, allowing Eli to pull off his sweater. The minute his arms were free, he started unbuttoning Eli's shirt. In a matter of seconds, he had it undone and pushed off Eli's shoulders.

He ran both hands up Eli's chest. "God, you're so fucking gorgeous."

"Thanks." Planting a hand on the bed beside Tyron's head, Eli leaned down to kiss him. "And you're beautiful."

Tyron let out a tiny whimper. Framing Eli's face between his hands, he kissed him again, soft and slow. When they eventually drew apart, their lips clung together as if reluctant

to let go. Eli could relate. He felt like he could happily spend days on end kissing Tyron. The only reason he forced himself to end it now was the insistent need to get his cock inside Tyron as soon as possible.

Sitting back on his heels, Eli undid the button and zipper on Tyron's jeans. "Lift up."

Tyron planted his left heel on the mattress and raised his hips. Eli eased the snug jeans over Tyron's ass and down his legs, taking care not to get the denim caught on his knee brace. Eli groaned when he found Tyron naked under his pants. His cock twitched and drizzled precum on his belly as Eli watched.

Eli's mouth watered. Pulling the jeans off Tyron's legs and tossing them on the floor, he lapped up the fluid pooling just under Tyron's navel. A low moan rewarded him. Tyron's fingers dug into his scalp. Encouraged, he moved down to nuzzle Tyron's balls. The silky-soft, slightly damp skin smelled of soap, sweat, and lust. Eli drew one delicate globe into his mouth and sucked.

That got him a gasp and an upward tilt of Tyron's hips. "God, Eli. Fuck."

Eli hummed his agreement. Tyron tasted rich and a bit salty, and Eli wanted as much of that flavor as he could get. Curling a hand around Tyron's cock, he let go of the first testicle and took the other into his mouth. His tongue stirred the dark hairs and rasped over the tender skin. Tyron keened and squirmed under him.

As much he loved sucking Tyron's balls, Eli wanted to taste more of him than that. Releasing his sac with a faint *pop*, Eli

planted both palms on Tyron's ass and pushed upward. Tyron's backside lifted, his legs curling toward his chest.

He let out a surprised *yip* as Eli spread his cheeks apart. "What're you doing?"

"Your knee okay?"

"Yeah." Cradling his right leg in both hands, Tyron twisted his torso sideways and stared at Eli with wide eyes. "Eli?"

"Relax." Tyron's muscles stood out hard and tense in his arms and chest, but he held still. Holding his buttocks wide open, Eli stared at his dusky pink hole. "So pretty."

Tyron let out a breathless laugh. "Assholes aren't pretty."

"Yeah, they are. Yours is especially pretty." Eli stroked a thumb over the tiny whorl. It clenched tight, then relaxed. Unable to hold himself back any longer, Eli bent and dragged the flat of his tongue over the sweet little hole.

Tyron let out a shout. "Ah! Oh. God."

Stiffening his tongue, Eli stabbed at the tight opening.

After a moment's resistance, the ring of muscle loosened, and Eli's tongue plunged inside. The sharp, earthy flavor exploded across his taste buds, and he gave a moan that Tyron's wails nearly drowned out.

Eli didn't stop until he had Tyron right where he wanted him: loose, wet, and incoherent. When his moans melted into sharp staccato cries and his hole began to flutter, Eli drew back and lowered his rear gently to the bed. Tyron stared up at him with lust-hazed eyes and whimpered.

Stretching forward, Eli pressed a tender kiss to Tyron's lips. "Don't worry, gorgeous. I'm just going to finish

undressing and get the necessaries. Then I'll take care of you. I promise."

"Hurry." A hand grabbed Eli's prick through his pants and squeezed hard. "I want this thing inside me so bad it fucking hurts."

Eli shut his eyes and tried to think of anything at all other than the feel of Tyron's fingers massaging his cock. No way in hell was he letting himself come in his pants. Not when he finally had Tyron naked in bed.

After a moment, he felt sufficiently in control to open his eyes. He gave Tyron a shaky smile. "Let go, huh? So I can get undressed?"

The pressure on Eli's crotch eased. Before he could get up, though, Tyron grabbed him by the neck, pulled his face down, and kissed him. "You taste like my ass. I like that." Tyron licked Eli's lips once more, then let him go. "Now get naked so you can fuck me."

Eli managed to stand in spite of his rubbery legs. He toed off his shoes, undid his pants, and shoved them down along with his underwear. His prick sprang free and smacked his belly hard enough to sting. Plopping onto the edge of the bed, he stripped off his socks, then reached into the bed stand for the lube and condom he'd stashed there earlier, just in case.

Properly equipped, he crawled back between Tyron's splayed thighs. Tyron had one hand wrapped around his prick and the other buried between his butt cheeks. Both hands were moving. Tyron's hips rocked along with the motion of his fingers. Eli bit his lip and reminded himself that he was

absolutely *not* allowed to come anywhere but inside Tyron's ass.

"Here." He tossed the lube onto Tyron's stomach. "Get yourself ready."

Grinning, Tyron pulled his fingers out of himself, snatched up the little bottle, and poured some into his palm. "Impatient much?"

"You were totally nonverbal a couple of minutes ago." Eli ripped open the packet in his hand and rolled the condom on. He kept his gaze glued to Tyron's fingers working the slick liquid into his hole. "I want you to be that way again."

The fingers emerged, reached out, and wrapped around Eli's sheathed prick. "Then hurry up and get this monster cock up my ass. That'll shut me up."

"No need for flattery. I was going to fuck you anyway." Eli reached across Tyron's body and grabbed a fat pillow. "Lift up again."

Tyron did. Eli stuffed the pillow under his hips, and the teasing spark in Tyron's eyes grew into a blaze. He stroked his hand up and down Eli's shaft. "Eli. Now."

He sounded every bit as needy as Eli felt. Eli scooted forward and lifted Tyron's legs. He planted a kiss on the injured knee where the skin showed between the straps of the brace. Resting Tyron's legs on his torso, Eli lined up his cock with Tyron's hole and pushed inside with one smooth thrust.

"Ooooh, oh my God." Tyron's bare toes curled over the shell of Eli's right ear. "Fuck. Nngh."

Eli agreed. The hot clutch of Tyron's body felt so good it was all he could do to keep from weeping like a little girl. He drew a few quick, shallow breaths. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Reaching behind him, Tyron braced his hands on the iron frame headboard. "Move."

Jesus, yes. Yes, yes, yes. Cradling Tyron's pelvis in both hands, Eli pulled partway out and slammed back in again. Tyron's insides spasmed around him. He hung on to Tyron's legs and wished the world would stop spinning. Watching Tyron's flushed face, Eli thrust again, angling up this time.

Tyron nearly came off the mattress. "Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck." His chest heaved and his eyes rolled back in his head. "Fucking do that again. Shit."

Eli grinned. Found the magic button. He hit it again. This time, Tyron's heel connected with the side of Eli's head. He held the offending leg tight against his chest and pounded into Tyron's body as hard as he could.

It didn't last long. Eli had been fairly certain going in that it wouldn't. He was okay with that. After so many weeks of wanting and not getting, a guy could only take so much, and the grip of Tyron's ass on his cock felt like nirvana. He came inside of five minutes, shuddering all over and swallowing his cries. Not that it mattered at that point. Tyron had proven to be impressively noisy already. When he climaxed a few seconds after Eli, he let out a wail that would've brought every soul in the house stampeding into the little bedroom if the party hadn't been even louder than him.

Eli carefully lowered Tyron's legs to the mattress before pulling out and falling on top of him. Tyron's spunk squelched

between their bodies. Worming a hand between them, Eli pulled the condom off and tossed it over the edge of the bed. "Jesus H., I needed that."

"Me too. C'mere." Tyron wound his good leg around Eli's hips, clamped both hands onto Eli's skull, and pulled him down for a kiss that ended up lasting nearly as long as the sex.

When they eventually pulled apart, Eli smiled at Tyron's lazy, sated expression. "I think I like the freshly fucked look on you."

"Me too. Tell you what. My ass is gonna feel that tomorrow." Tyron pressed his palms to the headboard and stretched. "Mmmm. I feel like I could sleep for a year."

"Tired?"

"Yeah." Tyron grinned. "You wore me out, you sex machine, you."

"Right. I can see where minutes on end of fucking could be pretty tiring."

"Hey, I've been burning the midnight oil lately. I'm not up to par here." As if to illustrate his point, Tyron yawned so hard his eyes watered.

"One of your clients running you ragged?"

"Not exactly."

"Oh. What's up, then?" Eli tried not to sound as curious as he felt. Tyron's willingness to talk about whatever the hell he did outside of computer work appeared to be inversely proportional to how badly Eli wanted to know.

He wasn't surprised when Tyron suddenly seemed to find the Monet print on the wall fascinating. "Nothing. Just ... stuff."

And that's all you're getting out of him tonight.

Stifling his disappointment, Eli smoothed the tangled hair from Tyron's face and kissed his nose. "Why don't you stay here and sleep some? You can spend the night if you like."

Tyron's eyes snapped into focus on Eli's face. "I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to impose."

"You're not imposing." Eli pecked Tyron on the lips before he could protest again. "Hey. We're officially sleeping together now. That means you can stay over anytime you want."

"Oh. Well. Thanks."

Tyron smiled, but his eyes were cautious, and Eli wondered why. He didn't ask, though. Some people just didn't like sleeping anywhere but their own beds. Maybe Tyron was one of those guys.

Or maybe he doesn't want the kind of relationship you do. Maybe it's just fucking for him. The possibility saddened Eli more than he cared to admit.

A loud banging on the door made him jump. Disentangling himself from Tyron's embrace, he sat up and glared at the door. "What?"

"Tyron left his crutches out here," Stewart called. "I thought I'd bring them to him before they got broken or someone tripped over them or something."

Eli could practically see the knowing smirk on Stewart's face. He shook his head. "Just a sec."

Tyron eyed the door nervously. "He's not coming in here, is he?"

"Not as long as I go over there and get your crutches before he gets tired of waiting." Eli scooted to the edge of the bed, bent over, and fished his underwear from the pile on the floor. "Don't you move. I'll be back."

Tyron smiled, and Eli's heart turned over hard. He forced himself to look away. Standing, he pulled on his underwear, hurried to the door, then cracked it open. "Hey, Stew. I'll take the crutches. Thanks."

Grinning ear to ear, Stewart passed the crutches through the opening to Eli. "I hope he can still walk. What the hell'd you do to make him scream like that?"

Heat flooded Eli's face. "Fuck you, Stew."

"No, thanks. Don't think my poor old body could take it." Stewart winked and wandered off.

Eli shut the door and leaned his forehead on it. His cheeks felt on fire. Knowing people had heard them fuck and *knowing* it were two very different things.

"Eli? Everything all right?"

"Yeah, fine." Eli turned and gave Tyron a wry smile.

"Stew's just being a smart-ass. Nothing new."

The concern on Tyron's face melted into humor. He laughed. "They heard us, huh?"

"They did, yes." Eli walked over, leaned the crutches against the wall beside the bed, then sat on the mattress. "That doesn't bother you?"

Tyron shrugged. "Not really, no. I can't seem to stop being loud, so I've kind of gotten used to other people hearing now and then."

"For some reason, I think that's sexy." Eli leaned over until he and Tyron were nose to nose. "Kiss me, sexy thing."

Laughing, Tyron wound his arms around Eli's neck and did as he was told. His tongue slid into Eli's mouth. Eli closed his eyes and let himself get lost in the feel of it.

A tinny rendition of "Ode to Joy" sounded from the pile of clothes on the floor. Tyron broke the kiss with a curse. "Shit, that's my phone. Let me up."

Eli reluctantly pushed back so Tyron could sit up. Scooting to the edge of the bed, Tyron leaned over, snatched his jeans off the floor, and took his cell phone from the front pocket. He flipped it open and put it to his ear. "Hey. What's up?"

While Tyron listened without comment to the caller, Eli stretched out on the mattress and tried to pretend he wasn't listening in. Not that he could hear anything. All he caught was the rise and fall of a female voice. He couldn't make out any of what she was saying, but her tone brimmed with excitement. If her enthusiasm for the topic of conversation—whatever it was—affected Tyron, he didn't let on. He listened in stone-faced silence while the woman chattered on and on.

Just when Eli thought he couldn't stand it anymore, Tyron finally spoke. "Okay, great. I'll call you tomorrow. Well, later today, I guess. Thanks." He clicked the phone closed and set it on the bed. He met Eli's questioning gaze with a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry, Eli, but I have to go."

"At this hour?" Eli sat up and laid a hand on Tyron's shoulder. "Is something wrong?"

Tyron's gaze dropped. "No, nothing's wrong. Just ... something's come up and I have to take care of it."

Secrecy again. With a deep sigh, Eli stood and gathered Tyron's clothes. "Okay. You want to get together later?"

"Sure." Tyron hauled himself to a standing position, balanced on his good foot, and wrapped his arms around Eli's waist. "I'm sorry. I'd really like to stay here with you. It's just, this is kind of urgent. I have to do it now, or I'll miss my chance."

"Hmm. Curiouser and curiouser."

"Look, I know I'm being mysterious, and I know you're dying to know what's going on—"

"What? I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, please." Tyron raised an eyebrow. "You don't fool me with that casual act of yours. Your ears were practically twitching, you were listening so hard."

Damn. Busted. Eli slid the arm not full of inside-out clothes around Tyron's waist. "Well, I didn't catch a single word, so whatever your big secret is, it's still safe from me."

"I can't tell you, Eli. Maybe I can one day, but not yet." Tyron peered up at Eli with real regret written all over his face. "Please say you understand."

The temptation to say "no, I don't" and insist Tyron come clean with him was a seductive whisper in Eli's ear. He ignored it. The last thing he wanted to do was destroy Tyron's trust in him. He could wait.

Eli planted a kiss on Tyron's forehead. "Of course I understand. I'm a naturally nosy person, that's all. Feel free to tell me to mind my own business."

A sweet smile spread across Tyron's face. "You're a pretty amazing guy, Mr. Rains."

Eli swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. "So are you, Mr. Sebers."

They gazed at each other in silence. Eli wondered if the struggle he thought he saw in Tyron's eyes was real, and if so, what it meant.

After a moment, Tyron released his hold on Eli. "Okay. Uh. I guess I better get dressed and get going."

"All right." Eli laid Tyron's clothes on the bed. "You want me to call a cab for you?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

"I'm on it, then." Eli patted Tyron's bare butt and started to move away.

Tyron's hand clamped onto his wrist. "I ... I'm glad this happened, Eli. Us hooking up, I mean." He stared into Eli's eyes with unnerving intensity. "I know this wasn't a onetime thing for you. It wasn't for me either. I don't do one-night stands."

Eli's heart leaped at the unspoken promise in those words. He laid a hand on Tyron's cheek, thumb caressing the corner of his mouth. "Neither do I."

The way Tyron's face lit up told Eli they understood one another. Smiling, he kissed Tyron's lips once more before going to call the cab. So what if he had no idea where Tyron was going or what he was doing? They were an official couple

now. They had plenty of time to learn all about one another. That suited Eli just fine.

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#### **Chapter Five**

Eli waited sixteen hours and twenty-three minutes before calling Tyron's cell. It shunted him to voice mail without even ringing. He left a message and went back to his postparty cleanup.

He didn't start worrying until three more hours passed with no return call from Tyron. The man always had his cell phone with him, and it was usually on. It wasn't like him to not answer, never mind failing to return a call within an hour or so. When Eli finally called again and still got voice mail, apprehension overcame his determination to respect Tyron's privacy, and he made up his mind to go find out for himself if Tyron was okay.

He decided to drive to Tyron's place instead of riding his bike. Riding in the dark and cold didn't bother him, but his Prius could get him there much faster. Besides, if Tyron was ill or injured, having a car available would be good.

Fifteen minutes and change after leaving his house, Eli eased into an empty spot on the street about a block and a half from Tyron's building. He forced himself to walk down the sidewalk instead of running like he wanted to. Panic wouldn't help anyone, even if he had a good reason for it, which he didn't. Not yet, anyway. He hoped he wouldn't find anything to change that.

Outside the front door, Eli squinted at the panel of buzzers on the wall, trying to make out the names in the wan yellow glow of a streetlight, which wasn't close enough to illuminate

anything. He'd only been up to Tyron's place a few times and could never remember which buzzer was Tyron's.

When he found it, he pressed it, then counted out one minute in his head with no answer. He pushed the button again. This time, he only waited a few seconds before trying once more. Still no answer.

Frustrated, he turned and leaned against the wall.

Intellectually, he knew he had no real reason to be this worried. Tyron hadn't said he'd be here, after all. He could be visiting friends or family, consulting with a client, or hell, simply shopping at the mall for all Eli knew. Just because Tyron had agreed to get together sometime tonight yet hadn't returned Eli's call didn't mean anything bad had happened. And that mysterious call Tyron had gotten before leaving Eli's house didn't necessarily have anything to do with why he seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth.

Eli was still standing there, holding a silent argument with himself over whether to leave or beg someone else to let him in, when a taxi pulled up to the curb. The passenger door opened. When Tyron emerged, Eli nearly passed out from sheer relief. "Tyron. Thank God."

"Eli?" Tyron elbowed the cab door shut and tucked his crutches under his arms. "What're you doing here?"

The taxi roared off into the night. Eli didn't pay it any attention. He crossed the sidewalk in a few strides and pulled Tyron into his arms, crutches and all. "Jesus, I was so worried. You didn't answer your phone or your buzzer or anything, and I didn't know where you were or if something had happened or—"

Tyron cut him off with a swift, hard kiss. "Settle down, okay? I'm fine."

Frowning, Eli examined Tyron with a critical eye. He didn't look fine. In fact, he looked worn-out. His shoulders drooped, and his voice sounded scratchy. He even wore the same clothes he'd had on at Eli's party.

"You're just now getting home, aren't you?" Eli brushed the long bangs from Tyron's face and cursed. "All right, what the fuck happened? Who hit you?"

Tyron shook his hair down to cover the black and purple bruise on his left cheek. "It was nothing. I got in a fight, that's all."

Eli would've laughed if he hadn't been so angry. Tyron had an impressive temper when he got going, but Eli couldn't see him getting involved in a fistfight. More likely, he'd shred someone with words. He'd never throw the first punch. Which meant someone out there had hit him for some other reason than self-defense.

Blind fury raced through Eli's veins. His jaw clenched, and his hands fisted. He wished he had the fucker who'd hurt Tyron here in front of him. He'd smash the bastard's face in.

"Hey. Eli."

Tyron's soft voice startled Eli out of his thoughts. He blinked. "What?"

A wry smile curved Tyron's lips. "You were growling."

"Oh." Eli drew a deep breath and blew it out, letting some of his anger out with it. "Sorry."

"'S okay." Tyron shot a glance at the door of his building. "I'd really like to go up, if you don't mind. I'm hungry and tired, and I need a shower like you wouldn't believe."

"Yeah, of course." Reluctantly letting go of Tyron, Eli stepped back. "Let me come up with you. I'll fix you something to eat."

Tyron hesitated, and Eli held his breath. The few times he'd been inside Tyron's apartment, he'd barely had time to note the bare walls and almost complete lack of furniture before Tyron had hustled him out the door. As much as he hated to admit it, even to himself, part of the reason Eli wanted to go in now was to have a better look around. He was a bit ashamed of himself for that.

"Okay, you can come up." Tyron looked away, sagging a little on his crutches. "You don't have to cook, though. Just ... just keep me company for a while?"

Eli gave him a sharp look. His face was chalk white, and his body shook with fine tremors. He looked like he could barely hold himself up.

Biting back the urge to demand Tyron tell him what had happened, Eli moved close enough to lay a hand on Tyron's shoulder as they started for the door. "I'll stay as long as you want me to. And I am happy to cook. I make a mean omelet."

Tyron smiled, clearly relieved. "That sounds great." He punched in the entry code and allowed Eli to hold the door open. "I'm starved."

They entered the building together and crossed the small lobby to the elevator. Eli pushed the Up button, watching

Tyron out of the corner of his eye. "Have you eaten anything since the party?"

The guilty expression on Tyron's face was all the answer Eli needed. "Um, not exactly. Haven't had time."

A soft *ping* announced the arrival of the elevator. The doors slid open. Eli trailed Tyron inside, shaking his head. "I've known some workaholics in my time, but I swear to God you put them all to shame."

"It wasn't work. I already told you that." Tyron pushed the button for the third floor, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the elevator door. "Time just kind of got away from me."

He was lying. Eli felt it in his bones. There was nothing he could do about it, though, so he said nothing.

They rode to the third floor and made their way down the hall in silence. When they reached Tyron's apartment, he fished his keys out of his jacket pocket, unlocked the door, and went inside with Eli behind him. He started toward the kitchen, but Eli put a hand on his arm to stop him.

"Go lie down on the couch," Eli ordered. "I'm cooking, remember?"

"Yeah." Tyron gave him a crooked smile. "Okay, I'm lying down."

"Good."

Tyron turned toward the sofa. He winced, and Eli frowned. "Is your knee all right?"

After a second's hesitation, Tyron shook his head. "It's really hurting right now. I think maybe I twisted it or something."

Eli was beside him before he'd finished speaking. He pushed Tyron gently to the sofa. "Roll up your pants leg. Let me see it."

"You don't know what you're looking at any more than I do," Tyron complained. He pulled up his pant leg, though.

Working as carefully as he could, Eli undid the Velcro straps of Tyron's brace and removed it. He didn't see any bruising, but the knee looked puffy. "Hm. Is it okay for you to leave your brace off for a while?"

"Yeah. The doc said I could take it off to sleep now." Tyron ran his fingers over the dent where the edge of the brace had dug into his swollen flesh. "It doesn't look all that bad. I guess I've just been on my feet too much today."

"I'd ask what you were doing all day if I thought you'd answer me." Eli leaned forward and kissed Tyron to stop the protest he knew was coming. "Lie down."

To his relief, Tyron did as he was told without further comment. Eli grabbed two of the cushions from the end of the couch and tucked them under Tyron's leg. "Stay. I'm going to bring you and ice pack and some ibuprofen. Then I'm going to feed you."

"I don't have any ibuprofen."

"You have ice, I guess? And food?"

"Yes." Tyron reached up and took Eli's hand in his. "Thank you."

Something in Tyron's eyes said he wasn't talking about the TLC so much as the lack of questions about what he'd been doing. Eli squeezed Tyron's fingers. "You ever want to talk about anything, you let me know. I'll listen."

Tyron didn't say anything, just nodded. Eli hadn't expected anything else, really. Letting go of Tyron's hand, he headed into the kitchen.

The refrigerator turned out to be nearly empty. Luckily, Eli found two eggs tucked in the corner of the crisper. Enough for a decent omelet, provided he could find something to put in it. A quick search turned up half an onion, two cherry tomatoes, and a single slice of American cheese. A yellow plastic tub in the back of the bottom shelf contained just enough margarine to cook with, as long as he didn't save any to put on the toast.

Speaking of which...

"Hey, Tyron, do you have any bread?" Eli opened a couple of cabinets, revealing a few plates and cups and a box of Cheerios, but no bread. "I was gonna make toast."

There was no answer from the living room. Thinking Tyron hadn't heard him, Eli quickly scooped some ice cubes from the freezer into a plastic bag. He wrapped it in a towel and skirted the counter separating the kitchen from the living area. "Tyron? Oh."

Tyron was sound asleep, one arm curled beside his head and the other hanging off the edge of the sofa. Eli walked over, and stood gazing down at Tyron. He looked small and battered with his swollen knee and bruised face.

It broke Eli's heart to see him like that. Bending down, Eli pressed a soft kiss to Tyron's brow. He didn't even twitch, which told Eli exactly how exhausted he was.

"What the hell have you been doing?" Eli whispered, cupping Tyron's bruised cheek in his hand.

The fact that he wouldn't have gotten an answer even if Tyron were awake bothered him.

Eli placed the makeshift ice pack carefully atop Tyron's injured knee. He used the blanket hanging over the back of the sofa to hold the bag in place. Moving as quietly as he could, he returned to the kitchen and put away the food he'd gotten out, then went back to the living room. Several magazines and a bunch of newspapers sat stacked in the corner of the room. Eli picked out a few things and settled himself on the end of the sofa, taking care not to bump Tyron's foot. He'd told Tyron he would stay for a while, and he intended to keep his promise whether Tyron realized it or not. Maybe when he woke, he'd be willing to talk about what had happened.

Not that Eli was holding his breath. Leaning back, he opened a magazine and began to read.

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#### **Chapter Six**

"God! Harder, Fuck."

Clamping both hands onto Tyron's hip bones, Eli thrust up into him with as much force as he could. Tyron, sitting astride Eli's hips, threw his head back and wailed as he came all over his own hand and Eli's stomach. His ass contracted around Eli's cock, and Eli climaxed with a low moan.

Tyron fell forward onto Eli's chest, panting. "Jesus Christ. That was fucking amazing."

"It sure was." Eli twisted until he could reach his own crotch, eased his prick from Tyron's hole, then tugged off the condom. Letting it fall to the mattress, he wound both arms around Tyron's nude body. "I have to tell you, I'm glad you're out of that brace now. Makes it a whole lot easier for you to ride me like you just did."

Tyron laughed. "You just got tired of doing all the work. Admit it."

"I admit nothing." Eli kissed the sweat from Tyron's brow. "Hey, guess what today is?"

"Hm." Tyron's fingers trailed up Eli's chest to toy with his nipple. "Tuesday?"

Eli swatted Tyron's butt. "Other than that."

Tyron rested his forehead on Eli's collarbone with a groan. "Not another anniversary. Please."

"Two months and three days."

"Good lord." Lifting his head, Tyron gave Eli a wide smile.
"You're a hopeless romantic, you know that?"

"Guilty." Eli slid both hands down to cup Tyron's rear.

"Come on, I get to fuck this sweet little ass on a regular basis. Can you blame me for celebrating every day?"

Tyron shook his head. His eyes sparkled. "Big guy, you can celebrate all you want as long as you keep sticking it to me."

"Got no plans to stop." Taking one hand off Tyron's butt, Eli raked his fingers through Tyron's tangled hair. "I'm working till six tomorrow. You want me to swing by your place with dinner after I get off? Emmy's invented a lentil chili hot enough to make your eyes water. I could bring some over, and we could watch a movie on your new Blu-ray."

Tyron's expression didn't change, but his body tensed.
"Why don't I meet you at the bar instead? We haven't been
out to eat in a while."

Eli suppressed a frustrated sigh. He'd been to Tyron's place several times after New Year's Day, but Tyron was still clearly uncomfortable having him there. The one time they'd had sex there, Tyron had flatly refused to invite Eli into his bedroom. They'd fucked on the sofa. It had been good, of course. As far as Eli was concerned, there was no such thing as bad sex with Tyron. But neither of them were teenagers anymore, and Eli liked a bit more comfort than the creaky old couch provided.

With that single exception, they'd never had sex anywhere but Eli's place. Not that he minded, but it irritated him—and to be truthful, hurt a little—that he evidently didn't inspire enough trust to be allowed to share Tyron's bed. He wished he could work up the nerve to talk to Tyron about it.

Eli managed a smile and a nod. "Okay. I'll meet you at I Heart That City at, oh, six fifteen? Does that sound okay?"

"Sounds great." Tyron glanced at the clock beside Eli's bed. "Uh-oh. Looks like your lunch break is almost over." Eli followed Tyron's gaze. The clock read 12:20. *Dammit*.

"Yeah, but I'm the boss. Surely I can take an extra half hour if I want." Eli squeezed Tyron's ass and flashed his most engaging grin.

"Nope, not today." Tyron rolled off Eli, sat up, and tugged on his hands. "Come on. Up."

"Ah, come on." Eli yanked Tyron back on top of him. "Just a few more minutes, huh? Lie here with me awhile." He brushed his lips against Tyron's, tongue flicking out in a way he happened to know Tyron loved. "Please."

"Eli, before you ripped my clothes off and threw me on the bed like the Neanderthal you really are inside, you told me we only had an hour because you have a meeting at three and several deliveries to get done first. You need to go. And I have work to do myself." Wriggling out of Eli's grip, Tyron climbed off the bed, grabbed Eli's hands again, and tugged. "C'mon, big guy. You can abuse your super-duper boss powers another day."

Sighing, Eli let Tyron pull him to his feet. "Damn you and your logic."

"That's what you get when you date a computer geek." Tyron pressed close to Eli, arms winding around his neck. "One more naked kiss, then we both have to get dressed."

Eli was more than happy to oblige. He clutched Tyron close, one hand buried in his hair and the other kneading his ass while they kissed. All Tyron's kisses were praiseworthy in their own way, but Eli adored the slow, languid, postsex ones

Tyron had dubbed "naked kisses." This was Tyron at his most open. His most vulnerable. Eli treasured these moments, fleeting as they were.

The kiss ended far too soon. Tyron drew out of Eli's embrace, his lips curved into the sweet half smile that always made Eli's stomach flutter. "Get dressed, Eli. You might be the boss, but you still don't want to be late for a meeting."

"True. I don't think my potential client would appreciate it." Eli picked up his bike pants and shirt from the floor and started putting them on. "You need a cab or are you walking?"

"Walking." Tyron sat on the edge of the bed to get his underwear up to his knees, then stood and pulled them up. "It's a beautiful day, and I don't have far to go."

Eli wasn't surprised. Ever since Tyron had gotten the goahead from his doctor to exercise again, he'd started walking whenever he could. "Okay. You have your cell, right?"

In answer, Tyron lifted his black cargo pants and patted the pocket. "And before you ask, yes, I promise I'll call you if I get in any trouble or if I need you for anything."

Grinning, Eli pulled his bright red shirt over his head. "You can read me like a book."

"Only 'cause your book's wide open for anyone to see."

Unlike some people, Eli thought, watching Tyron shrug on his shirt and fasten the buttons. After two months and three days of official coupledom, Tyron was as much of a mystery as ever.

Once they were both dressed, they headed downstairs hand in hand. Eli grabbed his delivery bag from its spot beside the front door and followed Tyron onto the porch.

Outside, Eli locked the door, then gathered Tyron into his arms for a good-bye kiss. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Yeah, see you then." Tyron nipped Eli's chin before letting go of him. "Bye."

"Bye."

Eli watched Tyron descend the porch steps and start down the sidewalk while he unlocked his bike from the porch rail. As usual, he wondered where Tyron went and what he did. Eli knew better than to ask, though.

Slinging his bag onto his back, he carried his bike down the steps, mounted it, and sat there thinking hard. His remaining deliveries would take him toward the suburbs, but relentless curiosity tempted him in the opposite direction, deeper into downtown Richmond. The direction Tyron had taken. His first delivery was only a couple of blocks from his house. If he rode fast, he could get that one done and still catch up to Tyron before he got too far away to follow...

Eli shook himself. What the hell was he doing? He hadn't snooped through Tyron's apartment on New Year's Day, when the man had slept like the dead for three whole hours before waking. No way in hell was he going to become a stalker now. If and when Tyron wanted to share his secrets with Eli, he would. Eli had no right to take those secrets against Tyron's will.

Thus resolved, Eli kicked off and pedaled down the street toward his first afternoon delivery.

\* \* \* \*

By the time his meeting ended, Eli had nearly forgotten his ongoing questions about Tyron in the elation of gaining an important new client. He already had a couple of exclusive contracts with local businesses, but this one could put Rainy Day Deliveries on the map. The fact that he'd beat out some pretty big names for this contract made him feel like the king of the world.

Whistling, he strolled down the hall from the conference room to his small office. He'd need to hire another person for car deliveries and possibly another for the bike routes as well. Anything beyond that could wait until he knew exactly how much business Shenandoah Office Supplies would be giving him.

He stopped and frowned when he saw Kaylee standing outside his office, twisting her fingers together and shuffling from foot to foot. "Kaylee? What's up?"

"I, um, I kind of need to talk to you." She glanced around. "Can we go in your office?"

"Of course." Eli opened the door and ushered her inside. He waved toward one of the two chairs in the room. "Sit down."

She perched on the edge of the chair. Eli pulled the other chair from behind his desk and sat in front of her. "What's wrong?" A terrible thought struck him. Leaning forward, he touched her hand. "You're not quitting, are you?"

"No! No, nothing like that." She eyed him with a level of caution he'd never seen in her before. "It's not business. It's personal, and I know you're not going to like it."

Dread coiled in the pit of Eli's stomach. "What is it?"

Kaylee stared at her hands for a moment, as if gathering her courage, then lifted her head and met Eli's gaze. "When I was on my way to a delivery earlier, I saw Tyron downtown. He was in an alley with some man."

Eli's jaw clenched. "And?"

"And he was handing the man some money." Kaylee bit her lip. "I don't know what it was all about, but, Eli, it can't be good. Meeting someone in an alley and giving them money is never good. And they both looked like they were trying to keep from being seen. Like they were doing something ... well, illegal."

Eli wanted to argue that they had no way of knowing that for sure. For all they knew, Tyron could've been giving a little cash to a hard-up friend or family member. But deep in his gut, Eli knew better. If Tyron were merely helping someone out, he wouldn't have been hiding in an alley. Which meant he must be involved in something shady.

He drew a deep breath and let it out. "Are you positive it was him?"

"Completely."

"And you're positive he was giving the guy money, not something else?"

"Yes." She leaned toward him, her eyes pleading. "Eli, I like Tyron. A lot. I wouldn't be telling you this if I wasn't one hundred percent positive of what I saw."

"Of course not." *God, what the hell's he been hiding from me?* "Is that all?"

She hesitated, and Eli's heart sank. "Actually, I thought I saw him last week, in that same alley. I didn't mention it then because I wasn't sure, but now ... Well." She hung her head. "He was giving some guy money that time too."

In an instant, the suspicion that had been simmering in the back of Eli's brain for weeks morphed into a rage so strong it paralyzed him for a moment. When he could breathe again, he shoved to his feet, marched to the office door, flung it open, and left.

He heard Kaylee behind him, pleading with him to calm down and think before he did anything stupid, but he ignored her. For two whole months—more, if you counted the time he and Tyron had been friends before they became lovers—he'd been patient. He'd let Tyron have his fucking secrets. Hadn't once nagged him to come clean. Hadn't even tried to enter the bedroom Tyron always kept shut, even though he gave no explanation for never allowing Eli in there.

For two months, Eli had given Tyron the space he wanted. But no more. At this point, Eli didn't give a shit whether Tyron was buying drugs, paying for sex, or dealing in government secrets. He'd been kept in the dark long enough. He deserved some answers, and he was going to fucking well get them.

"I'm going out," he barked at Trish as he passed her desk.

"Don't call me."

Kaylee followed him to the stairwell. "What about your deliveries?"

"Done for today." He shoved open the stairwell door.

She grabbed his arm. "Eli, come on, stop. I only told you this because I was worried about Tyron. I wouldn't've said anything if I'd known you'd get this pissed off."

"What do you think I'm going to do? Hurt him?" He shook off her arm and glared down at her. "He owes me an explanation. I'm going to get it, that's all."

Turning his back on Kaylee, he took the steps down to street level two at a time. He wished he'd taken his car to work this morning instead of cycling, but there was no help for it now. Maybe the quarter hour or so of hard pedaling it would take to get to Tyron's place would work off some of his anger, and he'd be able to face Tyron with some semblance of calm.

Fifteen minutes later, gliding to a stop at the bike rack down the street from Tyron's building, he realized he'd been wrong about that. Turning the whole situation over in his head had just made him angrier.

It didn't matter, though. He was furious but resolved to get the answers he needed. He chained his bike and helmet to the rack, strode down the sidewalk, and pushed the buzzer for Tyron's apartment.

"Yeah?" Tyron answered.

Eli leaned his forehead against the wall and fought a wave of mingled fury and hurt. "It's me," he said, struggling to keep his voice level. "Let me in."

The door buzzed. Eli pushed it open and stormed across the lobby without waiting to see if Tyron would say anything else. He shoved the stairwell door open, then ran up the steps and down the hall to Tyron's apartment.

Tyron stood in the open doorway wearing only a pair of faded, low-slung jeans and a puzzled frown. "Eli? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? I'll fucking tell you what's wrong."
Grabbing Tyron's arm, Eli dragged him inside and slammed the door shut. "Kaylee saw you today in that alley. She said you were giving money to some man."

Tyron paled. "What?"

"You heard me." Eli yanked Tyron closer and stared hard into his eyes. "What the fuck were you doing?"

Tyron's eyes went blank and hard. "It's none of your business."

"You told me you were working this afternoon, you fucking liar."

"I was working." Tyron wrenched free of Eli's grip and backed up, rubbing his arm and watching Eli like he was a rabid dog. "What the hell, Eli? You know I can't tell you everything I do. I thought you understood that."

"Yeah, so did I. But as it turns out, I don't. Not when I find out that whatever the fuck you're doing involves giving money to strange men in alleyways."

Tyron gaped at him. "So, what, I have to run it by you now if I need to buy something? Is that it?"

"Is that what you were doing? Buying something?"

"Goddammit, I can't tell you that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because!" Tyron threw both hands in the air with an impatient noise. "Look, I'm not doing anything illegal. Just ... just trust me, okay?"

Eli shook his head. "How can I, when you won't tell me the truth?"

For a second, hurt flashed across Tyron's face. Then the hardness came back, and his eyes blazed. He stalked forward to stand toe-to-toe with Eli. "I told you the truth. I told you nothing *but* the truth. If you can't handle not knowing every little fucking thing I'm doing every minute of every fucking day, that is your. *Fucking*. Problem."

Each word was punctuated by a stab of Tyron's finger to Eli's chest. Eli pushed Tyron's hand away. "I didn't ask to know every little thing. I want to know *this* thing, whatever it is."

Tyron thrust his chin out. "Well, you can't, so get the fuck over it."

"What were you doing in that alley with that man? Were you buying drugs? Hiring a hooker? Should I get tested again now?"

The shock on Tyron's face told Eli he'd gone too far, but there was no way to take it back now. "Tyron, wait, I didn't mean—"

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"Get out."
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"Fucking *go*!" Tyron flung the door open and stood there staring at the floor. His hand shook where it gripped the doorknob. "Just get the fuck out, right now."

<sup>&</sup>quot;No, listen, let-"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Now."

<sup>&</sup>quot;But-"

Eli forced his feet to cross into the hallway. He stopped and gazed at Tyron as if he could transmit his remorse to the other man via brain waves. "Tyron, I'm sorry. I—"

Tyron's chest hitched in a ragged breath. "Please just leave now. Please."

It killed Eli to hear Tyron sound so broken, especially since it was his fault. He swallowed hard. "I'll be at I Heart That City tomorrow night. I hope you'll still come."

Tyron didn't answer. With no course of action left except what Tyron wanted him to do, Eli turned and plodded back down the hall.

When he heard Tyron's door slam shut, Eli leaned against the wall and buried his face in his hands. This is why you never let yourself get mad at people, you asshole. Because you say stupid things that hurt the people you love.

Wait.

Eli raised his head, stunned. Did he love Tyron? Was that why he felt this possessive toward him? Was that why he felt so hurt by being kept in the dark about such an obviously important part of Tyron's life?

He thought about the way Tyron's smile made him feel like he could fly, the way his life seemed perfect whenever Tyron lay cuddled against him, and knew it was true. Somewhere along the way, he'd fallen in love with Tyron.

And what a fucking perfect time to realize it.

With a deep sigh, Eli trudged to the stairwell and plodded back down to the lobby. He loved Tyron. He knew it; he'd acknowledged it. Now all he had to do was convince Tyron to

talk to him again, and maybe he'd have a prayer of learning whether the feeling was mutual.

God, he was screwed.

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#### **Chapter Seven**

I Heart That City was always busy, even on Wednesday nights. This particular Wednesday night, though, it seemed as if the entire city had decided to follow Eli there. Every table was full, customers lined up four deep at the bar, and the whole damn place rang with voices. People were laughing, talking, even bursting into song occasionally.

Eli found the whole scene unforgivably cheerful. Scowling, he tossed back what he fully intended to be the first of many tequila shots and slammed the glass onto the bar. "Zach. Hit me."

The bartender handed beer bottles to two women, then slid over to refill Eli's glass. "Don't you think you ought to take it easy on those?"

"It's my first one." Eli gulped the second shot, shuddering as it burned down his esophagus. "Okay, my second."

Shaking his head, Zach filled the glass again. "Never figured you for one to drown your troubles in alcohol."

"I'm not doing that."

"Yeah, you are." Zach tucked a strand of glossy brown hair behind his ear, leaned his elbows on the bar, and gave Eli an uncharacteristically serious look. "So. Does this drinking binge have anything to do with Tyron?"

"Who are you, Dr. Phil? Or Dr. Zach, I guess."

"Is that a ves?"

"Good grief. You don't give up, do you?"

Zach arched a brow. Eli sighed.

"We had a fight. I was an ass, he kicked me out of his apartment, and now I'm here drinking alone instead of having Emmy's lentil chili with Tyron." Lifting his glass, Eli knocked back the third shot. "Give me another one."

Zach poured. "I'm cutting you off if you start slurring or your eyes cross."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I do it for all my babies; you're not so special." Eli snorted, and Zach flashed the devilish grin that made all the girls try to turn him straight. "Ha, I got you to laugh! My work here is done." He snatched the bottle away before Eli could say a word. "Give it a rest for a few minutes. I'll be back."

With that, Zach hurried off to take care of the other customers. Chuckling, Eli lifted his glass and took a sip. Zach could always make him smile.

Over the next hour, Zach refilled Eli's shot glass only twice more. Eli grumbled, but not too much. He might wish he could get blind drunk and forget all about Tyron for a while—if that was in fact possible—but if he did, he knew he'd be sorry in the morning. When it came to uncomfortable experiences, nothing quite beat riding all over the city on a bicycle while fighting off a screaming headache and the constant urge to puke.

Of course, the trade-off for no hangover tomorrow was loneliness, misery, and near-crippling regret now.

So getting drunk hadn't worked out. He could still go home and wallow in self-pity while relatively sober. Hopping off the bar stool, Eli pulled his wallet out of his jacket pocket. He counted out the appropriate number of bills, leaned over, and

laid them next to the sink on the other side of the bar. "Hey, Zach."

Zach glanced over and nodded when Eli pointed at the money. "Night, Eli."

Eli waved at Zach, then turned and made his way through the crowd to the door. Outside, he stood on the curb, wondering what to do. He didn't want to go home. The thought of being alone in his empty house made him feel sick. On the other hand, club hopping held zero appeal right now.

A blast of icy wind rocked Eli on his feet. He turned his face into it, relishing the way it bit into his skin. Maybe he could walk home instead of taking a cab. It wasn't far away, really, but with any luck, a brisk half-hour walk in the cold would numb him at least as well as liquor would have.

Eli strolled down the busy sidewalk with his hands in his pockets. His mind whirled with all the terrible things he'd said last night, as well as all the things he should have said and hadn't. Like the fact that the last two months had been hands down the happiest time of his life. That he wanted to be with Tyron for the long haul even if he never learned any more about Tyron's secret life than he knew now. That Tyron brightened his days and nights in a way no one ever had, and Eli treasured every single second they spent together.

Why hadn't he said those things? He'd asked himself that about a thousand times in the past twenty-four hours, but he still didn't have an answer. Or rather, he didn't have one he felt like facing. In his heart, he knew the reason; he'd let his anger at being lied to drown out everything else he felt. He'd let it overtake him to the point where he'd said things he

didn't mean, just to make Tyron hurt as much as he did. And now he was living with the consequences.

What if he never forgives me? What if I've lost him forever?

The thought was unbearable. Eli stumbled and almost fell as the full potential of what he'd done hit him. He hadn't meant to fall in love with Tyron. But it had happened anyway, and the possibility of losing his chance at something lasting tore at him like a thousand knives.

"I can't let that happen," he declared aloud to the jagged crack in the sidewalk at his feet. "I can't lose him."

His heart knew what he had to do before his brain caught up. By the time he realized he was heading for Tyron's place instead of his own, Eli was standing across the road from the back of Tyron's building. He eyed the stained brick with a mixture of trepidation and longing. He seriously doubted Tyron was going to let him in if he buzzed, but the only way to talk to him was to get inside the building. Maybe he could appeal to one of Tyron's neighbors to buzz him in. He'd gotten to know a couple of them over the past few weeks. One had even become his client recently.

His plan in place, Eli squared his shoulders and started toward the crosswalk leading to Tyron's side of the street. Before he got there, however, a figure exiting the rear door of the building caught his eye. The figure wore a long black coat and a knit cap, but Eli would know the curve of that sweet neck anywhere. Lord knew he'd left enough marks on it.

Eli almost called out to Tyron. He'd come here to tell the man he was sorry and he loved him, after all. Something

about Tyron's face, though, set off alarm bells in Eli's skull. He ducked into the darkened doorway of a nearby empty building just as Tyron turned to sweep a cautious gaze back and forth over the street. Hunching his shoulders, Tyron set off down the sidewalk without crossing the road.

Eli frowned. Where the hell was Tyron going, and why did he give off such a strong cloak-and-dagger vibe?

Maybe he's going to meet this mysterious person again. He didn't see you just now. If you're careful, you can follow him and he'll never know.

Part of Eli realized that invading Tyron's privacy like that wouldn't exactly improve his chances of getting Tyron back. But he couldn't just throw away the opportunity to find out what the hell had been going on all this time. Could he?

For a few endless seconds, Eli stood there in an agony of indecision. He wanted to find out what Tyron was up to so badly he could taste it. But he knew for a fact that if Tyron caught him, nothing he could say would make any difference. They'd be through, with no hope of starting over. He couldn't blame Tyron for it, either, since he'd do the same if their situations were reversed.

He'd just about talked himself out of the rash plan when another movement pulled his gaze up the street to the next block. Two people dressed in black were hurrying across the street in the dimness between the lights. As soon as they reached the other sidewalk, they both set out with a determined stride in the same direction Tyron had gone.

Eli didn't have to discuss it with himself this time to know his plans had just changed. Maybe the sinister figures had

nothing to do with Tyron. But on this sparsely traveled stretch of road, two shadowy strangers taking the same path as Tyron was just too much of a coincidence for Eli's comfort. They *had* to be following Tyron on purpose. In which case, Tyron could be in serious danger. Eli couldn't just let that go. He'd rather lose Tyron for good than risk anything happening to him.

Keeping his gaze glued to the two people slinking along about a block behind Tyron, Eli hurried across the street and into the shadows on the other side. He trailed after them, keeping as close as he could to the buildings. With any luck, they would be too busy watching Tyron to turn around and spot Eli.

The four of them walked another five blocks before Tyron turned left down a narrow side street. He didn't even glance behind him. The men—women? One of each? Eli had no idea—vanished after him about half a minute later.

Heart racing, Eli jogged to catch up. He knew the street Tyron had entered. It was little more than an alley, cramped and poorly lit, with only a couple of dive bars and a "massage parlor" still open after nine. Eli didn't like to think of Tyron being down there alone with those two thugs. And he was convinced at this point of their unsavory intentions. No way in hell would two strangers just happen to head down this particular road at the same time as Tyron.

Eli hit the intersection at a run. He skidded to a stop and peered around the corner. He was just in time to see the two strangers duck through the metal door into Elmo's, the only Goth bar in this part of the city.

Thanking his lucky stars that he hadn't spent all his cash at I Heart That City, Eli hurried to the entrance, handed five dollars to the pallid young woman working the door, then pushed his way through the black curtain separating the entry from the main room. The place seethed with kids dressed in black huddled over the gray metal tables or the red-painted bar. Growling, drum-heavy music so loud it hurt Eli's ears thumped through the smoky air.

Halfway across the room, the two men—definitely men—stood looking around with puzzled frowns on their faces.

Trying to act casual, Eli glanced around him as he made his way to the bar. Tyron was nowhere to be seen.

A surge of relief nearly made Eli's head spin for a second. Maybe Tyron had gone into The Cherry Pit instead. Eli couldn't quite picture him going to Miss Nell's. The services she offered weren't exactly his cup of tea.

When Eli reached the bar, he leaned his back against it and scanned the narrow room. Still no sign of Tyron. A few feet away, one of the men Eli had followed shrugged and shook his head. The other spun on his heel and stomped toward the bar's entrance, shoving people out of the way as he went. His companion trailed after him.

Eli gave them almost a full minute before following. It felt more like an hour. What if those bastards caught up with Tyron before Eli caught up with *them?* 

Yeah, and what if you got nailed following them because you were right on their heels? Eli reminded himself as he slipped through the crowd and back out onto the dark street. You have to be careful, or you'll just make things worse.

Outside, Eli lingered in the doorway for a moment while the two men hurried down the road toward the far end. Apparently they hadn't seen fit to check the other two businesses, which suited Eli just fine. He figured he was more likely to be seen while entering an establishment, and he didn't want Tyron to see him if it could be helped. Cowardly, maybe, but true.

When the strangers turned the corner onto the main thoroughfare, Eli emerged from the doorway and strode after them. He didn't want them to spot him, but he didn't want to lose them either, and the four-lane street was a pretty busy one with blocks on end of open bars, clubs, and restaurants.

As Eli passed the dark little alley running beside Miss Nell's, a movement caught the corner of his eye. He stopped and peered into the dense shadows. For a second there, he thought he'd seen...

Yes. There it was again. A definite movement. A face, Eli thought, reflected in the faint light from a window on the far side of a small dumpster.

A very familiar face, actually.

His caution forgotten, Eli rushed forward, grabbed Tyron's shoulder, and spun him around. "What the fuck are you doing?"

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#### **Chapter Eight**

The mini-DVR camera dropped to dangle from the strap around Tyron's neck. He stared at Eli with wide, shocked eyes. "Eli. What're you doing here?"

Eli saw no point in lying. "I was on my way over to your place to talk to you. I saw you coming out the back door of your building. Then two guys started following you. I followed them to make sure they didn't hurt you or anything." Eli glanced behind Tyron at the tiny window. Dim light leaked through a narrow gap in the otherwise-tightly closed blinds inside. "That's my story. What's yours?"

A very familiar defiance chased away the stunned look in Tyron's eyes, and Eli stifled a defeated sigh. Did he still not rate a truthful answer, even after having caught Tyron redhanded, filming who knew what through a massage parlor window? It was disheartening, to say the least.

To his pleased surprise, all the anger melted from Tyron's face. Shoulders slumped, he switched off the camera and rubbed his eyes with both palms. "What the hell. Come back to my place. I'll explain the whole sordid story. I don't think I can get anything better than what I already did tonight anyway."

Eli didn't ask all the questions *that* brought to mind. He cast a nervous eye toward the mouth of the alley. "What about those guys who were following you? It looked like they moved on, but still."

Tyron snorted. "Don't worry about them. They won't bother me again tonight."

"How do you know?" Eli frowned at him. "Wait, seriously, how do you know? I didn't even think you knew you were being followed."

He got a withering look. "I'm not totally stupid, you know. Of course I knew they were following me. They've been following me off and on for weeks."

Eli chewed on that, and he didn't like the taste of it one bit. The idea of Tyron taking a potential threat to his life so casually made Eli's skin crawl. "Maybe this is a stupid question, but why'd you come here if you knew they were following you? I mean, you're obviously doing something you didn't want to be caught at."

"This was a one-shot chance. I had to take it, tail or no tail. I have a few contacts around the city. I kind of put the word out that I was meeting someone at Elmo's tonight. If I hadn't been able to duck into the alley before they saw me, I'd have gone on into Elmo's and pretended my contact stood me up." Tyron shrugged. "It was a risk, sure. But they've always given up before once they lost me, so why wouldn't they this time?"

Eli shook his head. "You're crazy."

"It's all for a good cause, believe me." Tyron darted a glance over his shoulder at the window. "Can we go now, please? He's gonna leave soon, and I want to be long gone by then."

Biting back the automatic question of who "he" was, Eli nodded. He took Tyron's hand, and the two of them hurried

out of the alley and down to the road leading to the back of Tyron's building.

"I'm still mad at you," Tyron declared as he punched in the code to unlock the back door. He ushered Eli inside. "Just so you know."

"I don't blame you." The second they were safely inside with the door shut behind them, Eli wound an arm around Tyron's waist and pulled him close. He cupped Tyron's wind-reddened cheek in the other hand. "I was way out of line last night, Tyron. I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

"I don't know. Didn't you just follow me like some kind of creepy stalker?" Tyron's faint smile took some of the sting out of the words. "You really were out of line. You had no right to say those things to me."

"I know, believe me, I-"

Tyron pressed three fingertips to Eli's lips, cutting him off. "You were wrong. But I get why you were upset and frustrated. I've been hiding a lot of things from you. Well, not a lot of different things, really, but one or two really big things. And I guess I shouldn't have, not if I..." He trailed off, gaze dropping to the floor.

Something in Tyron's voice sent a surge of hope through Eli's blood. He lifted Tyron's chin and peered into his big, uncertain eyes. "If you what?"

"Nothing." Tyron's tongue snaked out to wet his lips. "Let's get upstairs. We need to talk, and this isn't a good place to do it."

Eli swallowed his disappointment. What had he expected, anyway? A declaration of undying love right here in the dingy back hallway of Tyron's apartment building?

He nodded. "You're right. Let's go."

They rode the elevator upstairs without talking. But Tyron clung to Eli's hand like a lifeline, and for Eli, that was better than any words.

Inside Tyron's apartment, Eli went straight into the kitchen and poured two glasses of sangria from the bottle in the refrigerator. He brought both back into the living room, where Tyron had taken off his coat and hat and was already parked on the couch.

Handing one of the glasses to Tyron, Eli kicked off his shoes and plopped onto the sofa, curling his legs beneath him. "All right. If you're ready to tell me your story, I'm ready to listen."

Tyron slumped in his seat, staring into his glass as if it could tell him how to begin. Eli sipped his wine. He could wait.

"I told you I had contacts in the city," Tyron finally said after a couple of silent minutes. "Well, one of my contacts is a girl who works for an escort service across town. Loreen. She and I have known each other since high school. She saw Warren Farraday with one of her co-workers for the first time about four months ago."

Eli's eyebrows went up. "Warren Farraday? As in Farraday Hotels?"

"The same, yes."

In the past two decades, Warren Farraday had built his reputation as much on his far-right morality as on his chain of

high-end luxury hotels. Misogyny, racism, and homophobia lurked under a thin veneer of "family values" at Farraday Hotels, and everyone knew it. Seeing Warren Farraday brought down a notch or ten always gave Eli the warm fuzzies.

Eli grinned. "Okay. Clearly you have dirt. I want to hear it."

Tyron laughed. "I was following him when you hit me with your bike. I'd gotten a tip from Loreen that he was gonna be meeting her friend that day, but she didn't know where, so I was tailing him. You sort of put the brakes on that."

"Oops." Eli winced. "Sorry."

"No big deal. It all worked out for the best, if you ask me." With a smile that made Eli feel warm all over, Tyron lifted his glass and took a deep swallow of sangria. "You know New Year's Eve, when I got that call and left?"

"Yeah. I could hear a woman's voice over the phone. That was your friend calling about Farraday?"

"Yep." Tyron aimed a smug smile in Eli's direction. "He was at the same hotel where she was, taking advantage of her friend's, um, special services. I got pictures of him going in there and coming out again. It's a place known for prostitution, but I couldn't get anything more incriminating." He shook his head. "Farraday almost caught me tailing him. I fell down a flight of stairs trying to keep from being seen. That's why I was so busted up."

"Good God, Tyron, you could've broken your neck or something."

"I know, I know." Tyron held up a hand. "Ancient history. Drop it."

Eli knew better than to argue, much as he would've liked to lecture some more. He let it drop. "I actually heard about that incident, now that you mention it. Stew said it was blogged on Naked Richmond, with pictures and everything. Did the blog guy get the pictures from you?"

Tyron sipped from his glass. "Guess again."

The lightbulb went on in Eli's brain. His mouth fell open.

"Oh my God. You're the Naked Richmond guy? The Flasher?"

"The one and only." Tyron raised his glass in a mock toast.

Dumbfounded, Eli shook his head. "Damn. I never would've guessed."

"Of course not. I'm very good at keeping a secret." Leaning over, Tyron set his glass on the plastic crate that served as a coffee table. "Or maybe not, since Farraday evidently found out who I am."

"He's the one who's been having you followed?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think so, yeah. I've pissed off a few people with Naked Richmond, but I think he's gotten the most bad press from it."

"Well, yeah, he got a lot of flack, but that was all." Eli sipped from his glass. "I don't think there was even a police investigation, was there?"

Tyron shook his head. "There was no real evidence of any crime, so there was nothing they could do."

"So why has he been after you? He's a millionaire and a prominent businessman, for Christ's sake; he ought to be able to deal with a little negative local press."

"I dented his precious reputation. Apparently that makes me a mean, horrible person who must be taken down." Tyron flashed a wicked grin. "Just wait till I post tonight's footage. He's going down for good, and not in a fun way. Lucky for me, he's stupid enough to make it easy."

Laughing, Eli set his own glass beside Tyron's and leaned closer. "Okay, spill. What'd you get?"

Tyron's eyes glittered with triumphant glee. "I got Mr. Holier-Than-Everyone Farraday taking it up the ass from a girl with a strap-on. And this girl was most definitely not Mrs. Farraday, since I'm pretty sure the missus is at least thirty years older and fifty pounds skinnier than this chick was."

"Shit, really?"

"Oh yeah. Got it all right here on my trusty camera." Tyron patted the DVR still dangling from his neck.

Eli hooted. "Tyron, man, you have balls of steel. How the hell did you know he was going to be there?"

"One of my other contacts. His sister works at Miss Nell's, so he's kind of got it in for Nell and her business. He saw Farraday there last week and called me. I met up with him and paid him to let me know if he saw Farraday there again. He figured he could help me bring down Farraday, and I could help him bring down Nell." Tyron's expression turned solemn and a little sad. "That's who Kaylee saw me with earlier. I'd promised to pay him anytime he could give me concrete information on when Farraday would be at Miss Nell's and which girl he'd be seeing."

Guilt rose like a sour taste in Eli's throat. Unfolding his legs, he slid closer and touched Tyron's cheek. "Now I feel even worse about what I said."

Tyron let out a shaky laugh. "You should."

"I do." Eli caressed the corner of Tyron's mouth with his thumb. "Look, I know it's only been, like, a day, but I've missed you like fuck."

Tyron's cheeks pinked, and his breath hitched. "I missed you too."

Eli moved close enough to feel the heat of Tyron's body. "Do you think we could go in your bedroom this time?"

To his consternation, Tyron laughed out loud. "We could, but it might not be very comfortable since there's no bed."

Eli blinked. "No bed?"

"Nope."

"Then what do you have in there?"

Grinning, Tyron pushed to his feet. "C'mon back and see."

Pulse racing with a sudden surge of excitement, Eli rose and followed Tyron to the perpetually closed door on the other side of the room. Tyron swung it open and strode in.

Eli followed, eyes wide. There was more furniture in there than in all the rest of the apartment put together, but none of it was a bed. Instead, two long desks took up nearly half the wall space. One desk contained a high-end desktop computer and the familiar MacBook. A ham radio set and a police scanner sat on the second desk. Both were currently switched off. Stacks of books and newspapers covered a fair bit of the floor.

"Wow. Geektastic." Eli pointed at the sleeping bag rolled up in the corner. "You don't sleep on that, do you?"

"I have before, but I usually just sleep on the sofa."
Removing the camera from around his neck, Tyron walked to the small closet, opened it, and stuffed the DVR behind a pile of blankets in the top. "I'll upload that stuff later. Right now, I believe you owe me a blowjob."

The thought made Eli's mouth water. "A blowjob, huh?"

"Yep." Tyron undid his jeans and shoved them down to his thighs. His prick, already hard, sprang free and swayed in front of him, canting to the left. "I want to come in your mouth."

Oh, fuck yeah. Eli licked his lips, gaze locked to Tyron's cock. "Sounds good to me."

"Then get to it." Tyron snapped his fingers and pointed at his feet, grinning ear to ear. "Now, big guy."

Eli didn't need to be told twice. Closing the distance between them, he dropped to his knees and swallowed Tyron's cock like the treat it was.

Maybe having come so close to fucking everything up made the difference, but to Eli, nothing had ever tasted as sweet as Tyron's ripe, salty prick did right then. He opened his throat to take Tyron deep, fingers digging into the meat of Tyron's butt cheeks.

Groaning, Tyron thrust down Eli's throat. "Goddamn. Yeah." His hands cupped Eli's skull with surprising tenderness. "Feels good."

Eli agreed, though he couldn't verbalize it at the moment. Instead, he expressed himself by contracting his throat as

hard as he could around the head of Tyron's cock. Tyron squealed and jerked in response. His prick pulsed a couple of times, which was all the warning Eli got before warm, slippery semen flooded his mouth. He pulled back enough to swallow without choking and gulped down every earthy drop.

Sitting back on his heels, Eli grinned up at Tyron's dazed expression. "Did I do okay?"

"Wasn't counting on coming that quick, you bastard." Glaring, Tyron slid down the wall to land in a heap on the floor. "Get the sleeping bag."

"What? You're not gonna suck me off? That's cold." Eli clamped a dramatic hand to his heart but scooted across the floor on his knees to fetch the sleeping bag anyway.

"Oh, I'm going to suck you, all right." Tyron kicked off his shoes, pulled his jeans the rest of the way off, and threw them in the general direction of the closet. "But there's no way you'll be able to move after. Thus the sleeping bag." Tearing his shirt over his head, Tyron tossed it on top of the jeans. He shot Eli a sinful smile. "Now hurry up and get that sleeping bag on the floor so I can get your cock in my mouth."

Eli moaned out loud as the cock in question pushed eagerly against his zipper. Working as quickly as he could with shaking hands, he opened the sleeping bag and spread it out on the floor. He was relieved when Tyron shoved him onto his back and started pulling off his clothes. Eli didn't think he would've been able to undress himself if his life depended on it.

In a few seconds, Tyron had Eli stripped naked and his legs spread wide. Without a word, Tyron bent and slid his soft, warm mouth over Eli's prick, and God, it was the best thing Eli had ever felt. Panting, Eli wound his fingers into Tyron's hair and held on. There was no need to push, no need to guide Tyron's movements. Eli knew from experience that all he had to do was relax and let Tyron do what he wanted. The magic touch of his lips, tongue, and fingers never failed to send Eli flying.

When Eli felt Tyron pull off for a second, he knew what was about to happen. He opened his thighs as wide as they would go, trembling in anticipation. Sure enough, two slick fingers pushed into his hole at the same time as Tyron's mouth gulped down his cock again. He gasped as the fingers zoomed in on his gland and rubbed.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," he breathed, hips pulsing upward.
"Gonna come."

In answer, he got another firm press of fingertips and a hard suck up the length of his shaft. He came with a strangled cry, his whole body convulsing.

By the time Tyron pulled his fingers out of Eli's ass and sat up, Eli felt utterly wrung out. He returned Tyron's smug grin with a loopy smile. "Well, you said I wouldn't be able to move. You were right."

"I know." Tyron stretched out next to Eli, snuggling into his arms. "Of course I'm not too anxious to move myself, so we're even."

"Good." Tucking a finger beneath Tyron's chin, Eli tilted his face up. "So, am I staying here tonight?"

Tyron's eyes gazed into Eli's, clear and earnest. "I sure as hell hope so."

Eli's chest went tight. Unable to speak, he answered by capturing Tyron's lips in a deep, expressive kiss. Tyron's mouth opened, tongue snaking out to tangle with Eli's, and it felt so damn good Eli thought it might tear him apart.

When they pulled apart, Tyron rested his head on Eli's chest with a contented sigh. Eli drifted off to sleep a few minutes later with all the lights on and Tyron securely locked in his embrace.

\* \* \* \*

When Eli woke, the first thing he noticed was Tyron's absence from his arms.

He noticed the darkness in the room next. When had the lights gone off?

Sitting up, he peered through the gloom. In the faint light coming through the curtains and the glow from two computers' sleep lights, he saw Tyron emerge from the closet with something in his hand. The something had a very familiar shape to it. Eli's eyes widened.

Before he could say anything, Tyron knelt beside him and whispered rapidly into his ear. "Yes, I have a gun. Yes, it's registered. Listen. I turned off the light because someone's breaking in. It's probably Farraday's thugs. They'll be expecting us to be asleep. If you get behind the door, maybe they'll think you left and you can take one of them by surprise. There's a big metal flashlight behind the door. Use it

as a weapon. I can get the drop on the other guy, since they won't expect me to be awake, never mind armed. Got it?"

Eli stomped down his fear as best he could and nodded. Now that Tyron had told him, he could hear the sounds of stealthy movement in the main room. Heart racing, Eli climbed to his feet and silently crossed the room to stand behind the door. He found the flashlight and picked it up. It felt reassuringly heavy in his hand.

Tyron curled up on the sleeping bag, the gun hidden in the curve of his body. A few endless seconds dragged by. Then the doorknob turned, and adrenaline rushed through Eli's blood, slowing everything to a crystal-clear crawl.

He had all of eternity to watch the door burst open and the two men from earlier that night come storming in. He watched with a sort of detached amazement as his own arm came up and smashed the big metal flashlight into the back of one man's skull, dropping him to the floor. Blood arced into the air, hung glittering for a moment in the light streaming in from the living room, then fell to sprinkle the wooden floor and vanish into the man's black sweater. The would-be attacker lay facedown and didn't move again.

Looking up, Eli saw Tyron leap to his feet in graceful slow motion, his pistol aimed directly between the second man's eyes. The stranger's arm came up. Deadly black gleamed in the man's hand, aiming for Tyron.

Eli moved before he even realized what he was doing. Lunging forward, he brought the flashlight crashing down on the man's forearm. A popping noise sounded, and a hole

gaped in the boards behind Tyron. The gun dropped and skittered across the floor.

Tyron didn't wait for his attacker to recover. He scurried behind the man, kicked him between the shoulder blades, and pointed the gun at the back of his head. "Hands laced behind your head, asshole. Now."

The man did it. "We weren't gonna do anything to you, dude. We were just supposed to break in and smash your computer. Take your camera. That's all." He turned his head, and Eli caught a glimpse of a terrified expression. "We weren't gonna hurt you. I swear!"

"Uh-huh. That's why you had a gun, I'm sure." Tyron shook his head. "Good God. Eli, call the cops, would you?"

Eli turned on the light. Shaking now with reaction, he stepped over the man he'd knocked out, found his jeans, and fished through them for his cell phone. He dialed 911 and told the operator what had happened. After he hung up, he pulled his pants on.

The whole time, Tyron didn't move a muscle and didn't once take his eyes from his prisoner. For some reason, Eli found that at once admirable and unbearably sexy.

Unsure of what to say or do, Eli crouched down and peered at the man he'd hit. The stranger groaned and opened his eyes. "Hi there," Eli said. "Cops and an ambulance are on their way. Just stay right where you are."

The man groaned. "Shit." He laced his hands behind his head without even being asked, which relieved Eli. Even though the guy had broken in, Eli didn't want the burden of having seriously injured anyone.

Tyron glanced over and caught Eli's gaze for a moment. He didn't say anything, but the grateful shine in his eyes said enough. Eli gave him a reassuring smile. Tyron smiled back, and Eli knew everything was going to be okay.

\* \* \* \*

Less than five minutes later, Tyron's small apartment crawled with police officers, detectives, and paramedics. Confusion reigned at first, when the cops busted in to find two bruised and bloodied guys on the floor held at gunpoint by a naked man. They'd disarmed Tyron and handcuffed him before Eli managed to convince them that it was Tyron's apartment and the other two were the ones who'd broken in.

With that misunderstanding cleared up, the police finally allowed Tyron to dress. After that, he and Eli sat side by side on the sofa answering the detectives' many questions while the paramedics whisked the injured man to the hospital and the uniformed officers hauled the other one off to jail. Two officers stayed behind to do whatever they did to gather evidence in a case like this one.

Eli wished he could just slink away and go watch the uniforms work. The suspicious way the two detectives eyed him made him feel like he'd done something wrong, even though he knew he hadn't.

Finally, at just after one in the morning, the police left, with instructions to call Detectives Estep or Juarez if either Eli or Tyron thought of anything else that would help in the case against the two men. Eli locked the door behind them with a

sigh of relief. "God, it's about time. I thought they were going to stay all night."

"Me too. But better them than those two fuckwads, I guess." Lifting the hem of his sweatshirt, Tyron used it to dig a bit of ink from beneath his thumbnail. "You know, I understand why they had to take our prints, but this damn ink is all over the place. Shit."

"You said it." Eli had washed his hands twice after Officer Grier took their prints—to distinguish them from any the two would-be thieves may have left, she explained—but ink still stained his cuticles. "I could go for a shower, myself. I can't help thinking I got that guy's blood on me."

Chuckling, Tyron rose from the sofa, went to Eli, and wound both arms around his waist. "I don't think you did, but I totally get how you feel. Let's go shower. We can wash each other."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Moved by a sudden, irresistible impulse, Eli cupped Tyron's face in his hands and gazed into his eyes. "I love you."

Tyron's mouth fell open. Eli winced inwardly but didn't look away. It wasn't exactly how he'd planned to tell Tyron. Not that he'd *planned* it, as such, but still. Blurting it out after a grueling evening with the police hadn't even crossed his mind. Yet now that he'd laid the words out there in all their naked glory, Eli wasn't about to take them back.

As the silence stretched on, Eli leaned close enough to rest his forehead against Tyron's.

"I'm sorry if that makes you uncomfortable. But it's true, and I just ... wanted to tell you."

"I'm glad you did." Tyron's fingers came up to trace the line of Eli's jaw. "I love you too. I have for a while, but I didn't know how to tell you." His hands slid around the back of Eli's neck and tightened there. He pressed his body against Eli's. "I could've died tonight. We both could've. And neither of us would've ever known how the other one felt. Do you have any fucking idea how much that scares me?"

Eli's throat constricted. Blinking away the sting behind his eyelids, he wrapped both arms around Tyron's waist and crushed the slight body against his. Tyron was shaking from head to toe, his fingers clutching at Eli's shirt as if he'd fall if he didn't hang on with all his strength. Eli held him, stroking his back and kissing his hair, until the trembling eased and the rapid breaths panting against Eli's neck slowed to normal.

When Tyron eventually drew back a bit, Eli searched his face with concern. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Tyron gave him a sheepish smile. "I'm Joe Cool in a crisis, but as soon as it's over I fall apart. Sorry."

"Hey, at least you keep it together when it counts."

Dipping his head, Eli collected a swift but sweet kiss. "So.

How about that shower?"

"Big guy, you said the magic words." Tyron stood on tiptoe for a longer, deeper kiss than before, then wriggled out of Eli's arms. "Come on. Cleanliness awaits."

Grinning, Eli let Tyron take his hand and lead him to the bathroom. Life was good.

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#### **Epilogue**

Eli hurried through the door of I Heart That City, already searching the Friday night crowd with his eyes. Across the room, Tyron waved at him from the corner booth where he sat busily tapping away at his laptop. Eli waved back and started making his way through the boisterous swarm of people.

"Hey," Tyron greeted as Eli slid into the booth beside him. "How was your meeting?"

"Great. I think we'll be getting this contract. Second major new customer this week."

"That's fantastic, big guy." Twisting sideways in his seat, Tyron lifted his smiling face in clear invitation. "Allow me to congratulate you."

Eli leaned over to receive Tyron's usual enthusiastic kiss. He sank into it with a hum of pure pleasure, fingers tangling into Tyron's hair.

"Mmm." Eli smiled and rubbed his nose against Tyron's as they drew apart. "You seem happy tonight."

Tyron grinned. "I'm making out with the hottest guy in the place. What's not to be happy about?"

Laughing, Eli leaned back against the padded seat.

"Thanks, but I know you, and I can tell when you're especially happy about something. So what is it?"

Glancing around at the nearby tables as if to make sure no one was listening in—as if anyone *could* with all the usual racket—Tyron beamed at Eli. "I got a call from Detective

Juarez today. They arrested Warren Farraday for hiring those guys to break into my place."

"Really? Shit, that's awesome! Not that he hired them, but that they arrested him. *You* know what I mean." Eli took Tyron's hand and squeezed it. "That was pretty quick. It's only been a little over a week."

"Yeah, well, apparently he made the mistake of hiring hoods who cracked like a couple of month-old eggs when they found out how much prison time they'd be looking at if they didn't give some names."

"So they're both cutting plea deals?"

Tyron nodded. "Sounds like it."

Eli scowled. "I don't know if I like that. Those assholes nearly killed you."

"Come on, Eli, don't be like that," Tyron berated, thumb rubbing the back of Eli's hand. "They're going to prison; it's just for a lesser charge. They both have petty records longer than your dick, which made them more than willing to give up Farraday for a plea deal." He swooped in and cut off Eli's smart-ass remark with a kiss. "In any case, Farraday's the one behind it all. As long as he goes to prison, I'm a happy camper."

"Well, if you're happy, I'm happy." Eli picked up Tyron's whiskey and took a sip. "What about the footage you got at Nell's? Are the cops letting you use it?"

Tyron had been forced to tell the police the whole story about Naked Richmond and how he'd happened to piss off a powerful local businessman. Making up something in order to keep his blog identity secret would've been next to

impossible, and pointless to boot. Tyron had worried that they'd confiscate his footage from Miss Nell's. Eli had pointed out that the end result wouldn't change—more charges and public humiliation for Farraday—but Tyron had wanted to use the footage on his blog, and he'd hated the idea of not being able to.

The way Tyron's eyes lit up gave Eli his answer before Tyron said a word.

"They said go ahead." Turning back to his laptop, Tyron brushed a finger over the trackpad. The *Flight of the Conchords* screen saver gave way to the distinctive red, black, and gray cityscape of the Naked Richmond blog. "I just put it up before I came over here. Check it out."

Eli looked. Under the eye-catching headline THIS TIME, FARRADAY'S THE ONE GETTING FUCKED, Tyron had embedded a video link. Eli clicked on the grainy grayish blur. The moment it started moving, it resolved into a slice of a dimly lit, utilitarian room containing a narrow bed, a small table, and a white plastic chair. On the bed, a tall, wide-shouldered man crouched naked on knees and elbows, pale rear end in the air. Behind him, a hefty redheaded girl wearing a lace bra and stockings that had seen better days pounded into the man's ass with a huge black dildo strapped to a harness around her hips. The man's big hands bunched the thin covers, and his erect prick swayed beneath him. His face was turned toward the camera, and even contorted in agonized bliss, the features were quite clearly those of Warren Farraday.

Eli let out a whistle when the short but damning clip came to an end. "Wow. I can't believe the police let you use that on your blog."

"Honestly? Neither can I. But they said since I could see what was going on right through the window from a public alley, I wasn't doing anything illegal." A huge grin split Tyron's face. "It's great, isn't it?"

"It sure as hell is." Unable to resist the joy shining in Tyron's eyes, Eli put both arms around his neck and pressed a kiss to his lips. "God, you are so beautiful when you're happy."

Tyron's expression softened into something so tender it made Eli's breath catch. Tilting his head sideways, Tyron brought their mouths together in one of those slow, sizzling kisses that always made Eli feel like he could fly straight to the sun.

"Keep talking like that, big guy," Tyron murmured against Eli's lips. "And you might get lucky tonight."

"Mmm." Eli nipped Tyron's bottom lip. "Keep kissing me like that and you might get lucky too."

Tyron looked up at him with absolute sincerity in those big blue-gray eyes. "I already did."

A bubble of warmth blossomed in Eli's chest. He smiled. "So did I."

THE END

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#### **Ally Blue**

Ally is a married mother of two, living in the mountains of North Carolina in the U.S.A. She is a registered nurse by trade and a writer of man-love by inclination. Her husband is a freelance artist, and their children have apparently inherited his artistic tendencies. Thankfully, they have also inherited his singing voice instead of Ally's, which her family will confirm can peel the paint off the walls.

Ally wrote her first story—a slash fanfic—in the fall of 2003, after discovering the joys of reading male-on-male sex starring her favorite hotties, who shall remain nameless. She has since branched out into original character fiction, mostly male/male love stories. Her short stories have been published in the e-zines Forbidden Fruit and Ruthie's Club, and she won third place in the Torquere Press 'Melt' short fiction contest in the summer of 2004.

In addition to writing, Ally enjoys traveling, collecting dragons, and trying to scare herself. Her favorite authors include Stephen King, Clive Barker, and Laurell K. Hamilton, and she is a rabid fan of horror movies.

Ally adores music, particularly Radiohead, Placebo, and Beck. She plans to have her iPod surgically implanted as soon as someone invents a way to do that. Hopefully this will mean the end of playing CDs and her children can finally stop telling her to turn the volume down.