

A man is seen from behind, sitting in a hot tub with his arms outstretched. The hot tub has a reddish-brown tiled rim and a white tile deck with a dark wood-grain pattern. The water is a clear, bright blue. The background features a mosaic of light blue and white tiles.

# A PROMISE KEPT

*Stormy Glenn*

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*by Stormy Glenn*

**Torquere Press**

[www.torquerepress.com](http://www.torquerepress.com)

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First published in [www.torquerepress.com](http://www.torquerepress.com), 2009

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To "V", you really put me through the wringer on this one but I think it was worth it. Thanks.

## Chapter One

Mason's heart squeezed in anguish as he gazed across the backyard of his parents' house and watched the man of his dreams lean down to kiss the cute little blond woman in his arms. The object of Mason's desire was Jack.

It wasn't a famous name, or an adventurous name, or even a poetic name. But to Mason Philips, it was the most beautiful name in the world, because it belonged to Jack Spencer, the man Mason had been dreaming about for the last ten years. And for Mason, it had been ten years of secret yearnings, stolen glances, and forbidden fantasies.

His problem was that Jack had been such a part of his life for the last ten years that he wasn't sure what to do without the man. Mason had been just sixteen years old attending his brother, Randy's engagement party when he had met Jack. It had been love at first sight. Mason's feelings hadn't changed in all that time, even after he had learned that Jack was straight.

Before Jack, Mason had never believed in the love at first sight hype. Now he wondered what he would do without Jack in his life. How would he survive without Jack's dimpled smile, his easy laughter, and his warm presence?

Mason had spent the last ten years hiding his feelings from Jack and everyone else. He had gotten so good at it that it surprised him each and every time he saw Jack and his feeling resurfaced.

Mason 's spirits sank even deeper as he watched Jack flirt with Angela. It was time to give up his fantasies and bury his feelings for Jack, to move on with his life, before he had even less of a life than he had now.

With a heavy heart, Mason walked across the yard and sat down at the picnic table with his parents. He looked at them both for several moments as he tried to gather his courage together. He needed to tell them he was leaving. It wasn't going to be easy. He was the baby of the family.

"Hey, Mom, Dad, can I talk to you for a few minutes?" Mason gave them a small, tentative smile.

"Sure, Mason, what's up?" his mother, Janet, asked as she turned to look at him.

"Well, you know that I have just a year left before I get my Ph.D. in Psychology, right?"

"Yes, of course," Janet replied. "What's this all about, Mason?"

Mason's hands twisted together. He really did not look forward to this part. "I'm transferring to another university. Georgetown University in Washington D.C. has a great program that I can attend while finishing my degree classes. I can get a minor in Applied Cultural & Community Socialization at the same time."

"D.C.? Washington D.C.?" Janet croaked out as she reached an unsteady hand out for her husband's.

"It's a great program, Mom. I'll still be getting my Ph.D. in Psychology, but with this minor, I'll be specializing. It will go a long way toward getting my foot in the door with what I really want to do," Mason rationalized.

"Oh, Mason, Washington D.C.? That's so far away, honey. We'd never get to see you."

"Sure you would. I'll be home for holidays and stuff. Besides, I won't be gone that long. I only have a year left." Mason said, his voice thick and unsteady. He took a deep breath then raised his eyes back up to meet his Mom's. His eyes clung to hers, analyzing her reaction. "This is something I need to do, Mom."

He watched his mother gaze at him for several moments. He could see the tears in her eyes as she finally nodded her head. "Okay, Mason. If this is what you need to do, I understand. Just remember that we're always here if you need us or want to come home."

Mason smiled and reached over for his mother's hand. He gave her hand a small squeeze. He knew his mother would understand, even if no one else did. She had always understood him. "Thanks, Mom. I promise I'll come home as often as I can."

As he looked past his mother to where Jack was standing with Angela, he didn't know how often that would be. It broke his heart every time he came to a family function and had to watch Jack with someone else.

In the past, Jack had often brought girls to the family gatherings, but it had been a different girl each time. Mason could pretend that Jack wasn't settling down because he was still looking for that perfect love. That maybe he still had a chance.

But for the last year, Jack had brought the same girl to every gathering. The rumor circulating through the family

grapevine was that Jack was going to announce their engagement any day now.

Mason didn't think he could survive watching Jack marry someone else. Sure, he wanted Jack to be happy, which is why he did his absolute best to be civil to Angela, Jack's girlfriend. But it tore his heart apart each time he saw them together.

Knowing that Angela, as nice as she was, would be sleeping in Jack's bed every night, getting all Jack's love and affection, Mason didn't think he could continue to smile and be civilized. So, Mason had made the decision to move away.

"Are you sure about this, Mason?" Bob asked.

Mason sent his Dad a little smile. "As sure as I can be, Dad. I'm not terribly happy about leaving you all, but this is something I need to do. It's kind of hard being the baby of the family. I need to get out on my own a little.

"When do you leave?" Janet asked.

Mason colored fiercely as he answered. "Next week. I thought I'd drive there and have a little vacation time along the way. I already have an apartment waiting for me and everything. Classes start in two weeks, but I wanted to get there a little early and check the area out, get all moved in."

"So soon?" Janet asked. "Why didn't you tell us earlier? We could have thrown you a going away party or helped you move."

"I didn't tell you earlier just because of that. This is something I need to do, Mom. Besides, you know what Randy would say if he knew. He still doesn't understand me being in



school all of this time. He still thinks he knows what's best for me."

Janet and Bob both chuckled. "Okay, Mason," Janet said, "If this is what you need to do, we'll support you in it. We just want you to be happy."

Mason didn't know if he was happy about it or not. He felt numb after finally making the decision to move, almost as if his head was a little clouded. He knew it would come, the pain and anguish from leaving Jack. He was hoping to put it off as long as possible. At least until he was by himself and could lick his wounds in private.

As Jack flashed him one of those famous, dimpled grins from across the backyard, Mason wondered if he would make it that long. Jack was just so handsome. He took Mason's breath away every time he looked at the man.

Jack was six foot four inches of raw, dominant male. His exuded everything that was male from his wide shoulders and strong arms to his perfect washboard stomach and his thick, muscular thighs.

The curly dark brown hair and deep steel blue eyes only added to Jack's features. What got Mason every time were the strong square jaw, the five o'clock shadow Jack always seemed to have, and the dimples.

Oh, those dimples. Jack had one on each cheek right next to his mouth, and they shown bright as day every time he smiled. Jack's smile could light up a room and bring the dead back to life. Mason would do almost anything to be on the receiving end of one of Jack's smiles.

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Mason couldn't remember how many times he had done something really stupid, acted like a complete idiot, to get Jack to laugh and flash those dimples. Of course, that totally backfired on him. After ten years of acting like an imbecile, Jack thought Mason was an irresponsible moron.

Jack never took Mason seriously, nor did anyone else. Mason supposed he deserved it. He had done some really stupid things. Everything from dying his hair blue to throwing water balloons at his brother. But each dimpled smile had been worth every stupid stunt Mason had ever pulled.

No, Mason knew that it was finally time to give up his fantasies about Jack and move on with his life. He was twenty-six years old. It was past time for him to give life without Jack a try. Maybe, out there somewhere was someone that he could love and be happy with and maybe not. But Mason had to try.

Mason was tired of being alone, tired of sleeping alone, and tired of coming home to an empty apartment every night. He was tired of lying to his family every time they asked him why he never brought someone home. Basically, Mason was just tired.

He felt a little sad as he glanced around the yard at his family. His father was busy flipping hot dogs on the BBQ. His mother sat at the patio table as she chatted with him. It was a normal Philips' backyard BBQ. And Mason would miss them all. He hated that he had to leave them. They were a very close knit family. But Mason knew he couldn't stay. In the end, it would destroy him.

Mason felt the sadness in him well up even more as he watched his family. He had wanted to have just one last gathering with them before he left. His misery was like a lead weight as he accepted the fact that it was time to leave. Staying was just too damn hard.

Mason looked across the backyard to where Jack was standing on the patio talking to Randy and Kari, his arm wrapped around the Angela's waist. Yeah, it was time to go. Maybe ten years past time.

Mason set his drink down, then walked across the yard as calmly as he could and into the house. He gathered his stuff together and started to leave his mother a quick note when he heard someone walk into the kitchen.

It was all Mason could do to suppress his groan when he looked up and saw Jack. He really could have gone all day without this. "Oh, hey, Jack," he said as he tried to flash his best smile.

"Hey, Mason, you taking off?" Jack asked as he leaned his hip against the counter.

"Yeah, I've got a bit of a headache and don't feel much like partying. I was just going to leave Mom a note. If you wouldn't mind, could you let her know?" Mason crumpled up the piece of paper he had been writing on and tossed it in the garbage can.

"Are you okay to drive? You want me to take you home?" Jack asked.

Would I ever! "No, man, I'm cool. I haven't had anything to drink except soda. Must be allergies or something. I'll be

fine once I get home and get some rest," Mason replied quickly as he grabbed his windbreaker.

Jack smirked. "Guess it's all those late night parties finally catching up to you."

"Yeah, that must be it."

"You know, Mason, if you put half as much effort into your studies as you do into partying, you could—" Jack began.

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all from Mom and Dad. I don't need to hear it from you," Mason replied as he rolled his eyes. What parties? He hadn't been to a party in so long he wondered if he even remembered what one was.

"Look, Mason, I'm just saying—"

"No, Jack, you're not," Mason said as fury almost choked him. "I'm tired of people telling what I should or shouldn't do. You stand there and tell me that I should pay more attention to my studies and stop partying? Do you know how long it's actually been since I've been to a party? Do you?"

"No. But I was just saying—"

Mason couldn't stand it anymore. He had put up with the crap from his parents because he knew that they loved him and just wanted the best from him. He even put up with it from Randy. He would not put up with it from Jack, not when his heart was being ripped out of his chest just from being in the same room with the man.

"Do you even know anything about me? About who I am, what I do, what I want out of life? Do you even have any idea what my life is like? Or do you see what you want to see, what you've always seen?" Mason asked, his voice starting to rise with his anger and frustration.

Before Jack could say anything, Mason tore into him. "No, you don't. You don't know one damn thing about my life—or about me. You're just like the rest of them. You still see me as that stupid teenage boy that wanted to make you laugh. You don't see the real me. None of you do."

"Mason—" Jack began again.

"You know what..." Mason began laughing bitterly, "...it doesn't matter anymore. None of it does. You believe whatever you want to believe. I'm out of here."

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Jack stood there, stunned, as he watched Mason throw open the front door and walk out, slamming the door behind him. What had just happened? Mason never got angry, not with him, and not anyone else for that matter.

It just wasn't in him to be angry with someone. Mason was the family clown. He was always doing something to make everyone laugh. Like the time he had jumped into the swimming pool with all of his clothes on. Sure, Jack knew that he probably should have grown out of it as old as he was, but it was just Mason.

Jack turned as he heard someone walk up behind him. It was Janet, Mason's mom. "Was that Mason? Is he leaving?" she asked as she went to the window to look out.

"Uh, yeah. He said he had a little bit of a headache and decided to go home. I'm sure he'll be fine once he gets some rest," he tried to assure Janet. No sense in her knowing about Mason's outburst.

"Oh, I was so hoping he'd stay. This is our last gathering with him. I'm really going to miss him. He's my baby, no matter how old he is. It's just going to be so hard once he moves."

"He's moving? When? Why?" For some reason that didn't sit well with Jack. He didn't understand why. He shouldn't care what Mason did.

"Oh yes, he's moving back east to Washington D.C. to attend school there. He's supposed to leave next week. Already has an apartment waiting for him and everything."

"Why is he moving? Isn't he going to school here? Why does he have to go to school in D.C.?" Jack asked, not liking the idea of Mason living all the way across the country. Mason was always here. It was just a fact of life he could depend on, like the sun rising in the east.

"He says he wants to finish his degree there, but I think it's something more than that."

"Like what?" Jack asked curiously.

As Janet turned to look at Jack, he was surprised by the sad look on her face. "I think someone broke his heart. He hasn't said anything, but a mother knows when her baby is hurting. He's been hurting for awhile now. That's why I didn't argue with him when he told us he was moving. Maybe a change of scenery will do him some good. Bring the light back into his eyes."

"I didn't even know he was seeing anyone. He never brings anyone to any of the family gatherings. In fact, I can't remember him bringing anyone, ever, at least not since I've been around. And that's been, what? Ten years or so?"

"No, he never brings anyone home. I asked him about that once, a couple of years ago. He said that he did have someone he cared about, but he just wasn't ready to share yet. I thought at the time that the relationship was just too new or something. Now I wonder."

"Wonder what?" Jack asked, half in anticipation, half in dread.

"I wonder if he's afraid to bring someone home. Of how we will react."

"Why would he be afraid of bringing someone home? Hell, I bring dates all the time. And I'm not even a real relation." Jack shrugged to hide his confusion.

"I think maybe the person he's involved with is married. Every time I ask he gets this sad, distant look, like he's suffering. Sometimes, he's so unhappy, I worry about him, what he might do."

"You don't really think he'd do anything to hurt himself, do you?" Jack asked hesitantly, nearly afraid to voice his thoughts, especially since they centered on the sudden anger he felt that Mason might be involved with someone else. Where had that come from?

"No, of course not. But I just hate to see him so unhappy. I wish I knew who was hurting him. I'd find them and give them a good piece of my mind. They have no idea what a special man Mason is. He's so kind and gentle. He wouldn't purposely hurt a soul. And to see him so sad, well, it just breaks my heart."

"How long has this been going on?" Jack asked through gritted teeth. He stroked a shaky hand through his curly,

brown hair as he tried to figure out why he was so unsettled by the thought of Mason seeing someone else.

"Several years by my guess. I don't know if it's been the same person all this time or if it's been several different people. Maybe he's just unlucky in love." Janet looked down at her hands as she twisted her wedding ring around her finger.

"Sometimes I see a glimmer in his eye when he's staring off into space, and I think, that's it, my baby's in love. Only someone who has felt real love can have that glimmer. And then the glimmer fades away to be replaced with heartache so deep that it must tear at his soul. And I don't know how to fix it."

She wiped the tears from her eyes with her sleeve, giving off a little laugh, "Well, enough of this. We have a party to attend. We should get to it."

Jack watched Janet leave the room, a multitude of questions circling in his mind. He didn't know what to think. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen any of this. He had been totally oblivious to anything concerning Mason.

Maybe Mason was right. Maybe Jack didn't really know anything about him. Jack still saw him as a goofy kid. And he was what, twenty-five ... twenty-six years old? Granted, Mason still acted goofy nearly every time Jack saw him, which accounted for that opinion somewhat.

But now that he thought over the last few years, he realized that Mason had been less and less silly every time he saw the man. Maybe he was growing up. Jack was glad of



that. Jack knew Mason was a smart man. Jack hoped that Mason could have everything he ever wanted out of life.

Experience had shown Jack that you only got what you really wanted by hard work and determination, not goofing off and making people laugh. After so many years of Mason running around in the snow in his bare feet, painting his entire body purple, and setting off firecrackers, Jack was a little hesitant to believe that he had finally decided to buckle down and become a responsible adult.

Hell, what did he know? Jack hadn't even known that Mason was involved with anyone and now Janet tells him that Mason is in love with someone and having his heart broken? It must be pretty serious for Mason to move across the country to get away. Jack couldn't believe how much he didn't like that thought.

Jack briefly wondered who Mason was involved with. Was this person married as Janet suspected or otherwise involved? Or was it something else? What kind of problems could two people have that would keep them apart like this?

Unless she didn't love Mason. If the woman Mason was in love with didn't love him in return, it could be devastating, especially to someone like Mason, who didn't seem to take anything seriously.

Jack clenched his fists together. He felt angry for Mason. As silly as he was, he was still a nice guy. He didn't deserve to be hurt like that. He himself had been hurt once or twice chasing after unattainable love. He knew what it felt like.

As he thought about Mason's situation, he wondered if he could help in any way. Was there any advice that he could

give Mason? Words of wisdom, so to speak, that might make things a little easier for him?

Jack still didn't like the idea of Mason moving across country. He couldn't imagine what life would be like without Mason. It made Jack sick to his stomach just to think about it. Maybe he had gotten too used to Mason being around all of the time? Maybe this was what Mason needed.

He shook his head as he walked back out onto the patio. Mason sure could get himself into a jumble. Jack pondered briefly if Mason could use a friend. Maybe he'd drop by and see.

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## Chapter Two

Two days later, Mason stood up from the box he had been packing and walked to the door when someone knocked on it. Opening it up, he was surprised to see that Jack stood there.

"Jack."

"Hey, Mason, I was wondering if you had a moment to talk?"

"Uh, yeah, sure, come on in," Mason said as he held the door open and stepped out of the way. Mason stared after Jack in bewilderment as he walked into the apartment. He seemed to be looking at the stacks of packed boxes with something close to disgust.

"What's up, Jack?" Mason asked as he tried to figure out what was going on. It felt like a kick in the gut to have Jack here after making the decision to stop pining over him.

"I just wanted to know if everything is okay? Your mom mentioned that you were moving." Jack gestured to the boxes stacked around the room. "Guess it's true."

"Yeah, I'm transferring to Georgetown University."

"Why?" Jack asked as he looked back at Mason.

"Why?" Mason asked, blinking with bafflement at Jack's question. "Why what?"

"Why are you transferring? Can't you finish your degree here in Portland?" Jack asked as he took a few steps closer to Mason.

"I could, but the program at Georgetown offers more," Mason replied as he stepped back from Jack. Standing this

close to Jack, he could smell the soft musk of Jack's after-shave and it was making his legs go weak. Jack smelled so damn good. He always did.

"Is that the only reason?" Jack asked.

Mason could feel his heart pound in his chest as he tried to read the closed expression on Jack's face. Had Jack learned of his desire? Mason would worry that someone had told Jack how he felt except that he had never told anyone else.

"Should there be another reason?" Mason asked as he felt an unwelcome blush creep into his face.

"Mason, I just want to help. You don't have to hide things from me. I'm your friend," Jack said as he reached a reassuring hand out to pat Mason on the arm.

My friend, but not my lover, Mason thought sadly as he shrugged Jack's hand off of his arm. "I'm fine, Jack."

"Mason—"

Mason turned away and walked over to stand at the kitchen counter. "Thank you for checking on me, Jack, but I'm fine. You can go now." Mason knew he was being rude. It was just too hard to be in the same room with Jack and not blurt out how much he wanted Jack. Mason had to bite his lip to keep from blabbing everything.

"Mason—" Jack began again.

"Please, Jack, just go," Mason said quietly as his hands gripped the edge of the countertop. "Please." Mason closed his eyes as he waited for the front door to open and close and Jack to leave.

"Mason, there has to be a better way to deal with this than to move across the country."

Mason spun around to find Jack standing right behind him, so close that their chests almost touched. Mason's eyes widened in surprise at the look of concern on Jack's face. "Deal with what?" he choked out over the lump that had formed in his throat.

"Look, Mason, we can't choose who we love, but she's not worth leaving your family," Jack said.

"Who?" Mason asked in confusion.

"The woman you're in love with. Your mother told me all about it. She didn't know if your problem was that the woman was married or unavailable or what, but no woman is worth giving up your family."

"I'm not in love with any woman," Mason said, perplexed by the direction this conversation was going.

"Mason, I told you, you don't have to hide this from me. I just want to help. If she can't see what a great guy you are, you don't need her. There are a lot of other women out there," Jack continued as if Mason hadn't said anything.

Mason couldn't stop the small laugh that escaped his lips as he gazed at Jack. The situation wasn't that funny, but he couldn't believe that Jack was here giving him the chin up speech when Jack was the reason he was in this mess in the first place.

"Jack, there is no woman," Mason said.

"Mason—"

"Jack, I can promise you, there is no woman. I'm gay."

Mason watched as Jack's mouth opened and closed several times as he stared at Mason in shock. Mason's embarrassment that Jack was the first to know he was gay

quickly turned to annoyance as Jack just continued to stare at him.

"You're gay?" Jack asked in a whisper.

Mason crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Jack. Jack sounded astonished, as if the thought had never entered his mind. "Yes, I am. See? No woman to worry about. Now, would you please go? I have a lot of packing to do."

"You're gay?" Jack asked again.

Mason rolled his eyes and waved his hand in the air in agitation. "Yes, Jack, I'm gay. Always have been. Always will be. Now, if you'll kindly leave me to finish my packing, I might have time to go down to the bar and find me some hot stud to bring home and fuck."

Mason grabbed Jack by the arm and pulled him to the door. He opened it up and pushed Jack through it. Mason briefly noted the dazed look in Jack's eyes. "Bye, Jack," Mason said as he shut the door.

The moment the door shut, Mason turned the lock then leaned his head against it as his heart beat frantically in his chest. He couldn't believe he had just come out to Jack. And Jack thought he was in love with a woman. Didn't that just beat all?

Mason shook his head as he turned back to his packing. As he picked up another stack of books and placed them in an open box, he wondered what Jack would have said if Jack knew that he was the reason Mason was moving across country and leaving his family.

Mason snorted to himself as he grimly thought about Jack's response. He'd probably pat Mason on the head and tell

him that they could still be friends, but only friends. It wasn't like Mason had a lot of friends, but friendship was not what he wanted from Jack. And what he wanted, he could never have.

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Mason was groggy from sleep as he reached for the bedside phone. He glanced briefly at the alarm clock and wondered who in the hell would be calling at two o'clock in the morning.

"Hello?"

"Is this Mason Philips?" asked a strange voice.

"Yeah, this is Mason Philips. Who's this?" Mason asked, still wondering who in the hell was calling him so early. It seemed like just a few hours since Jack had left, and Mason had finished packing only to fall into bed, exhausted.

"I'm the bartender down at Dooly's on Fourth Avenue. I have a guy down here named Jack. Man, he's skunked. He didn't drive here, but I don't think he should walk home either. When I asked who I could call he told me to call you. Can you come get him?"

"Ugh, yeah, I'll be there in about fifteen minutes. Don't let him go anywhere," Mason replied angrily as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and hung up the phone. He quickly got dressed, grabbed his jacket and keys, and headed out the door.

As he drove toward Dooley's, Mason couldn't believe how angry he was at Jack. He complained about Mason being irresponsible, and Jack was so drunk that he couldn't even walk home.

And why call him? Wouldn't it have been easier to call Randy? Randy might be Mason's brother, but he was also Jack's best friend. Mason hadn't even known that Jack knew his phone number.

Mason resolved to pick Jack up and drive him straight home and drop him off. If Jack wanted to get so drunk he had to have someone come and get him, he deserved what he got. Mason pulled up in front of Dooley's and got out of his car. He casted an angry glare at the bar before he headed for the door.

As he opened the door, he was a little surprised at the brightness in the room. In the light, he was able to spot Jack immediately. He sat at the bar counter as he talked with a man Mason assumed was the bartender.

He walked up right beside him. "Jack?"

He watched Jack turn to look at him. When Jack's face lit up at the sight of him, Mason tried not to take it to heart, especially when he knew it wasn't real.

"Mason, what are you doing here?"

Jack actually sounded happy to see him, but Mason could tell from the slurred speech that Jack was definitely three sheets to the wind. Mason almost laughed. Jack was so plowed. He could barely keep himself sitting upright on his stool.

"Jack, it's time to go. I'm sure the bartender would like to close down and go home. Why don't you let me take you home?"

"Okay, Mason," Jack gave him a sloppy, dimpled grin. "I would like to go home with you."



Mason wondered at the slightly wistful sound to Jack's voice. He sounded almost sentimental. Shaking his head, he grabbed onto Jack's arm and helped Jack down from the barstool. "Come on, ya booze hound, let's get you home."

Mason was several inches shorter than Jack was, so he was able to wrap an arm around Jack's back and help him out to the car. Unfortunately, Jack was a good fifty pounds heavier than Mason, which made half carrying him to the car much harder.

After some creative maneuvering and several swear words, Mason finally got Jack settled in his car and closed the door. He walked around the car and climbed into the driver's side. Looking over at Jack as he started the car, he began to laugh.

Jack was out cold. Mason could even hear him softly snoring. Oh man, he was going to hate himself in the morning. His head was sure to explode the first time he opened his eyes. Mason sure wouldn't want to be him in the morning.

Mason pulled into Jack's driveway a few moments later. He climbed out of his car and walked around to the passenger side. He shook Jack's shoulder several times, calling Jack's name, trying to wake Jack up. Finally Mason gave up. Apparently Jack wasn't going to make this easy.

Mason pulled Jack to his feet then threw him over one shoulder and closed the door. He reached the front door and found it locked. Oh, hell! He pulled Jack off his shoulder and leaned the man against the door as he dug into Jack's pocket for the keys.

His breath hitched in his throat when his hand brushed against a hard length in Jack's pants. Oh man, what he wouldn't do to have Jack conscious right now. Mason so didn't want to be doing this right now. He dug out the keys then pulled Jack against his chest so he could get the door unlocked.

He kicked the door closed after unlocking it and carried Jack into the house. He had never been inside of Jack's house before, so he wasn't quite sure where the bedroom was located. He just started walking down the hallway looking for the master bedroom.

As he looked around he was surprised at how masculine the whole house seemed. It was cozy but not overly dramatic with lots of light colors. Mason could see himself being very comfortable in Jack's house.

The whole house was decorated in warm earth tones, from the soft beige couch and loveseat centered around a stone fireplace to the large, oak bookshelf filled with books that lined one entire wall. The biggest surprise to Mason was how clean and organized everything seemed to be. Jack's house was very orderly.

What did seem strange to Mason was that there didn't seem to be a sign of a female in sight. There were no flowers, female clothes, or even feminine paraphernalia. It almost seemed like Jack was single.

Mason walked into the bedroom at the end of the hall. He pulled back the covers and laid Jack down on the bed. Mason pulled Jack's shoes off and laid them on the floor by the door. He reached down and pulled Jack's shirt off and then reached

for his jeans. Part of Mason hoped that Jack was wearing boxers, the other more torturous part hoped that he wasn't. Damn! He was.

He carefully folded Jack's shirt and jeans and laid them on a chair by the window. He walked back to the bed and pulled the covers up over Jack to tuck the man in. God, Jack was so beautiful, Mason thought as he stared down at the sleeping man.

Mason went into the kitchen, searched around until he found a can of coffee and proceeded to make a pot. He set an empty cup down right next to the coffeepot and wrote a short note telling Jack to feel better soon.

In the bathroom, Mason searched the cabinet for some aspirin, easily finding it in the organized shelf. Jack's bathroom cabinets were so tidy, Mason was surprised Jack hadn't labeled everything. Maybe Jack had a little Obsessive Compulsive Disorder going on.

The entire house was very neat and clean, almost too much so. Mason wasn't a slob by any means, but he had been known to hang up his clothes on the floor. Unlike Jack's orderly bookshelves, Mason had stacks of books all over his apartment. Organized he was not.

He grabbed a glass of water and took it back into the bedroom, setting the bottle of aspirin and the water on the nightstand. He set the house keys down right next the aspirin.

As he looked down at the man he had loved for nearly ten years, Mason couldn't help himself. He leaned down and placed a small kiss on Jack's lips. He nearly jumped out of his

skin when Jack wrapped an arm around his neck and began to respond to his kiss.

Jack's kiss was hesitant at first, his mouth gentle and exploring. Then his tongue joined in, brushing against Mason's. Mason couldn't control his moan. Kissing Jack was everything he always thought it would be and more.

Mason was lost in his first real kiss, his head spinning as Jack took the kiss deeper, harder, both hands wrapped in Mason's hair to hold him in place so he couldn't escape. Not that Mason wanted to. He was right where he had wanted to be for the last ten years.

When Jack reached down and pulled on Mason's shirt, reality crashed in. He couldn't do this. Jack was straight. He was drunk. Jack obviously didn't know what he was doing. Mason knew he had to stop this before it got out of hand.

"Jack, man, stop," he begged as he tried to untangle himself from Jack's arms.

"Don't want to stop," Jack moaned as he sucked on the side of Mason's neck hard enough to leave a mark. His hands were quickly finding their way under Mason's shirt.

"Jack, please, we can't do this," he whispered desperately as Jack's fingers pulled at his nipples. Mason couldn't keep the moan from escaping his mouth as Jack manipulated his sensitive flesh. His nipples were a hot spot for him, and Jack was playing him like a master.

"Want you—want you now—too many clothes," Jack said between kisses. He was almost rough as he jerked at Mason's clothes.

"Jack, do you know what you're doing? Do you even know who I am?" Mason asked desperately.

"Mason, pretty, pretty Mason."

Okay, so Jack knew who Mason was. That didn't mean that he knew exactly what he was doing. Did Jack have secret desire to be with a guy? As much as Mason wanted to give in, he didn't want to be an experiment in gay sex.

Mason tried again. He grabbed Jack's face in his hands and tried to get Jack's attention. He had to stop this before it got out of hand. "Jack, we can't do this. You're drunk. You don't know what you're doing."

Mason knew he was lost when Jack flashed him one of those famous dimpled grins.

"I'm not that drunk," he chuckled, then pulled Mason's head down for another kiss.

Mason groaned deep in his throat as he succumbed to Jack's seduction. Mason softly stroked Jack's chiseled chest, his nipples. He climbed fully onto the bed and settled himself between Jack's legs, growling at the feel of Jack's hard cock pressed against his stomach. He kissed Jack's chest, down his tight abdomen to the edge of Jack's boxers. He pulled the edge of Jack's boxers down an inch at a time, slowly baring Jack's cock and nearly hairless sack until he could push the boxers all the way off of Jack and drop them on the floor.

He let out a heavy breath when Jack was totally naked to his hungry gaze. Oh damn, he was perfect here, too. Jack's hard cock, standing at full attention, was long and thick. A drop of pre-come glistened on the small slit at the ample head of his cock.

When Mason reached out with his tongue and licked up the small drop, Jack's cock jumped in response. As Mason enveloped the head of Jack's pulsing cock in his mouth, Jack wrapped his hands in Mason's hair, his groan of approval sounded loud in the nearly silent room.

For Mason, the taste of Jack's cock and the spot of pre-come that leaked from that cock was ambrosia. He knew it would be like this. He attacked Jack's cock, lavished it with his mouth and tongue as if his very next breath depended on it.

Mason heard Jack groan, then Jack humped his hips and drove his cock into Mason's eager mouth. Mason lowered his mouth down until his nose was buried in soft, curly hair. He wrapped his lips tightly around the base of Jack's cock and slowly sucked his way back up to the tip, then quickly back down to the base.

As Mason devoted himself to lavishing his cock, Jack squirmed on the bed, his hands reached to clench in the sheets, his moans grew louder and louder with each lick of Mason's tongue.

Mason felt the cock in his mouth start to throb, then jerk suddenly as Jack arched off the bed, spurts of soft cream shooting into Mason's mouth. He swallowed as much as he could until it began to leak out the side of his mouth.

He licked Jack clean, dropping Jack's cock from his mouth to gaze up at him. Mason groaned softly as his head dropped down onto Jack's leg. Jack was out cold—again. And Mason was hard as a rock.

Oh well, any discomfort he had from going unrelieved was worth it to hear Jack's cries of delight and know he had been the one that had given Jack that pleasure. Besides, there was always the morning.

Mason climbed from the bed and quickly dropped his clothes on the floor before he climbed back into bed next to Jack. He pulled the comforter up over both of them and then grabbed Jack and pulled the man into his arms.

He pushed one of his legs between Jack's and wrapped one arm around Jack's waist, his hand resting on Jack's heart. He nuzzled Jack's head where it rested on his arm. He couldn't believe that after all these years Jack was finally in his arms.

"I love you, Jack," he murmured quietly into Jack's hair. Mason closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, fantasies of what his future with Jack would be like dancing in his head.

\* \* \* \*

Mason felt someone shake him. He didn't want to wake up yet. He was too comfortable. "Go back to sleep, baby, it's too early," he grumbled.

"Mason, wake the fuck up!" someone yelled as he was shaken again.

Mason cracked open his eyes, blinking when he saw Jack sitting in front of him. As the memories of the night before swirled in his head, Mason reached for Jack. "Morning, baby," he smiled. He couldn't wait to finish what they had started last night.

But Jack wasn't smiling. "What the hell are you doing in my bed?"

Mason sat up and scooted against the headboard. He rubbed a hand over his face as he tried to figure out what had happened between last night and this morning. This wasn't how he had envisioned waking up.

"What the hell are you doing here, Mason?" Jack asked. Jack reached over and slapped Mason's hand away from where he was rubbing his face.

Mason saw Jack's face turn red with rage. As Jack continued to glare at him, it slowly began to dawn on Mason that Jack didn't remember anything from last night. He couldn't answer Jack. What would he tell him? You were drunk last night and I took advantage of you? Yeah, that'd go over great.

The best thing he could do would be to get out of there as fast as he could. Mason scooted to the side of the bed and reached for his pants. He pulled them up his legs and, not knowing how to avoid it, stood up to button his pants. As he grabbed for his shirt, he grimaced as he heard the horrified gasp that came out of Jack's mouth.

"What the hell happened here, Mason? Tell me, damn it!" Jack demanded.

Mason couldn't keep the anguish out of his eyes as he turned to look at Jack's shocked face. "Nothing happened, Jack," he whispered with a desperate hope that Jack would believe him. "You were drunk and I drove you home. Nothing happened."

"Then why the hell were you in bed with me—and why are you naked?"



Mason stepped back when Jack jumped to his feet and started around the end of the bed. It was only then that Jack seemed to notice that he was also naked. Mason's heart shriveled in his chest as Jack's face filled with distress.

He should have known it was too good to be true. Jack was never going to love him, and he should have known it. Last night had been nothing but a dream. This morning was turning into a nightmare.

He looked helplessly at Jack as Jack turned to look at him again. "What did you do to me?" Jack whispered before he turned and ran to the bathroom.

Mason watched him run, heard him throw up. Mason slowly turned and walked out of the room. His heart still beat in his chest, so he knew that he was still alive, but it certainly didn't feel that way.

Jack was apparently so disgusted with Mason that he was literally sick to his stomach. That thought alone made Mason wish he had never picked up the phone the night before. He clenched his hands together and dug his fingernails into his palms to keep himself moving.

Well, if Jack throwing up after finding them naked and in bed together that didn't say clear enough that Jack would never be his, Mason didn't know what did. Jack was clearly disgusted with him. Probably hated him now, too.

Mason couldn't blame Jack. He knew last night that he should never given into Jack's pleas but he had just wanted the man so much. Just once he wanted to feel like Jack wanted him, too. He knew it wasn't real, but he wanted it to be. He had pretended it was.

He didn't know what he was going to do. Jack was sure to tell Randy what happened, and Randy was going to be pissed at him. He had never told him or the rest of his family that he was gay. Without Jack, there didn't seem to be any point. Why come out of the closet when the one you wanted to come out for didn't love you?

Mason drove to his small apartment and walked inside. He looked around in a daze, not knowing quite what to do. He felt like the walking dead. He didn't feel sad or happy—nothing. He just didn't feel anything. He wondered if he would ever feel again. The only thing that told him he was still alive was the beating of his broken heart.

Mason was in a stupor as he gathered up some clothes and personal items and piled them into a duffel bag. He dropped the bag by the front door along with his laptop. He went to his bedroom closet and pulled down a medium sized cardboard box.

He carried the box to the bed, sat down and looked inside. So many memories, so little stuff. He grabbed a pen off of his nightstand and wrote a short note before he dropped it in the box and closed the lid. He wrote Jack's name across the top in big, black letters before picking the box up and carrying it to the living room.

With one last regretful look at the box, he set it down next to the front door. Mason looked around his house one more time. There wasn't much left. Most of his stuff was already packed and stacked by the front door. He just had a few items left to pack. It took less than a half-hour.

He stacked all of the remaining boxes next to the front door where his mother could easily get to them. He checked the apartment one last time for anything he could have left behind before he headed to the front door.

With his suitcase and a few boxes packed in his car, Mason got into his car and drove to the bank. He withdrew two hundred dollars then went to his parent's house. It was still early, not even eight o'clock in the morning, but he knew his mother would be up. For as long as he could remember she had never slept past seven in the morning.

He opened the kitchen door quietly, hoping to not wake his father. Mason didn't feel like facing him right now. As he knew he would, he found his mother at the breakfast table having her morning cup of tea.

"Mason? What are you doing here so early?" Janet asked as she saw Mason walk through the door.

"Hey, Mom, I knew you would be up, and I just needed to talk to you with no one else around." Mason knew she wasn't going to like what he had to say, but if anyone would understand, she would.

"Look, Mom, something has come up and I have to head out early. Here's the key to my apartment. Everything is packed and sitting by the front door. Do you think you and Dad can go over and pick it up? Maybe put it in the garage until I can make arrangements to get it?"

"Well, sure, son, but what's going on? Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No, Mom, it's something I have to work out on my own. I just need some time to figure it all out. Just—" Mason rested

his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands as tears formed in his eyes.

"Mason, honey, what is it? Surely nothing could be that bad?" Janet quickly got up and walked around the table to wrap her arms around Mason.

Mason wrapped his arms around his mother's waist and pushed his head against her as he cried, great sobs wracking his frame. He wished that he was a little boy again and his mother could kiss away all the hurt. He felt like his entire world was crashing down around him.

Mason's sobs soon trickled down to the occasional snuffle. He leaned back and reached for a napkin to wipe his face, handing one to his mother when he saw the tears on her face. He felt bad that he had made his mother cry.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't mean to make you cry. I just wanted—I just—hell, I don't know what I wanted."

"You wanted some comfort, Mason—and stop swearing," Janet replied. "Can you tell me what happened? It sometimes helps to talk about it."

Mason shook his head. "No, I'm not ready to talk about it yet. I don't know if I ever will be. It—it hurts too much."

"Is it because of the one you love?" Janet asked hesitantly.

Mason's head shot up, and he looked at his mother in shock. "You know about that?" Of course she knew about that. Jack had said exactly that, but did she know the fact that Mason wasn't in love with a woman, but a man?

Janet shook her head. "Not exactly. I know that you have fallen in love with someone, but I don't think it's going well. You're not supposed to hurt this much when you're in love."

And I know it's been going on for quite some time, years in fact."

"Not going well, yeah, I guess you could say that." Mason laughed bitterly.

"What happened?" Janet asked as she walked back around the table to sit down.

Mason look at his mother for several long moments as he decided how much to tell her. His mother had always understood him. She was his biggest fan in fact. But he didn't know how she would take his news.

"Mom, I'm in love with someone and they don't love me. I've been in love with them for years, but they don't want me in the same way. I'm never going to have them. Things kind of came to a head earlier, and I just think it would be best if I took some time before the term started to get my head on straight. That's all."

"Is it because you're gay?" Janet inquired.

"You know I'm gay?" Mason asked, shocked that his mother knew. He thought he had hidden it so well all of these years.

"Oh, honey, of course I know. I've always known. What? You don't think a mother knows these things?" She laughed lightly.

"Does Dad know?" Mason asked in dread.

"Of course he knows. But we don't care. We've never cared. We just want you to be happy."

"What about Randy and Debbie? Do they know?" Mason pushed his trembling hand through his hair.

"I don't think Randy does, and Debbie doesn't have a clue. She's too into her current boyfriend."

"How long have you known?" He looked back up at his mother.

"Since I found your porno collection under your bed when you were nineteen. It was kind of hard to miss the fact that they were all men and not women."

"And you never said anything? Why didn't you say something?" he asked incredulously.

"Well, your father and I figured you'd tell us when you wanted us to know. Until then, it was your business." Janet was quiet for a moment as she watched Mason get over his shock that she knew. "Honey, is that the problem? Were you afraid we wouldn't understand?"

"No," Mason shook his head regrettably. "I wish it was that easy. He just doesn't love me. I had hoped for awhile, years in fact, that maybe some day he would, but now I know he never will. I should have known better. He isn't even gay."

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

"Look, Mom, I have to go. I need to get on the road before traffic gets too heavy. I'll call you when I can and check in, okay?" Mason asked as he got to his feet.

"Is this really what you want, Mason?"

"No, this isn't what I want. I can't have what I want, but this is what I need to do."

Janet nodded her head sadly. "Okay, son, if that's what you want. But just remember, if there's anything you need, anything at all, your father and I are here."

"I know, Mom, and thanks. But this is something I have to do on my own. I think if I'm far enough away that I can't see him all the time, maybe I will be able to move on. It's a hope anyway." Mason tried to flash his mother a hopeful smile, but knew he failed when he saw her eyes tear up again.

"Please be happy, Mason, wherever you go. Remember that you always have a home here, no questions asked." Janet walked to Mason and gave him one of her famous Mom hugs. "I love you, Mason, and I'm very proud of you. You are a wonderful son."

"Thanks, Mom, I love you, too. I wish I didn't have to go, but—" Mason said as he hugged his mother back.

"No, honey, you do what you have to do. Don't worry about me. I'll be here when you need me, okay?" Janet assured him as she walked him to the door.

"Thanks. Would you please tell the others that I love them and I'm sorry for leaving without saying goodbye?"

"Sure, son. You just do what you need to do, and I'll take care of things here. Drive safe and call me as soon as you can."

"I will. I love you, Mom," Mason whispered again as he leaned down and kissed his mother. She really was the world's best mom.

"Bye, baby," Janet waved as Mason got into his car and pulled away. She watched him drive down the street and out of sight, feeling two large arms wrap around her waist from behind.

"You heard?" she asked through the tears that clogged her throat.

"Yeah, I heard. He never was one to do things the easy way," Bob replied as he hugged his wife.

"Do you know who Mason is in love with?" Bob asked.

"Jack."

"Jack? He's in love with Jack? I thought he said the guy he was in love with was straight?" Bob asked in confusion.

"Mason believes he is. If you really think about it, how would he know any different? It's not like they hang out together, and Jack never brings anyone but women to the house if he brings someone. Have you ever heard him say he's gay? Jack told us he was gay, but he never told Mason. I don't even think Debbie knows."

"What are you going to do? Maybe Mason wouldn't leave if he knew."

"No, it's not our place to tell Mason. I'd like to, but I can't. Besides, just because Jack is gay doesn't mean he will love Mason. That—that they have to work out themselves." Janet turned in Bob's arms to give him a quick kiss.

"Now go get dressed. We need to go pick up Mason's belongings." She patted him as she walked past. "Come on, old man, get to hopping."

"Old man ... old man? I'll give you old man, woman!" Bob growled at his laughing wife as he chased her out of the room, swiping at her ass as he went.

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## Chapter Three

Jack heard the door slam behind Mason as he left. Jack wiped his mouth and brushed his teeth before he walked back into the bedroom. He pulled on a pair of jeans and a cotton shirt and sat down on the side of the bed.

What the hell happened here? The last thing he remembered was sitting on a barstool at Dooley's talking with the bartender. How had he gone from there to being naked in bed with his best friend's little brother?

Oh man, Randy was going to kill him. He had made Jack promise to leave Mason alone the second he had discovered Jack's attraction to Mason. It had been hard, but Jack had done it, keeping his hands, and his fantasies, to himself.

The first time Jack had realized that he had an attraction to Mason, Mason had just graduated from high school and gotten home from a summer camping trip. Jack and Randy had been sitting in the backyard pool when Mason ran outside, fully dressed, and jumped into the pool.

Randy was angry with Mason, but Jack was instantly turned on by the deep tan Mason sported, especially when he took his shirt off and Jack got a good look at Mason's sculpted chest. It had been all Jack could do to keep swimming with the erection he suddenly had.

Randy noticed his reaction and later that night he demanded Jack's promise to stay away from Mason. He said his brother was too young, that Mason needed to live his life

a little. So, Jack had kept his promise, for seven years—seven long, lonely years.

Now, that promise had gone down the tubes. Jack still wasn't sure what had happened last night, but he knew something had. The evidence was still on the sheets. He wished he could remember. At least then he might have a memory to sustain him.

He knew he needed to track Mason down and talk about what had happened. He needed to find out exactly what happened between them. But he so didn't want to face Mason and confess his feelings. Jack just wanted to make peace and swear to Mason it would never happen again.

Jack pulled on his shoes and grabbed his jacket. As he looked around the room, he spotted his keys sitting next to a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin. He knew Mason had left it for him. He was grateful for the thought. It showed that Mason cared on some level. It just wasn't the level Jack wanted.

Next, Jack drove to Mason's apartment, trying to figure out what he was going to say. How do you ask a guy ... gee, did we have sex last night? There just wasn't a polite way to do it. It sent a message that either Jack forgot because Mason hadn't been good enough or that Jack forgot because he didn't care.

None of it was really true. Jack did care. He wasn't sure he was in love with Mason. But Jack did like Mason, and he sure did lust after the younger man. Mason got better looking as he matured.

He was strong, muscular, and athletic. But he was also fine boned, which just made Jack want to hold Mason in his arms and protect him. Jack had always been partial to men that had a little more hair than average and Mason fit that description to a tee. He was a small teddy bear with a brawny chest covered in dark, curly hair.

How could Jack not be attracted to Mason? He had just never acted on that attraction. Hell, Jack wanted to. Even if Mason was interested, Jack wasn't sure he was into something long-term. And someone like Mason had to be long-term.

He sighed as he pulled into the parking lot of Mason's apartment complex and climbed out of his car. This wasn't going to be easy, but it had to be done. He reluctantly walked toward the apartment and was surprised when the door opened and Janet walked out carrying a cardboard box.

"Janet? What are you doing here? Where's Mason?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, uh, Mason left for D.C. this morning. He said something came up and he had to leave early."

"He left? Just like that? Without saying a word to anyone?" Jack asked, astonished that Mason had just left.

"Well, he said he had a few things to figure out in his head before the term started so he was going to get an early start."

"He didn't—did he say anything else?"

Janet shook her head. "No, but he did leave a box of your stuff inside. You might want to get it before Bob loads it up."

Jack walked past Janet and into the apartment. He instantly spotted a cardboard box with his name written across the top in big, bold letters. He couldn't remember ever leaving anything at Mason's house. He had only been here a couple of times, and both of those times with Randy.

He saw Bob watching him out of the corner of his eye as he knelt down next to the box and pulled the lid open. He didn't know what he thought he would find, but it certainly wasn't what he did. He carefully lifted out the folded piece of paper on the very top and opened it up.

"Oh jeez, Mason," he whispered as he saw the two words written there ... I'm sorry. Oh, god! Why had Mason done this?

Jack put the paper aside and looked back into the box. Inside, carefully tied with a blue ribbon, were all the cards he had ever given Mason ... Christmas cards, birthday cards, holiday cards ... everything. There was also an old shirt that Jack remembered loaning to Mason years ago. It had been one of his high school jerseys.

Under that were all the little presents he had given Mason throughout the years. Cups, baseball caps, shot glasses, even the plastic dog poop he had given Mason as a joke last April Fool's Day. Everything he had ever given Mason was carefully placed in the box.

As Jack put it all back he realized that Mason was giving everything back to him as if Mason intended to wipe Jack out of his life. His hands clenched around the edge of the box as he resisted the urge to throw it across the room. Didn't Mason

expect to see Jack at Janet and Bob's house? Did Mason expect Jack to not come around?

Jack stood up, grabbed the box and carried it to the door. He nodded to Bob as he walked out to his car and put the box in the back. He glanced back to see Janet watching him from beside her truck.

He walked over, pushing his hands into his pockets as he went. "Hey, Janet, do you know how long it's going to take Mason to get to D.C.?"

Janet shook her head. "No, but Mason said he would call and check in with us frequently."

"Could you ask Mason to call me when he gets in touch. I really do need to talk to him."

"Sure, Jack, I'll let him know."

"Thanks, Janet. Um, I have to go. I have some things I need to get done."

Jack walked to his car and climbed in. He shut the door and then lifted his head to stare out the front window. He slammed his fist down on the dashboard as he watched Janet load a stack of boxes into her truck.

He couldn't believe Mason had just up and left with no word to him. Something had obviously happened between the two of them. Was Mason's leaving his way of saying that he didn't want it to happen again or that he just wasn't interested?

\* \* \* \*

Mason made it as far as Eugene before he had to pull over and find a hotel. He felt tired and drained, his emotions in

turmoil. He needed to find a place to crash for awhile. He found a cheap hotel right off the highway and booked a room for the night.

Mason stopped at the corner liquor store and grabbed a bottle of cheap tequila then grabbed some take-out at the neighborhood drive-through before driving back to his room. Once in his room, he locked the door and settled into the bed.

After a couple bites of his burger he set it aside and opened the bottle of tequila and started drinking. He flipped on the TV to something he wasn't really interested in and lay there, not really seeing anything on the screen through his tears.

At some point during the evening he pulled off his shirt and pants and lounged on the bed in his boxers. He hugged one of the bed pillows close to his body, wrapped himself around it as he rolled to his side, and cried for all of the lost years of dreaming.

\* \* \* \*

Mason rolled over to look at the clock, squinting at the blurred numbers there. What time was it? Hell, what day was it? Mason couldn't remember anything but bits and pieces since he had fallen into bed with a bottle of liquor. Or was it two or three bottles?

He vaguely remembered using his cell phone to dial Jack's cell, listening to Jack answer, then hung up a few moments later without saying a word. As Mason began to come out of his drunken haze, he wondered how many times he had dialed Jack's number just to hear Jack's voice.

After going to the bathroom and getting a quick shower, he got dressed. The clock on the side table read 7:30am. Maybe it was time to check in with his mom. He knew she would be up this early. Mason sat down on the side of the bed and dialed his parents' house. He was a little surprised when the phone was picked up almost immediately.

"Hello?"

"Mom?" he asked curiously when he heard the slight tremor in her voice. Had something happened?

"Mason? Oh my god, Mason. Where are you? Are you okay?" Janet cried into the phone.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm fine. I was just calling to check in. Are you okay?"

"Oh, Mason, I was so worried that something had happened to you. We couldn't reach you by cell phone or anything, and you didn't call. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm fine. I told you I would check in when I could. I stopped off to get some sleep and turned my cell phone off. Why are you so upset?" Mason could hear the near hysteria in his mother's voice. She was almost panicked.

"Mason, are you sure you're okay? Where are you?" Janet still sounded worried.

"Mom, what's wrong?" Mason asked, his heart beat rapidly in his chest as worst case scenarios flew through his mind. Had something bad happened to Dad? Or Randy or Debbie? Jack?

"Mason, you've been gone for four days. You didn't call like you said you would. We had no idea where you were. When you didn't call we thought something had happened to you.

We even went to the police and filed a missing person's report on you."

"Four days? Are you sure?" Mason was shocked. He looked around the room and saw what he had previously ignored. The room was cluttered with empty bottles of tequila and take-out boxes. It was literally trashed. Well, that at least explained the headache he had woken up with.

"Mason, what happened? Where are you?" Janet asked again.

Mason's hand trembled as he ran it through his hair. Oh hell, he was never going to hear the end of this one. He had finally been as irresponsible as everyone always thought he was. All of his words to Jack about treating him like an adult and he had to go and pull a stunt like this. Perfect!

"Look Mom, I need to go. I'm fine and I promise I will call you later today. I need to figure out—I just need to figure out a few things. Tell everyone I'm fine, okay?"

"But Mason..."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but I need to go. I'll call you tonight, okay?"

"All right Mason, if that's what you want. But, please tell me where you are? Just in case you don't call me tonight, so I don't worry. Or at least turn your cell phone back on," Janet pleaded of her son.

Mason gave her the name of the motel he was in, plus the direct number to his room and promised to turn his cell phone back on before asking "Don't tell anyone where I am, please. I don't think I could deal with it right now. Just tell them that you heard from me and I'm fine. Okay?"



Janet agreed, after some persuasion from Mason, and said goodbye. Mason set the phone down and turned to look at the room. What in the hell had happened? He had obviously booked a room in some hotel and crawled into a bottle. That explained the huge headache he had woken up with.

Mason knew he needed to get his head on straight. He called the Portland Police Department and talked with the officer in charge of his missing person's report. Mason told the detective where he was and assured the man that he was fine.

The officer requested that he show himself at the police department so that they could see him in person, and Mason agreed that he would. He just needed a couple of hours to clean up first and drive back to Portland.

Grabbing a trash bag, he cleaned up the sparsely decorated motel room and repacked his bags. He dropped the trash off at the large commercial trash bin and walked in to the office to pay his bill. He had to use his credit card because, apparently, he was out of cash.

As Mason climbed into his car a little while later, he felt much better. He realized that he really had nowhere to go except his parents' house. He had given up his apartment, and it was too late to drive to D.C. The school term was getting ready to start. He'd never make it in time.

A sudden thought came into Mason's head. He couldn't just give up on his goal to get his Ph.D. Mason searched around until he found his acceptance letter from Georgetown University, then dialed the administration office. He tapped

his fingers lightly against the steering wheel as he waited to for someone to come on the line.

It took him less than ten minutes to withdraw from his current classes and postpone his transfer until next term. As long as he withdrew before classes started, he was good for the following term. It wouldn't mess up his degree, just postpone things for awhile.

He now had three months to decide what he wanted to do. In the meantime, he knew his parents wouldn't mind if he stayed with them. He also realized that he needed to call his landlord in D.C. and see if he could get his deposit back. It was a nice apartment close to the university, so the landlord should have no problem renting it out again.

It took longer than Mason would have liked to drive to Portland and deal with the missing person's report. He had to meet with a detective who wanted the whole story as to why he had been missing and where he had been over the last four days.

"Hello, my name is Mason Philips. I'm here to see a Detective Cooper Thomas. He's expecting me," Mason said to the police officer behind the bulletproof glass at the police department.

"If you'll wait one moment, I'll let Detective Thomas know that you're here," the officer replied.

Mason nodded and walked over to sit down in one of the chairs set against the wall. He felt like a complete idiot. And he was going to sound so much better when he explained to the good detective that he had been in a drunken stupor for

the last four days because he was in love with someone that wasn't even gay. Mason couldn't wait.

"Mason Philips?"

Mason looked up to see a tall, good-looking man standing in front of him. His wavy, black hair came almost down to the collar of his white dress shirt, which he seemed to fill out very nicely. If it wasn't for the gold shield hanging out of the pocket of his brown slacks, Mason would have assumed he was a businessman.

He got to his feet and held out his hand. "Detective Thomas?"

The man nodded as he shook Mason's hand. "Why don't we go back here where we can talk more privately?" the detective asked as he gestured to the green double doors behind him.

Mason followed the detective through the doors and down a long, white hallway to a small room with a couple of chairs and a single table sitting in it. The detective gestured to one of the chairs while he sat down in another.

"So, Mr. Philips, want to tell me where you've been for the last four days and why your family felt the need to file a missing person's report on you?"

Mason could feel his face heat up with his humiliation. He clasped his hands tightly together in his lap as he looked over at the detective. "Mason, please, and I don't really have a good explanation as to why my parents filed a missing person's report except that they were worried about me."

"And why would they be worried? Is this something you do a lot?"

"No," Mason laughed nervously. "Actually, I never do things like this. I was just—I had a few things that I needed to work out, and I tried to do it by climbing into a bottle of tequila. Not the smartest move, I know, but it seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"Was anyone with you? Anyone that might be able to corroborate your story?" The detective asked.

Mason shook his head. "No. I was alone." Mason quickly pulled the motel receipt out of his pocket and handed it to the detective. "This is the receipt from the hotel I stayed in. I'm sure the manager can tell you I was there. And, from the number of bottles I cleared out of the room before I left, the clerk at the liquor store should remember me pretty well."

The detective picked up the receipt and stared at it for a moment, then looked up at Mason. After several moments of scrutiny, Mason felt like squirming in his seat. He felt like he was getting in trouble with his first grade teacher for telling her that the dog ate his homework.

"Mason, is there something more going on here? Something you're afraid to talk about? We can protect you, you know. Is someone after you or trying to hurt you? I can't help you unless you tell me everything."

Mason dipped his head to look down at his hands as he took a deep breath. This was a lot more uncomfortable than he had thought it was going to be. He looked up to see the detective staring at him intently.

"No, detective, no one's after me or trying to hurt me or anything. I was just trying to—hell, I don't know what I was

trying to do," Mason said as he ran his trembling hand through his brown curls. "Forget maybe?"

"What were you trying to forget, Mason?" Detective Thomas asked softly, more softly than Mason expected from a police detective.

"To forget that the man I'm in love with doesn't want me," Mason murmured. He watched the detective for several moments as he waited for a reaction. When it came, it wasn't the response he had been expecting.

"Sucks, doesn't it?" Detective Thomas replied with a small chuckle.

"Uh, yeah," Mason said in confusion.

"So, man to man, want to tell me what happened?"

Mason could feel the heat stealing into his face. "I was on my way to D.C. where I'm supposed to be attending school. I pulled over at a motel and crawled into a bottle for a few days. When I came out of it, I called home, and my mother told me that she had filed a missing person's report on me. That's pretty much it."

"And the man you're in love with? How does he play into this?"

"He doesn't," Mason said, a bitter smile crossing his face. "He doesn't love me. Hell, he's not even gay. I had hoped for awhile, but now I know the truth. I guess maybe that's why I got drunk. It was just too much for me to handle at the time."

"And now?"

Mason chuckled as he looked back at the detective. "Now? Now I feel like a complete idiot. I've been trying for ages to convince everyone that I'm not a child anymore, and I have

to go and fuck it up by going on a four day bender. If hadn't been able to call the admissions office and postpone my classes, it could have messed up my entire degree as well."

"All right, Mason, I'm going to write this up as a lack of communication. No sense everyone knowing your business. But if you feel the need to go on another bender, you might want to let people know where you are first so that they don't worry," Detective Thomas said as he stood to his feet.

Mason quickly nodded his head as he stood up also. "I usually try not to repeat my stupid mistakes, Detective. I promise, no more drinking."

"Will you be continuing your trip to D.C. or staying here in Portland?" Detective Thomas asked as he opened the door and waited for Mason to pass through.

"No, I'll be staying here in Portland for now. The next term isn't due to start for another few months, and since I dropped out of this term, I have to wait until then to go," Mason replied.

"So, what are your plans now?" Detective Thomas walked down the hallway beside Mason.

Mason shrugged his shoulders. "Find another apartment since I gave mine up. Get a temporary job. Figure out what to do with myself for the next few months. Find out what being a gay man is like."

He turned to look back when Detective Cooper stopped walking, the look on the man's face one of curiosity and confusion. "Why would you need to find out what being a gay man was like?"

Mason couldn't help but chuckle at the look on the detective's face. "I've been living in the closet my entire life. I guess you could say I just came out, to my family, the man that—well, him, and now you. I've never lived as a gay man ... until now."

The smile that came across the detective's lips was slow in coming, but it was bright and cherry when it came. "Well, if you need a friend that's been out of the closet for several years to show you the ropes, give me a call. No pressure and no ulterior motives, just a friend," the detective said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. He quickly pulled out a pen and wrote something on the back before handing the card to Mason. "This is my office number and my personal cell phone is on the back. Give me a call."

Mason took the card and looked down at it for a moment. He had a smile on his face as he glanced back up at the detective. "Thanks, maybe I will." At least someone was attracted to him.

Mason drove to his parents' house. As he pulled up in front of the house he wondered how he was going to explain this all to his parents. He had been so stupid, and it had put his entire future in jeopardy.

He climbed out of his car and slowly walked toward the house. When he spotted Randy's car, he let out a groan. Now he was going to have to face his brother, too. Could things get any worse?

As he walked into the kitchen he heard voices from the dining room. He took a few quiet steps closer to the doorway

as he realized that they were talking about him. As he stood there and listened, he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Detective Thomas told me that he had seen Mason in person and that he was just fine. Not a scratch on him," Janet assured all those in the room.

"So, in other words, he was being his usual inconsiderate self? When is he going to grow up, and when are you going to stop making excuses for him, Mom? Mason is twenty-six-years old and it's damn time he grew up!" Randy responded angrily.

"Randall Philips, don't you dare talk to your mother in that tone of voice!" his father demanded sternly.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm just so damn tired of Mason not getting his life together. How is he ever going to make anything of himself if you keep coddling him? Do you know how many times I've offered him a job at my firm? He keeps turning me down. Says he wants to go to school. Well, how long does it take to go to school? He's been going for years. When is he going to graduate? You two don't have the money to keep paying for him to go to school until he figures out what he wants to be when he grows up."

"Randall, what your brother chooses to do is none of your business. He is a grown man, and you need to treat him as such. Whether we pay for his schooling or not is our choice, not yours. But, just for your information, Mason is paying his own way through college. We've never given him a penny for school. And just because you have a job and a house and a family doesn't mean that it's what Mason wants. He has to figure out what he wants on his own," Bob said.



"Whether Mason goes to school or not is not the issue here. We need to be accepting and understanding of Mason. He's going through a hard time right now and needs us to support him, not come down on him," Janet added.

"How in the hell are we supposed to support him when we don't even know where he is?" Mason heard Jack ask, surprised that Jack was even here. Mason hadn't seen his car outside which meant he probably came with Randy. Perfect!

"Don't swear, Jack," Janet admonished.

"Sorry Janet, I'm just worried about him. He left without saying a word to anyone, just up and left. Why would he do that?"

"I think you know why, Jack."

"Yeah, I guess I do," Jack replied sadly after a few moments.

"You son of a bitch," Randy yelled as he slapped the table in front of him. "You broke your promise to me, didn't you?"

"It was a stupid promise in the first place, Randy. But no, I didn't break it. I wanted to. For seven years I stayed away from him because you didn't want your brother to be gay. I never let anyone know I was attracted to Mason, not even Mason. And now I've lost him. Because of you and your stupid, bigoted ideals."

Mason nearly fell to his knees in shock. Jack's promise to Randy to stay away from him hurt almost as much as hearing that Randy didn't want a gay man for a brother.

"Oh my god, Randy, you didn't?" Janet whispered in horror.

"Jeez, Mom, it wasn't like that. Mason was barely nineteen years old. I wanted him to be able to experience the world a little before he decided what he wanted to be—gay or straight. If Jack had come on to him, it wouldn't have been his choice. I just wanted him to have a choice."

"What kind of choice did you give me?" Mason stepped forward into the room, eyes instantly going to Jack before they swung over to glare at his brother. "Do you have any idea what I have been through the last ten years?"

Seeing the look of astonishment on everyone's face he laughed harshly. "Yeah, that's right, ten years. Not seven like Jack. Ten years, Randy, ten long years I've been alone and why? Because you didn't think I was responsible enough to decide if I was gay or not? Well, I've got news for you, Randy, I've known I was gay since I was fifteen. I knew I was gay before I even met Jack."

"Mason, I only wanted—" Randy began.

"You wanted—you—you—you. This isn't about you, Randy. It's about my life, and me, not you. You have the career and the house you want, along with the little family that you want. You're so busy trying to run my life that you can't see that I have a life."

Mason could see a little smile form on his mother's lips as he chewed his brother out. It was about time Randy was put in his place. Oh, he meant well, but he always thought everyone should do what he thought was right, no matter what they thought. It was about time he woke up and saw the real world.

"As for my sucking the parents dry, I have never taken a penny from them to go to school. I pay my own way. I work hard for everything I do. But you can't see that, can you? You still think I'm irresponsible. Why? Because I'm still in school? Do you have any idea how long it takes to get a Ph.D. in Psychology? Years, Randy, it takes years. But I only have one year to go before I graduate. Do you have any idea how hard it is to do that? How hard I study? One of the ways that I pay for school is through scholarships. To get a scholarship, you have to have good grades. I do. I have never had anything less than a 3.5 GPA in school. Do you know how hard you have to work to get that kind of grade point average? I already have three different job offers—three—all because of my hard work."

"Mason, I had no idea," Randy replied.

"That's because you've never taken the time to learn anything about my life, Randy, or you would have known this. You still think I'm some irresponsible little kid. I'm not. I grew up a long time ago," Mason shouted as he slammed his hands down on the table top.

"Mason, I think he was only trying to help. He wasn't—" Jack started.

"And you!" Mason shouted as he turned to glare at Jack. "How dare you make a promise to my brother about something that has nothing to do with him? It's bad enough that Randy is trying to run my life, but for you to actually agree to his demands—how could you do that?"

"I just—"

"You just what? Didn't want me? It wasn't me asking for sex the other night. It was you, Jack. I tried to stop you. I told you we couldn't do anything while you were drunk—to wait until you were sober. But you couldn't take no for answer, could you? You just had to have your way, didn't you?" Mason shouted as he stood up and waved his arms in the air.

"Well, you got it, and then proceeded to blame it on me the next morning, like I had done something so terribly wrong. You wouldn't even let me explain before you were running to the bathroom to throw up like you couldn't stand the idea that we had been together."

As Mason looked at the dropped jaw on Jack's shocked face, he decided that he had had enough. "Don't worry, Jack, it may have been my first kiss, but thanks to you and my brother, I'm still as untouched as I was ten years ago when I first fell in love with you," he laughed bitterly.

Mason put his hands on the table again and leaned in so that his face was close to Jack's as he continued in a low voice. "And now that I know how much I disgust you, maybe I will finally be able to get over you and find someone who doesn't throw up just from the thought of touching me."

Before anyone could say anything Mason had turned and stormed out of the house, leaving behind a room full of shocked and dismayed people. No one said anything for several moments as Mason's words sank in.

Jack was devastated. Mason had loved him for ten years? Why had he never said anything? Why had he never tried anything? Jack wanted to keep his promise to Randy, but he

would have given it up in a second if he had known how Mason felt.

Jack's heart began to crumble as he realized that Mason thought he was disgusted with him. He had run to the bathroom to throw up because he had a hangover, not because they might have done something together. There was so much he had to make up for, and he didn't know if Mason would ever let him, but he sure wanted to try.

Jack remembered all the late night phone calls he got where no one talked, but he knew that someone had been there. He had heard someone breathing just before they hung up. Now he knew it had been Mason. He must be so heartbroken.

"I—I—I don't know what—" Jack began, only to be interrupted by Randy.

"Jack, I'm sorry. I had no idea. I just—" Randy said.

"You two amaze me," Janet laughed, "You're still doing the I thing. You made decisions, major decisions, about Mason's life without talking to him first. Neither of you has ever taken Mason seriously. And don't give me that crap about Mason always being goofy."

She glared across the table at Randy and Jack, then zeroed in on Jack. "Do you know why Mason seems to act goofy every time you're around? Because of you, Jack. He did everything he could think of to get you to notice him."

Janet rolled her eyes at the astonished look on Jack's face. "Oh, don't look so shocked. He was in love with you. He wanted your attention so he acted stupid to get you to smile at him. He's never been irresponsible. He goes to school and

gets good enough grades to get scholarships every year. And in the summers, he's worked every summer since he was sixteen years old. Who do you think paid for our 25th anniversary vacation? Mason did, with the money he earned from working his summer jobs."

"But I thought—" Randy began, only to be interrupted by his father.

"Shut up and listen to your mother, son."

Jack watched Randy's head snap back at his father's stern voice. He couldn't remember the last time Bob had spoken to either of them like that. Certainly not since they had been teenagers. But at this point, he wouldn't be surprised at anything Bob did. They both deserved it.

"Under normal circumstances, I would tell the two of you to fix this mess, but not this time. This time, unless Mason approaches you first, I want the two of you to stay away from him. If he wants to talk to you, he'll let you know. You've both caused him enough pain. I won't let you do it anymore," Janet said as she glared across the table at Jack and Randy.

"But, what about—" Randy tried to say.

"Oh, don't worry, I plan on telling Mason exactly what I've said to you. If he wants something else, he'll let you know. Until then, stay away from him. You've both done enough damage."

Bob was right behind Janet as they left the room to go upstairs, leaving Randy and Jack sitting at the table in silence. They avoided each other's gaze, not knowing what to say to each other. The silence was almost deafening.

"Jack, I—I'm really sorry. I had no idea when I asked for that promise that it would come to this. I really meant well, I swear," Randy finally said.

"I know, Randy. Your heart was in the right place. No, we're both at fault here. We both decided the matter for Mason, not just you. I should have stood up to you, said no. But I didn't, and now I don't know how to fix what I've done. Mason will never forgive me now."

Jack's hand shook as he pushed the hair back from his face. He quickly clasped it together with the other one as he tried to hide how agitated he really was. Mason had been waiting for Jack for years, and Jack had never had a clue. And now it might be too late.

"Just give him some time, Jack," Randy said as he patted Jack on the arm. "If he really cares about you, he'll come around. Ten years is a long time to love someone just to give up now."

"My god! He said he's loved me for ten years—ten years, Randy. No one's loved me like that, ever." He ran his hand through his short, dark brown curls again, pulling at the ends as he tried to comprehend how badly he had fucked up. "We wasted ten years that we could have been together."

He tried to casually wipe away the tears forming in his eyes, embarrassed by them. "I can't imagine what he's gone through. I just have no idea how to make this up to him. Or even if he will let me."

He looked up at Randy's somber face, giving a little laugh. "Do you realize that Mason was absolutely right? We know nothing about his life. We just took what we saw and

assumed that it was how he always was. I'm a lawyer, Randy. I know how hard it is to get a degree. To think he's getting a Ph.D.? That takes a lot of hard work."

"Yeah, I'm just beginning to realize that I really don't know anything about my baby brother. Makes me wonder what kind of person I am. I've so concerned about Mason acting irresponsible all this time and I was the irresponsible one," Randy replied, looking grim.

"How do you think I feel? I had someone as wonderful as Mason right in front of me all of these years and I never saw it. Now it may be too late." Jack's chest hurt at the very thought that he might have lost Mason already. He pressed his hand against his chest as he tried to make the ache go away.

"That's not true, Jack. If you hadn't been interested, I never would have asked you to stay away from him. And please know that it had nothing to do with him or you being gay. I could care less about that. I just wanted him to be happy."

"Randy, you don't get it. Yes, I was attracted to Mason all those years ago. I still am. I mean, damn! Have you seen that boy lately? Your brother is hot! But I wasn't in love with him. You were right to keep me away from him. I wasn't interested in a relationship. But now—"

"Now? Now what?" Randy asked as he sat forward in his chair.

"Now it's different," Jack said softly as he started down at his hands. "I want to get to know him, to see if we have anything to build on. I want to know what makes him happy,



what makes him sad—besides me. I want to know what I have to do to get him to laugh."

Jack laughed as he looked back up at Randy. "I want to know if the things I dream about at night really happened—and if we can do them again. And I want to hold him and make all the hurt that I've caused go away."

He looked at Randy from under his eyelashes, blushing a little at his words. "Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, man, it does," Randy replied. "It tells me that I made a really stupid mistake seven years ago, one that I am never going to be able to fix. I never should have kept you two apart. I was wrong, and I really hope that some day you both will forgive me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jack asked, astonished at Randy's words.

"Jack, you're talking about Mason the same way I talk about Kari. You're in love with Mason."

"No, I'm not," Jack said quietly as he wondered, "Am I?"

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## **Chapter Four**

Mason tried to bury his feelings deep inside as he went about life. He found a part time job at a local youth facility helping the young teens of Portland, which was really where he wanted to work in the first place.

He moved into a small one-bedroom apartment close to his workplace. He even called Detective Thomas and invited the man over for dinner. If he was going to begin a new life without Jack, meeting new people was just the beginning of what he needed to do.

A week later, after he settled into his new apartment, he called his mother to let her know where he was. He was hesitant at first to tell her, but after she promised not to say anything to anyone except his father, he gave in.

"Honey, I won't tell anyone. I promise. I just need to know that you're safe."

"I'll be fine, Mom. I just don't want to see Randy or Jack right now, and I know that if they find out where I am, they'll come over and start messing in my life again. I need some time to get over this before I see them."

"I've already told them to stay away from you until you contact them. I also told them that I was going to tell you I said something. If you want something different, you can contact them."

"No, Mom, that's what I want. Look, I need to go. I have someone coming over for dinner, and I need to finish cooking. Maybe we can have dinner or something later this week."

Okay?" Mason asked as he twisted the phone cord around his finger.

"Hmmm ... a date? Is he nice? Will I like him?"

"Yes, Mom, he's very nice. He's the detective that was in charge of the missing person's report you filed. I met him when I went down to the police station for an in-person interview. I'm sure you will like him, but right now it's just a single date. Don't picture me married yet."

"All right, have a good time then. And call me later about dinner this week."

"Okay. I love you. Bye, Mom."

"Bye, baby."

Mason couldn't help laughing at his mother. She really didn't care that he was gay. It was nice to be able to discuss this side of his life with his mother after all of this time. It made him feel like he wasn't totally alone.

Mason jumped when the doorbell rang. He got up and went to let Detective Thomas in. He was surprised when he opened the door and found the detective leaning against it. He was dressed very casually in jeans and a nice button down shirt, unlike when Mason had first seen him.

"Hey, Detective, glad you found the place. Come on in," he replied as he held the door open so the detective could come in. He watched the man walk in. Damn, the man had an ass to die for. Too bad it wasn't Ja—Mason instantly stopped the direction of his thoughts and turned to smile at the detective.

"Cooper or Coop, please. It's only Detective Thomas when I'm at work."

"Okay, Cooper it is. Please, make yourself at home. Can I get you something to drink? Water, soda, a glass of wine?" Mason offered.

"A glass of wine would be great, thanks," Cooper replied as he looked around the tiny apartment. "Man, this place is tiny. I didn't know they made apartments this small."

Mason nodded as he glanced around his apartment. It was small. Officially considered a one bedroom, it was barely that. His bedroom was just a small alcove off to one side of the living room. It didn't even have a door separating it from the rest of the apartment.

The main living area, including the kitchen and dining room, was all in one big room. His only luxury was that he had his own bathroom, even if it did only have a stand up shower cubicle and no tub. Several apartments in the building didn't even have that.

Mason had done his best to make it livable, decorating it with colorful artwork, several large throw pillows, and stacks of books in every nook and cranny. He felt that it had an eclectic look to it. It was a far cry from the neat and orderly apartment Jack lived in.

"Yeah," Mason replied as he poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Cooper. "It was all I could find on spur of the moment. I had an apartment waiting for me in D.C. when all that stuff happened. I'll be here for a little while until I decide what I want to do with myself."

"D.C. huh? I think you mentioned that when we last spoke. That's quite a ways away. Why move all the way over there?"

Mason settled himself into an overstuffed, brown suede chair across from Cooper. "Do you want the truth or the version I told my mother?"

"Um, well, I guess the truth. But why don't you tell me both anyway?"

Mason laughed, "Hmmm, okay. I told my mother I was moving to D.C. to attend Georgetown University so I could finish my degree."

"And the truth?" Cooper asked.

"The truth—well, the truth is that I needed to get away and try to find a life for myself."

"And that means what?"

"You know about the four day bender, right? And the guy I told you about? Well, I had a lot of ... stuff ... I wanted to forget. I know I didn't handle it in the right way. Hell, I don't remember anything past the first night really. The rest is just a blur. You could have painted me purple and called me Santa Claus and I never would have known the difference."

"Sounds like you had a lot you needed to forget."

"Yeah," Mason said. He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I did." He sat his glass down on the small, glass table in front of him before he looked up at Cooper. Thoughts of Jack started to fill his head—again.

"Look, Cooper, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. I thought I was ready for this, but maybe I'm not. I'm really sorry," Mason said regretfully. He liked Cooper and thought that with Jack out of the picture maybe he could start something with the detective. Guess not.

"Mason, it's okay. I told you before, I'm not expecting anything from you. If friends are all we will ever be, then that's fine with me. I can always use another friend. Can't you?"

"Yeah, I can always use a friend. I don't seem to have many right now." Mason gave a small laugh.

"All right, friends it is. Now, tell me about this guy that you tried to drink away. Then we can go for a walk downtown and ogle cute guys. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky." He laughed as he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Mason laughed. He couldn't help it; Cooper was funny. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. And he could certainly use a friend right about now. "Are you sure you want to hear this? It's pretty long and boring."

"That's up to you, Mason. It's your story. If you're ready to share it, then spill. If not, that's okay, too. We can still go ogle cute guys."

"You might as well get comfortable. We may be here awhile."

"I never believed in love at first sight until I met Jack. I knew at the time I was too young. Hell, I was just sixteen. I thought that maybe, when I got older, Jack might be interested. So I bided my time until I was older."

Mason smiled as he thought about Jack. "Man, he has the greatest smile. I love his dimples. I did every stupid thing I could think of to get him to smile at me and show me those dimples. In the end, that backfired on me. Ten years later and he still thinks I'm a dope."

"Mason, can I ask you a question?" Cooper interjected. After Mason nodded he continued. "Have you ever been with anyone? You say you've been in love with Jack since you were sixteen years old. That doesn't leave much room for anyone else."

"I tried once. It was a disaster from word one. Oh, the date went okay and all, but when we started to fool around a little, I just couldn't. It felt wrong. I felt like I was betraying Jack, which is funny considering he doesn't even want me."

"And since then?" Cooper asked.

Mason shook his head. "A few weeks ago, just before my bender, I got a call from a bar that Jack was drunk and needed a ride home. I picked him up and drove him home and one thing kind of led to another. There was some heavy kissing and a few other things, but beyond that, no. I've never been with anyone. I never wanted to be with anyone except Jack. Guess that's not going to happen now."

"Why not? If you know he's gay and you're gay, then what's the problem?"

"Well, for one, until a few weeks ago, I didn't even know that Jack was gay." Mason grabbed his wine and took a small sip before he set it back down. "He always brought women to any family functions we had so I naturally thought he was straight. I finally came to the conclusion that I just needed to leave so that I could try and get a life for myself away from Jack. I just couldn't watch him marry someone else."

"So, now that you know he's not straight, does that change anything?"

Mason shook his head. "No. The morning after we were together, Jack was so disgusted with me that he threw up. If that doesn't say he's not interested, I don't know what does."

"You could be wrong."

"No, I'm not wrong. He promised my brother that he wouldn't try anything with me."

"Your brother? What does he have to do with this?"

"Randy and Jack have been best friends for years. In fact, Randy's wife, Kari, is Jack's sister. I guess about seven years ago, Jack showed some interest in me. Randy made him promise that he wouldn't touch me, come near me—I don't know, he just promised Randy he'd stay away from me."

"If he was interested in you, I don't see the problem, Mason. He could still be interested."

"First of all, he made that stupid promise. I know I was only nineteen at the time, but I wasn't stupid. Jack didn't even ask me what I wanted. Neither of them did," Mason said. He waved his hand around, holding up two fingers. "Second, he's obviously no longer interested, and I can't take it anymore. I'm tired of going to bed alone, of not having anyone to hold me. Basically, I'm just tired. I waited ten years for him to come around and the first time he does, he ends up throwing up. No, I'm done with Jack."

"Tell me about Jack. Why did you fall in love with him in the first place if he's such a jackass?"

"He's not an asshole, not really. He's actually a really great guy," Mason said

"Come on, Mason, you need to get your mind off your troubles. I'm taking you out, no arguments," Cooper said as



he got to his feet. "Go put on something tight and sexy so I can show you off. If I can't get down your pants, I at least want to see you in them."

Mason laughed as he stood to his feet and headed toward his room to change his clothes. He had just the outfit in mind. He had been saving it for Jack, but there was no reason to save it now. It was time for him to stop mooning over Jack and get on with his life.

A few minutes later Mason walked out of the bedroom to be met with whistles and catcalls from Cooper. "Oh, honey, you're gonna set the place on fire with that outfit."

Mason blushed as he looked down at the tight, faded blue jeans, with a few worn out spots here and there, and the plain white T-shirt he was wearing. He topped it off with a pair of light brown loafers. "What?" he asked of Cooper.

Cooper walked over and reached up and ruffled his hair a little. He stepped back and took a long look. "Yeah, that'll do. Now you have that just got out of bed look," he said, making Mason blush all over again. "You know, on most guys this would be gauche. On you, it's hot!"

Mason hesitated briefly, then let Cooper drag him out the door. This was a little scary. He had never done anything like this before, never even been out to a gay bar. Hell, he'd never been anywhere as a gay man before. Guess it was about time he started.

The bar that Cooper dragged him to was nothing like Mason expected. He wasn't sure exactly what he had expected, but this wasn't it. It was actually nice. The music was good, a mixture of country, rock, jazz, and blues.

The décor was that of any bar, several tables throughout the room, some booths, and a big dance floor in the middle of the room. There was a second floor with even more tables and booths. To the back of the second floor room were four pool tables. All in all, it was a pretty nice looking bar.

There weren't any drooling men hiding in corners getting each other off or piles of guys making out in booths. Sure the place was filled with men, but they were doing what anyone else would be doing in a bar, having a good time.

Cooper and Mason worked their way through the crowd until they reached an empty booth that they could claim. Cooper went to grab them both a drink while Mason looked around the room. When Cooper came back, he set their drinks down and reached for Mason's hand.

"Come on, let's go dance." At Mason's nervous look, he laughed. "No funny business, I promise. I just like to dance."

"I'll warn you now, I'm a horrible dancer," Mason said as he stood up and followed Cooper out onto the dance floor.

"No worries, honey, no gay man on the planet can dance wrong. It's just not in our DNA. Besides, you could just stand here in the middle of the dance floor and not move. You'd still be sexy as hell," Cooper added with a wink as he began to dance to the music.

It didn't take long for Cooper to learn that Mason was the only gay man on the planet who couldn't dance. He was just too tied up in knots. He didn't know how to let loose.

Mason didn't like the evil little grin that crossed Cooper's face as he watched Mason dance. Cooper signaled to

someone behind him. Suddenly Mason felt another man come up behind him and start dancing.

Mason went to turn around, but Cooper stopped him by grabbing his arm to hold him in place. "Uh ah, stay right where you are. It's just a friend of mine. I want you to close your eyes and just feel the music. I know you have it in you somewhere. Just let it go."

Mason looked doubtful, but he closed his eyes anyway. He listened to the beat of the music. He was awkward at first, then the music sank into him to replace the tension. His body got into the rhythm of the music and began to move and sway on the dance floor.

Cooper and Mason spent the next several hours dancing and having a good time. By the time Cooper drove Mason home, he knew that he wanted Mason for a friend, even if he couldn't have Mason for a lover. Mason was too special of a man to give up for any reason.

Cooper pulled the car to a stop outside of Mason's apartment and turned to him. "So, did you have a good time?"

"Yeah, that was great. I can't wait to go again."

"Anytime, babe, just give me a call."

Mason unbuckled his seatbelt and grabbed the door handle. He stopped to turn back and look at Cooper. "Thanks, Cooper. I really did have a good time tonight. I'm sorry that—that things couldn't be different."

"Me, too, Mason, but I really think you're still in love with Jack. Until you deal with that, you're never going to move on. Even if that moving on means you end up with Jack."

"How can you be so—so calm about this?" Mason asked, astonished by Cooper's easy, friendly manner.

"Many years ago I was in love with someone. Everyone around us told us we couldn't be together—our parents, our friends, everyone. Eventually he just gave up. He didn't fight for what we had. I guess he couldn't take the pressure. I haven't seen him in almost as long as you've been in love with Jack. But I still love him. I will always love him. Oh, I know I have to move on with my life, and to a large extent, I have. He will always have a special place in my heart, and I will always regret not trying harder, not telling everyone to go to hell. I don't want that for you."

Mason gave him a small smile. "Thanks, Cooper. I appreciate it." He climbed out of the car, leaning back down to look at his new friend one last time. "You interested in a just coming out of the closet gay friend then?"

"I'm always interested in having another friend, especially a gay one," Cooper said as he winked up at Mason.

"Then come to dinner with me at my parents' house this week. They'll love you. My parents are great."

"Sounds like a plan. Give me a call and tell me when and where and I'll be there."

"Will do. Catch you later, Cooper. And thanks again. Call if you need anything."

Mason closed the door and waved as Cooper drove away. He turned and walked to his apartment, his thoughts sad as he realized that there was no great relationship with Cooper waiting for him.

He went inside his apartment and got ready for bed. He thought over the fun he had had as he climbed under the covers. The evening had been an eye-opening experience for him. Even if he wasn't in a relationship, maybe there was life beyond Jack after all.

Mason closed his eyes and faded off to sleep, feeling more optimistic about his life than he had in years. That night, for the first time in years, he didn't dream about Jack.

\* \* \* \*

Mason was nervous as he called his mother about bringing a guest for dinner. He had never brought anyone home with him before and didn't know how she would react. She seemed to be pretty accepting of the fact that he was gay, but it would be a little different when she saw it in person.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mom, how's it going?" Mason said, smiling in response to his mother's happy voice.

"Mason, honey, how are you? Have you settled in then? Do you need anything?"

"No, Mom, I'm fine. The apartment is a little small, but I'll get by. Look, I was calling about dinner this week. Are we still on?" Mason asked hesitantly.

"Well, sure, honey. What night would you like to come over?" Janet asked.

"Any night is good, but that's not really why I called. Would you and Dad mind if I brought a friend for dinner? I know it's short notice and all, but I've met this really nice guy,

you know, the one I had dinner with the other night. Anyway, I wanted to know if I could bring him along?"

"Well, sure, Mason. You know you can bring anyone you like. You don't have to ask."

"Well, Mom, the thing is, he's gay, like me. I just didn't know how you would feel about that." Mason held his breath as he waited for his mother's response. It wasn't long in coming and made him smile.

"Shame on you, Mason Philips! You know that isn't an issue for us. It never has been and it never will be. We just want you to be happy. If this young man makes you happy, then bring him."

"He's not a date, Mom. Just a friend," Mason responded, rolling his eyes.

"That's okay, too."

"Um—is anyone else going to be there?" He asked hesitantly.

"No, not if you don't want them to be," Janet assured him.

"Not yet. I was hoping it could be just you and Dad, Cooper and me. I'm just not ready to face them yet. I need a little more time, okay? We can try the family thing on another night." He laughed a little as he tried to break the tension. Mason couldn't keep the happiness out of his voice as he continued. "You'll like Cooper, Mom. He's really nice. He took me dancing last night."

"Oh? And how did that go?" Janet asked.

"It didn't start out too well, but Cooper assured me that every gay man on the planet knows how to dance. Apparently it's in our DNA. So, he taught me how to dance."

"I think I would have liked seeing that. So, this man of yours know how to dance, huh? Maybe I'll have to see how good he is. I've been known to be quite the dancer in my time. I think I may be able to whip him into shape," Janet laughed.

Mason chuckled when he pictured Cooper dancing with his mother. She probably could give him a run for his money. After finalizing plans, he hung up with his mother and called Cooper to let him know of the dinner date at his parents' house. Cooper said he would be there, bringing his dancing shoes with him.

Cooper was a huge hit with Mason's Mom and Dad. Cooper and Janet had danced the night away. Bob had even gotten out on the living room floor and shown everyone a few new moves. It had been a great evening for all of them.

The next few weeks went by in a blur of activity for Mason. He went to work every day, but his nights were reserved for getting to know Cooper better and discovering life beyond Jack. He still loved Jack and missed him terribly, but getting out and making new friends helped a lot.

Through Cooper, Mason had made several new friends, a few of them gay, a few not. Many nights they all settled at one house or another for a casual dinner or get together. Cooper introduced Mason to them one night at the bar.

"I have a few friends I want you to meet, Mason," Cooper said as he sat down next to Mason and gestured to the other men with him. "This is Jordan Bennett, my work partner and best friend. Despite the fact that he's as straight as they come, he's still okay."

Mason smiled up at the tall, dark-haired man as he shook Jordan's hand. He wasn't bad looking. Maybe six foot two, with a thick five o'clock shadow on his square jaw. He was dressed as casually as the rest of them in a pair of faded jeans and a dark blue cotton shirt. "Hello," Mason said.

"This is Patrick O'Brian and Neil Bennett," Cooper said as he gestured to the other two men. "Neil is Jordan's cousin and Patrick's partner."

"Work partner?" Mason asked as he shook each of their hands. Patrick looked to be as tall as Jordan, just a bit bulkier. He actually looked like a linebacker for a football team. Mason admitted to himself that he was a little intimidated by Patrick's large size.

"No," Patrick said as he shook Mason's hand. "Neil is the love of my life."

The moment Patrick's eyes fell on Neil, Mason quickly revised his opinion of the large man. His eyes went all dreamy and tender as he looked at his partner. No one that looked at his lover that way could be all bad.

"Oh, sorry," Mason said as he turned his gaze to Neil. Neil was a couple of inches shorter than Patrick was and quite a bit thinner, but he seemed to carry it well. He looked very athletic with a slim but muscular body.

"Don't be. Many people make that mistake. Neil's an EMT and I'm a firefighter with the city of Portland. That's actually how we met," Patrick chuckled.

"Then you do work together? I mean, you are sort of in the same type of work," Mason said as he sat back in his seat and stared at the two of them.



"Actually, my apartment caught fire and Patrick saved me. Just came right on into the burning building, tossed me over his shoulder, and carried me out to safety. That night, he came by the hospital and asked me out. The rest is history," Neil chuckled.

Patrick laughed. "He had the sweetest ass I had ever seen. I just couldn't let that get away from me."

Mason laughed when Neil jumped and swatted at the one hand Patrick had on the table. From the lust filling Neil's face, he had a good idea where Patrick's other hand was. He turned his head when he heard a soft snort next to him. Jordan was rolling his eyes.

"Patrick hasn't been able to keep his hands off of Neil's ass since. If you're going to be hanging out with us, you'd better get used to seeing it. Those two can't be within twenty feet of each other without attacking each other."

"You should be so lucky," Neil chuckled as he looked over at his cousin. "At least I'm getting some on a regular basis. When was the last time you got laid?"

Mason's eyes widened at Neil's words. He didn't know whether to laugh or be concerned at the glare Jordan shot over at his cousin.

"Just because I'm not currently seeing anyone doesn't mean I couldn't get a piece if I wanted it. Hell, if I was gay, I'm sure Mason would go home with me," Jordan said as he winked at Mason. "Wouldn't you, Mason?"

"I, uh, I—" Mason sputtered in shock.

"Mason's not ready for your perverted brand of comedy, Jordan," Cooper said quickly. "He's only been out of the closet

for a few weeks, and I'm trying to show him the ropes. Besides, his sexual fantasies are all reserved for me."

Mason's jaw dropped open as he turned to stare at Cooper. He could feel his face heat up at the blatantly sexual grin on Cooper's face as Cooper blew him a kiss. "Uh, Coop—" Mason began.

Cooper reached up and patted Mason on the back. "Relax, Mason. I'm just having fun with you, as is Jordan. None of would try anything with you unless you made it clear that you were interested. Besides, I know that your heart still belongs to Jack."

Mason grabbed his beer and took a quick swig. "Actually, I haven't thought about Jack in a few days." He lifted his head to glare at Cooper, a friendly smile on his lips to belie his anger.

"Thanks for reminding me, blockhead."

"Jack?" Jordan asked. "Who's Jack?"

Mason chuckled at the chagrined look on Cooper's face before turning to look at Jordan. "Jack is a very sexy, very hot guy that I was interested in for several years. But, as I recently found out, he has absolutely no interest in me. Hence, the just coming out of the closet thing."

Jordan looked confused, as did Neil and Patrick. "What does some guy not being interested in you have to do with coming out of the closet?" Jordan asked in confusion.

"I hid in the closet because I had dreams of being with Jack. There just wasn't any reason to come out of the closet when I still had hope we'd get together. Now that I know we're not..." Mason said.

"So, now that you know that you and this guy aren't getting together, you're..." Jordan asked.

"Looking for someone new to fantasize about," Mason chuckled.

"Well, in that case..." Jordan said. He wiggled his eyebrows at Mason. "How do you feel about handcuffs? I'm a police detective, you know. I'm sure I could dig up a pair or two."

Mason laughed at the outright flirtation on Jordan's face. "Are you sure you're not gay?"

"Sorry, honey, dick does nothing for me. Of course, if you play your cards right, I might reconsider."

"I don't know, Jordan, I was kind of hoping Cooper might break me in," Mason said as he turned his head to bat his eyelashes at Cooper. He laughed as Cooper's face turned red. Cooper knew he was joking, but it was still fun to flirt with the man.

"Okay, on that note," Cooper said as he set his drink down on the table, "anyone want to dance?"

\* \* \* \*

Through Cooper's tutelage, Mason had become quite the dancer. He loved it—the freedom from thinking, the sound of the music, the sexy way he felt out on the dance floor. Many times he would be dancing only to have someone join him. Sometimes he knew them, sometimes he didn't.

He usually ended up being propositioned. He always said no, and that was usually all he needed to say. Every once in awhile, Cooper or one of their friends had to step in and help fend off one of Mason's more insistent admirers.

One evening, Mason was out with Cooper and their other friends. He was busy letting loose on the dance floor when he felt a body behind him, hands encircling his chest.

At first he didn't do anything. He was too busy enjoying himself and having a good time. Besides, it wasn't unusual to get physically close to someone when dancing. It never really meant anything though.

After awhile Mason began to notice that the hands began to wander beyond what he was comfortable with. He pushed the hands away, but the guy that held his hips firmly grabbed onto him, not giving up.

Mason got really nervous when the man leaned into him and whispered huskily in his ear, "I can make your ass beg."

Mason tried to step away from the creepy man as he sternly replied, "No, let go of me, please." He grabbed at the man's hands and tried to pry them away from his body, but the man was insistent.

"Oh, I like it when you beg, sweetness. I'm gonna enjoy hearing you beg when I fuck you." The hands on his chest pinched his nipples through his shirt. Mason began to struggle with the guy as he tried to get away.

Mason was not a small man by any means, but this man was bigger and stronger. He easily kept a hold of Mason as he ground hard cock into Mason's jean clad ass. When the man sucked on his neck, Mason had had enough. He thrust his elbow backward, catching the man off guard as his elbow connected with the man's stomach.

"Get the hell away from me!" Mason yelled, suddenly getting Cooper's attention from across the dance floor.

Cooper grabbed Jordan, and they both pushed their way through the throng of dancers trying to reach Mason.

"Oh, sweetness, don't be like that. I'm gonna make it good for you, I promise," the man crooned in Mason's ear as he tried to pull Mason off the dance floor.

Mason struggled with him. He dug his heels in and forced the man to practically drag him from the room. He had no intention of going anywhere with this man. Besides taking what was not offered, the man was just plain creepy.

Cooper and Jordan reached them just as the man tried to pull Mason out one of the side doors. Cooper grabbed Mason and pulled him away from the man. Cooper pushed Mason behind him. Jordan grabbed the man by the collar and shoved him into the wall.

"Who the hell are you?" Jordan demanded as he held his arm across the man's throat. He applied more pressure when the man didn't immediately answer him.

"Wallace—Carl Wallace," the man choked out.

Mason watched the man struggle against Jordan, but Jordan was stronger and faster. Mason was a little astounded, though, when Jordan lifted the man up off the floor and shoved him into the wall again, causing the man's head to bang into the wall behind him.

"Don't you understand the word NO?" Jordan growled.

"He didn't mean it. He wanted to go with me. I know he did," the man replied as he looked from Cooper to Mason.

Mason quickly shook his head, shocked at the lust filled look the man was giving him. "I didn't, I swear. I told him to

leave me alone, Jordan. I didn't do anything. I was just dancing."

He felt Cooper pat him on the shoulder as a shudder of disgust passed through his body. He knew Cooper was just trying to reassure him, but he didn't think anything would make it better at this point. Mason was so distressed that he felt his stomach begin to roll.

Mason watched thankfully as Jordan pushed Wallace toward the door. "Get out of here and leave Mason the hell alone," Jordan growled.

The man stepped back against the door. As he pushed it open with his body, he looked back over at Mason, lust and something more sinister shone in his eyes. "Mason," he whispered before he pushed through the door and left.

"Mason, honey, are you okay? Did he hurt you?" Cooper asked as he checked Mason over for any injuries. Jordan pulled the door shut and came to stand next to Cooper, the worry clear on his face.

"No, no, he didn't hurt me. Just scared me. I've never had anyone—I've never—I told him I didn't—I didn't do anything, Cooper, I swear," Mason stammered out. Mason shivered at the memory of Wallace's words. "I asked him to leave me alone, but he just wouldn't stop. He kept touching me and saying—things."

"I know, honey. Don't worry about it. He was just seeing things that were not there. You didn't do anything wrong." He wrapped an arm around Mason. "Come on, let's go find Neil and Patrick and head out of here. I think we could all do with an early night tonight."

Mason nodded as he allowed Cooper to lead him out of the bar, followed closely by Jordan, Neil, and Patrick. Jordan quietly explained what had happened to Mason while they walked toward their cars.

A shiver of unease passed through Mason as they made their way out to their cars. As he unlocked his car door he looked around the parking lot. Nothing seemed out of place, but he just couldn't get past the feeling of being watched.

"Mason? Are you sure you're okay? You want me to follow you home?" Cooper asked from his car.

Mason shook his head. "No, I'll be okay. I'm just a little weirded out right now. I feel like that guy is still watching me. I'll be fine once I get home and get into bed." Mason climbed into his car and pulled away from the bar, heading toward home.

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## **Chapter Five**

Mason tried to get the visions of Carl Wallace out of his mind as he climbed into bed that night. The guy had really given Mason the creeps. There was something really wrong with that man, something evil that made Mason feel violated just from the look in his eyes.

He had never experienced something like that before. He had never really had to tell someone to stay away from him, to stop touching him. Not that he had that many people trying to touch him, but he, at least, wanted to be able to say who could and couldn't do it.

And the things the man had said—they just made Mason's skin crawl. Mason felt totally freaked out. He got up quickly and double-checked the locks on the doors and windows. He knew it was silly, but he couldn't help it. If he had a choice, he wouldn't even be alone tonight.

Unfortunately, it was hard for any man to admit that he was scared, even him. Mason knew that a lot of men thought the emotional responses were girly, but he felt that they were natural. The years of learning and research that he had done had just gone to prove to him that bottling up his emotions would only increase his stress level, not relieve it. But there were times when they overwhelmed him, like now.

Out of desperation Mason reached for his cell phone on his nightstand and dialed Jack's phone number. Jack had always made him feel safe. Maybe if he heard Jack's voice he would feel better.



Mason held his breath as he heard the phone pick up and a groggy voice answered, "Hello?"

Oh god, he hadn't realized until he heard Jack's voice for the first time in weeks how much he missed the man. It had been so long since Mason had seen Jack, since he had called Jack. Mason wanted to say something, anything. But words failed him as tears filled his eyes and fell down his cheeks.

"Hello?" Jack asked again.

Mason covered his mouth with his hand to keep himself from saying anything. He wanted to, but if he did, he didn't know if he could keep himself from begging for Jack's affections.

"Mason?" Jack said, his voice suddenly sounded low and husky. "I know it's you, Mason."

Mason's heart beat faster in his chest at Jack's words. How did Jack know it was him? He hadn't made a sound, and he knew his number was blocked on caller ID. Silence reigned. It stretched for several moments as neither of them spoke. Mason was afraid to say anything.

"Mason, I know it's you. Talk to me, please," Jacked pleaded. "Fine, Mason, if you're not going to talk to me, then stop calling me." He waited several moments for Mason to respond, to say something, anything. But Mason still didn't speak. "I mean it, Mason. Don't call me again."

Mason cringed when he heard the phone slam down. He held the phone to his chest for several moments before he could gather the strength to hang it up and set it down on his nightstand.

He rolled over and punched his pillow several times as anger at himself filled his mind.

He was so stupid! All he had to do was say one word and Jack would have talked to him. One single word. But no, he had to just sit there like a bump on a log and not say anything. Mason punched his pillow again then rolled it up into a ball under his head. What an idiot!

It was just as well. Jack didn't want him. Jack had never wanted him. As hard as it was, he had to remember that. If he kept calling Jack he would never get over the man. He would never be able to move on.

That's all he needed to do, move on. There were days when he knew his life was getting better, that he was moving on without Jack. There were other days when he wondered why he even got out of bed. It just never seemed to get any easier.

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Jack slammed the phone back into its cradle and stared at it. He was so tired of this. Mason kept calling him, but never said anything. He knew it was Mason calling. He always knew it was Mason calling. What he couldn't figure out was why Mason wouldn't talk to him. He knew Mason cared about him. If Mason would just talk to him maybe they could work this all out. It was driving Jack crazy.

Neither Bob nor Janet would tell him where Mason was living. They wouldn't tell Randy either. And if Mason was going to his parent's house for dinner, both Jack and Randy

were asked to stay away. Mason didn't want to see either of them.

It had been weeks. Jack had waited, hoping for some sign from Mason that he wanted more from Jack. All he got were late night phone calls where Mason didn't talk—until now.

Jack suddenly groaned as he realized how stupid he had just been. He could've slapped himself. Mason was never going to call him back now and these late night calls were his only connection with Mason. What in the hell had he done?

\* \* \* \*

Cooper smiled as Mason walked up and sat down at the little table across from him. "Hey, man, I'm glad you could join me for lunch. I know your schedule is pretty booked at work. The guys should be here in a few minutes. Neil was running a little behind so Patrick and Jordan went to pick him up."

"No problem. We can order when they get here. But I could use a something cold to drink." Mason waved the waitress over and ordered a glass of strawberry lemonade then turned back to look at Cooper. "So, what's this lunch all about?" Mason asked.

"What? I can't ask my best friend out for lunch? Do I need an ulterior motive to see you?" Cooper feigned outrage.

"Cut the crap, Cooper. I'm not an imbecile. I know something's up. You've called in reinforcements."

Cooper shook his head as he waited for the waitress to set Mason's drink down on the table. "Yeah, you're right, there is something I need to talk to you about, but I would like to wait

until the guys get here. I want them to hear this as well," Cooper said.

Mason nodded and took a sip of his strawberry lemonade. He could see Cooper watch him, assessing his mood. He knew he didn't look good. It would figure. He felt like crap. He had barely slept since Jack had hung up on him last week. All he could do was lay there and think about what Jack had said.

"Mason, you look like you haven't slept in days. What's going on?"

"Gee, thanks, so glad to see you noticed," Mason chuckled.

"That's not what I mean, Mason, and you know it. You look—I don't know—sadder than the last time I saw you. Did something else happen?" Cooper asked.

"Yeah, you could say that. I was stupid, yet again. The night that guy accosted me at the bar last week? I called Jack." Mason could feel his face heat up with embarrassment even as he said the words.

"And? What happened? What did you say to him? What did he say to you?" Cooper asked in amazement.

"That's just it—nothing. I couldn't say a damn thing," Mason said, dejected.

"Oh, well, what did Jack say? He did say something, right? Or did he sit on the line and say nothing like you did?"

"Oh no, he said something all right," Mason laughed bitterly. "He told me never to call him again."

"Oh damn, Mason, I'm so sorry." Cooper said as he watched Mason. "What are you going to do?"

Mason shrugged. "I don't know. Stop calling him, I guess. The problem is that I just can't seem to get past what he said

to me. It's like—like the words keep rolling around in my head, and I can't seem to forget them. It feels like everything's died, all my dreams and fantasies, all gone, like they never existed. And I don't know what to do about it."

"Are you going to stop calling him?"

"Probably not," Mason laughed.

Cooper patted Mason's hand. "You, my friend, are glutton for punishment. Either lay all your cards on the table and tell the man how you feel or stop fawning over him."

He shook his head at Mason's reluctant look. "You know, one of these days you're going to have to take me to meet this man. I have just got to meet the man who's kept a sexy thing like you all tied up into knots for ten years. He's got to be something."

"Oh, he is. We're talking serious eye candy here," Mason laughed.

"Eye candy? Where?" Jordan asked he sat down beside Mason.

Patrick and Neil sat down next to Cooper; their shoulder's nearly touched as they sat close together. Mason knew from experience that Patrick's hand was on Neil's leg under the table. Patrick couldn't seem to be in the same vicinity as Neil and not touch him in some way.

"I was just telling Mason that he needed to introduce me to Jack. Mason swears he's the best eye candy this side of the Mississippi. Someone that looks that hot I have got to meet. Even if it's just to ogle him."

"Hmmm, not a bad idea. I like ogling," Jordan replied.

"Maybe we should throw a party or something. I nominate

Patrick and Neil as hosts. Mason's apartment is just too small, and Cooper's—well we've all seen Cooper's place. That man doesn't know the meaning of the word organization."

"My parents' place would be better. They have a pool. We could have a good old fashion pool party and BBQ. My Dad cooks some mean steaks. Besides, Mom has been bugging me for ages to meet you guys. Would be the prefect opportunity. You can all meet my asshole brother and then we can all ogle Jack together."

"That sounds like a plan to me," Cooper replied.

"Cool. I'll give Mom a call and set something up with her and get back to you all," Mason replied, then he looked at Cooper." So, want to tell me what this lunch is all about?"

"Do you remember the guy that attacked you at the bar? Carl Wallace?" Cooper asked slowly.

Mason nodded. "How could I forget? He gave me the creeps." He shuddered.

"I ran a check on him. He doesn't have a criminal record that we can find. I'm not even sure Carl Wallace is his real name. But Jordan and I both feel he's dangerous. He's not going to give up just because we ran him off. He's too aggressive for that and won't take no for an answer," Cooper explained seriously.

"We want you to take extra precautions for awhile, just until we feel that he's moved on," Jordan added as he patted Mason's hand. "Unfortunately, there was nothing we can do officially until Wallace makes a move."

"You don't think he's going to come after me, do you?" Mason suddenly felt very anxious. Wallace wasn't someone he

wanted to deal with again—ever. That man scared the crap out of him.

Cooper shook his head. "No, that's not what we are saying. We just want you to be careful. Pay a little more attention to your surroundings. Make sure your doors are always locked. Don't answer the door unless you know who is there. Stuff like that."

"If you hear anything or feel unsafe, anything, call one of us. You have our cell phone numbers. Use them. We don't care what time it is, day or night, call us. Even if you're just feeling uncomfortable, call us. One of us will be there as fast as we can," Patrick added.

"Are you really sure all of this is necessary? Aren't you overreacting just a bit? Why on earth would someone want to come after me?" Mason asked.

"Mason, we're not saying he's going to come after you, but there was something seriously wrong with that guy. He just, well, he gave me the creeps also, to be honest. I've been a cop long enough to know that when my gut is telling me something, I should go with it. And my gut is screaming over this guy," Cooper said.

"We just want you to be extra careful. We care about you and don't want anything to happen to you." Jordan squeezed Mason's hand, trying to reassure him.

"Besides, I would hate to have anything happen to that tight little ass of yours before I see it in a pair of swimming trunks." Cooper winked at Mason, making him blush.

"Hmmm, now there's an image I wouldn't mind seeing myself, and I'm not even gay," Jordan chuckled, only adding to Mason's embarrassment.

"Okay," Patrick laughed as he got to his feet and pulled Neil up with him. "All this talk of tight asses is giving me a serious woody, so we're gonna go someplace more private before I bend Neil over the table and fuck him right here."

Mason nearly spit out his drink at the dreamy, lust-filled look in Neil's eyes as Neil began to rub the bulge in Patrick's pants. "I wouldn't mind. I've always loved having sex in the great outdoors. Being in public will just add to the experience," Neil chuckled.

"Yeah, baby, but I don't think Mason's quite ready for your kinky brand of sex. Might warp his poor little mind, keep him from ever wanting to have sex again," Patrick said as he wrapped his arm around Neil's waist.

No one was more surprised than Mason as he winked at Neil and Patrick, "Oh hell, I haven't even had sex yet. At this point, I'd be willing to risk it."

Everyone just stared at him for several moments in silence shock before they burst out laughing, causing the flush on Mason's face to deepen even more.

Cooper reached over and wrapped an arm around Mason's shoulders then pulled him in for a quick kiss on the cheek. "Oh honey, we have so got to get you laid."

Mason chuckled through his blush, "Yeah, I keep trying, but Jordan just hasn't said yes yet." No one could keep from laughing when Mason winked at Jordan, and this time Jordan



blushed. Jordan was a confirmed heterosexual and everyone knew it. But they sure had fun teasing him.

"I know you want me, but I'm holding out for Coop. He's the only one that could make me switch sides. Have you ever seen him in the buff? He has a sweet ass," Jordan chuckled as he blew Cooper a kiss.

"Okay, on that note Patrick and I really are getting out of here. Call us about the party, Mason. I'm sure it'll be a blast." Neil and Patrick waved as they walked off, arms around each other. Patrick's hand was firmly placed on Neil's ass.

Mason laughed with Cooper as Jordan rolled his eyes. It was a known fact in their tight little circle that Patrick had a strong obsession with Neil's ass. He constantly had his hands on Neil's ass, either groping Neil or caressing him.

Cooper, Mason, and Jordan finished their lunch and agreed to meet later that evening at Mason's apartment to plan the pool party. Mason still had to call his parents and ask them if it was okay, but he was pretty sure it would be.

His mother would be even more thrilled when he told her to invite Randy and Jack. Mason still wasn't sure how he felt about seeing Jack again. But with Cooper and his other friends there, it would be easier. At least he hoped it would.

\* \* \* \*

Mason opened his apartment door a few days later and let himself in. He set his briefcase down on the dining table and walked to the fridge to get a soda. He popped the top and walked to his bedroom to change into his jogging pants. He

came to a complete halt in the doorway at the sight that met him.

His heart thudded in his chest and air refused to leave his lungs as he looked around. The bed was made up with white silk sheets and several pillows. Red rose petals covered the white sheets. Candles were lit throughout the room. A tall glass of champagne sat on a breakfast tray next to a bowl of chocolate covered strawberries. Next to the bowl was a note.

Mason quickly crossed the room and picked up the note. Tears clouded his eyes as he read the words. For you, my love. I miss you so much, but we will be together soon.

Jack, it had to be Jack!

His hands shook as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He had to take several deep breaths before he could dial Jack's phone number. He felt his heart beat rapidly with every ring of the phone.

"Hello?"

"Jack?" Mason murmured breathlessly.

"Mason? Is that you, Mason?"

"Jack," he tried again, just a bit louder. He didn't know what to say, how to express the overwhelming joy he felt that Jack would do something like this, would be so romantic. It meant the world to him.

"Why are you calling me, Mason? What do you want?" Mason was confused by the stiff animosity in Jack's voice.

"Didn't you—I mean—you left the note and the—"

"I left what? Mason? Have you been drinking again?"

"No, I just got home from work. I wanted to thank you for the champagne and strawberries and the sheets and

everything. I was so sure you didn't care, that you didn't want—" Mason said rapidly.

"Whoa, whoa, Mason, slow down. What are you talking about?"

"How did you do all of this? Did you get the key from my mother? How did you even know where I live? I was just so surprised when I came home. For you to do this—Jack, I—Oh, I just knew we could—"

"Mason, what the hell are you talking about? I didn't do anything."

Mason was silent for several moments as he tried to comprehend Jack's words. It had to have been Jack. Who else would—oh my god! No, no, no, why couldn't it have been Jack?

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Jack, it won't happen again," Mason whispered quietly. He could hear Jack yell his name as he hung up the phone. He looked once more around the romantic setting before he left the room, shutting the door behind him.

He quickly walked out the front door and went to sit in his car, the doors locked. He flipped his cell phone open and dialed Cooper's phone number. "Coop?"

"Mason? What's up?"

"I think he was here, in my apartment," Mason replied quietly.

"Who, Mason?" Cooper asked in confusion.

"Wallace," Mason said as he ran his hand through his hair. When he noticed that it was shaking, he clenched it into a fist

and dropped it in his lap. "I got home from work and someone had been in my bedroom."

"What makes you think it was Wallace?"

"Because it wasn't Jack. And I'm pretty sure it wasn't you unless you're planning on seducing me. That doesn't leave too many other people. It had to be Wallace. Please, just come. I'm scared to go back into my apartment," Mason said as he gripped the phone tightly in his hand.

"I'm already on my way, honey. Now, how do you know it's wasn't Jack?"

"I called him, and he doesn't know what I'm talking about. He thinks I'm drunk. It was stupid, I know, but for a moment I thought—I thought—oh hell, you know what I thought, Coop," Mason replied as he let his head fall forward against the steering wheel.

"Yeah, honey, I do, and I'm sorry it wasn't Jack. But I need you to do something for me, okay? Don't touch anything until I get there, okay? In fact, stay out of the room altogether," Cooper said.

"I didn't touch anything. As soon as I figured out that it wasn't Jack, I left the room. Right now I'm locked in my car."

"Okay, good, stay there. I'm going to hang up for a moment and call Jordan and tell him to meet us there. I'm also going to call Neil and Patrick.. I want them to sit with you while Jordan and I check things out. I'll call you right back, okay? Don't open your door for anyone but us, understand?"

"Okay, but call me right back," Mason pleaded.

"I will, baby, I promise."

Mason knew it was only a few moments, but it seemed like forever before Cooper called him back. "Mason? I'm just a couple of blocks away. I'll be there in just a few minutes. Neil and Patrick are on their way, and Jordan's contacting the local police station so that we can take lead on this.. Okay?"

"Okay," Mason said, sniffing into the phone.

"It's going to be okay, Mason, I promise," Cooper assured him.

"I feel like such a wuss. I'm twenty-six fucking years old. I'm a grown man, and now I'm afraid to go into my own house. I'm locked in my car. What does that say about me? No wonder I can't find anybody to love me. Who would want to love someone that jumps at their own shadow?"

"That's enough, Mason. There's nothing wrong with you. You're scared, and I think you have a right to be scared. And you will find someone to love you. It just takes time, honey. Hell, you've only been out of the closet for a couple of months. To find love, true love, it takes a little longer than that. But it's going to happen, baby, just you wait and see. It's going to happen," Cooper assured Mason.

"You think so? I'm not so sure. Coop, I'll be honest, I don't know how much longer I can do this. I've waited so long, and I'm still alone. I'm so tired of not having anyone for myself. When I got home and saw the roses and the champagne and the strawberries and then I read the note—it felt so good. It felt like someone finally cared about me, that someone wanted me. And I thought it had to be Jack. I wanted it to be Jack. Oh god, I am a wuss!"

\* \* \* \*

Cooper knew there wasn't anything he could say to make Mason feel better at the moment. He knew what it was like to be without the one you loved. He still missed Alec, and it had been nearly ten years.

Mason clearly wasn't getting over Jack. Until he either got together with Jack or got over Jack, Mason wasn't going to be able to have any type of life. Maybe it was time for a little friendly intervention. He'd have to get Jordan, Neil, and Patrick in on it, but he was sure they would agree. Mason needed help.

Cooper pulled into the parking lot right beside Mason's car and swiftly got out and walked to his window. Cooper could see Mason with his head resting on the steering wheel, his shoulders shaking as he cried.

He knocked softly, seeing Mason jump, then quickly unlock the door when Mason saw who it was. Mason climbed from the car and threw himself into Cooper's arms. He could hear cars pulling into the parking lot in the background.

Cooper didn't release Mason from his arms until Jordan, Neil, and Patrick arrived. Leaving Mason with Neil and Patrick, Cooper and Jordan went into the apartment to investigate. The police arrived, and Cooper and Jordan used their detective influence to take the lead on the investigation.

Cooper didn't want anyone treating Mason badly because he was a gay man, and Jordan wanted to make sure that every possible lead was investigated. The entire apartment was dusted for fingerprints and all of the evidence was

bagged up to go to the crime lab. Neighbors were questioned and the outside of the first floor apartment canvassed.

Mason refused to go back into his apartment, so Neil went in and packed him an overnight bag before leading him to Cooper's car. Patrick drove Mason's car so that he would have it in the morning and followed behind everyone else as they drove to Cooper's house.

"Come on, honey, we're here," Cooper said as he helped Mason from the car. "We're going to go upstairs and put you to bed, okay?"

Cooper could tell from Mason's bleak nod that he wasn't terribly aware of his surrounding at the moment. Cooper didn't blame Mason. It must have been quite a shock for Mason to come home and find all of that stuff in his room and know that some stranger had been in his house.

He helped Mason into the apartment and down the hall to the bedroom. Once Mason was tucked into the bed, Cooper gave him a sleeping pill to help him sleep, then turned out the light and quietly shut the door behind.

He walked back down the hallway and met Neil and Patrick in the living room. He went right to the fridge and grabbed a soda and popped the top, taking a large swig. He would have preferred a beer, but under the circumstances, drinking wouldn't be a good thing. He had work to do.

"How is he?" Patrick asked as he hugged Neil tightly to his chest.

Cooper shook his head. "Not good, but what can you expect? Some maniac was in his apartment."

"Do you know who it was? Could it have been Jack?" Neil asked.

Cooper shook his head. "No, it wasn't Jack. Mason thought it might be and called him. Jack wasn't—Jack thought he was drunk. It was Wallace; I'd bet a month's salary on it. Now, I just have to prove it."

"Won't the evidence prove it?" Patrick asked in confusion.

"Maybe, maybe not," Cooper said as he shrugged his shoulders. "But even if the evidence proves that it was Wallace, what judge in the county would issue an arrest warrant on a man that left romantic items for his gay lover?"

"Wallace isn't Mason's lover!" Neil nearly yelled as he glared across the kitchen at Cooper.

"Prove it!" Cooper said. "You know he isn't and I know he isn't, but try and prove that to anyone else. All Wallace has to say is that they're having a lover's tiff and no one can prove otherwise."

"But that's—that's just—that really sucks," Neil said.

Cooper nodded his head. "Yeah, it does. Luckily, Mason does have one thing in his corner that Wallace hasn't counted on."

"What?"

"Me!" Cooper said as he slammed his soda down on the counter. "I'm going to go back to Mason's apartment and join Jordan. I want you two to stay here with Mason. I don't want him alone for any reason."

Neil and Patrick nodded their heads. "Call us when you know something," Neil said.



"I will. Let Mason know that Jordan and I are on this, okay?" Cooper asked as he grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. "Oh, one more thing, I want you to start planning that pool party for Mason. I think he needs the distraction right now."

"What about Jack?" Patrick asked.

"Oh, he's definitely on my list of things to have at that party," Cooper chuckled as he opened the door. "Those two need each other more than I need air. They're just too stupid to admit it. Looks like we're going to have to plan a little intervention on their behalf."

Patrick and Neil stayed with Mason while Cooper and Jordan began their investigation. By the following morning, they had a suspect—Daryl Carlton Wallace. He was a thirty-five year old private investigator.

Unfortunately, until he did something more threatening, all they could get him on was trespassing and harassment. That wouldn't even keep him in jail overnight. They needed something more concrete.

Jordan suspected that this wasn't the first time that Wallace had done something like this. He was too organized not to have some experience at this. It would take a lot of fancy footwork and deep digging to prove it though.

Until then, keeping Mason safe was their first priority. It was quickly decided among the four friends that Mason would have one of them with him at all times. Someone would drop him off and pick him up from work. And he would either stay at one of their houses or someone would go home with him..

A Promise Kept  
*by Stormy Glenn*

As despondent as Mason seemed at the thought of all of this, Cooper decided the plans for the pool party needed to be moved up a couple of weeks. Mason needed to let loose a little and relax. The pool party was just the thing to put a smile back on his face.

Now, if he could just get his plans in the works for Jack...

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## Chapter Six

It was a perfect day for a pool party. After discussing his plans with Bob and Janet, they had graciously agreed to host the party, even offering to help with Cooper's little plan to get Mason and Jack together. It had taken less than a week to plan the party, but now it was in full swing

The temperature was about eighty-five degrees, the sun was shining, and a slight breeze was blowing the summer air through the backyard. The patio table was covered in food; buckets were filled with ice and drinks. The pool had been cleaned and was ready for play, and soft music played in the background.

It was sure to be a splendid pool party. Just what Mason needed, Cooper thought as he looked around at what had been prepared with a satisfied grin. All was ready for the party to begin. Now where was Mason?

"Janet, have you seen Mason?" he yelled across the patio.

"I think he's upstairs changing in his old room. Second door on the right at the top of the stairs."

"Changing, huh? I'd better go supervise this," Cooper chuckled. He skipped to the back door and into the house to the sound of Janet's laughter. Cooper knew that Janet understood that there was nothing between him and Mason except friendship.

He had been pleasantly surprised at how easily Janet and Bob had both agreed to his plan. They had readily offered their assistance to make it happen. As of today, operation get

Jack to pull his head out of his ass by any means necessary was in full swing.

Cooper quickly climbed the stairs and knocked on Mason's door before he opened it and strode in. Mason walked out of the bathroom, a slight flush on his face when he spotted Cooper standing in the doorway.

Hot damn! Mason wore the skimpiest pair of black swim trunks Cooper had ever seen. They hugged his ass like they were painted on and left very little to imagination. Janet had done a wonderful job picking them out.

"Damn, baby, those things are perfect. You just might get your wish with Jordan. I'm not sure any man could stay straight around you in those," Cooper whistled as he dragged his gaze down Mason's nearly naked body, then slowly back up.

"I can't believe my mother bought these for me. What was she thinking?" Mason exclaimed.

"I don't know what she was thinking, but I know what I'm thinking. You look hot!" Coop wiggled his eyebrows at Mason suggestively.

"Oh, you're no help. Look at me! I look ridiculous," Mason complained as he gestured down to his body.

"I'm looking, I'm looking—" Cooper chuckled, making Mason blush more.

"Cooper!" Mason whined.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. But you look fine. You look great in fact. Hell, you even put me to shame and I bought these trunks in Italy." Cooper gestured to his own bright red swim

trunks. They were almost as tight and as skimpy as Mason's, but not quite. "Besides, Jack will be drooling for sure."

Mason sat down on the side of his bed with a heavy sigh. "I feel ridiculous."

Cooper sat down beside Mason. He patted Mason's bare leg. "You look great. Hey, this is your coming out of the closet pool party. You're supposed to look hot, so all the gay men, and a few of the straight ones, will ogle you. How else will you find true love?"

Mason looked shyly over at Cooper. "You think so?"

"I know so, honey. Would I steer you wrong?"

"In a heartbeat!" Mason chuckled. Cooper laughed. Mason was silent for several moments before he shot Cooper a look from under his eyelashes. "Coop, would you do something for me?"

"Sure, honey, anything. You know that."

"I—I don't want you to think I'm coming on to you or anything, 'cause I'm not. Not that you're not a great looking guy and all. Because you are and any man would be happy to have you. I just—well I wondered if you..."

"Mason, spit it out already."

"Would you kiss me?" Mason whispered.

"What?" Cooper asked in surprise.

"Never mind," he mumbled as he quickly looked down at his hands. He picked at his fingernails with one hand. "It was stupid."

Mason tried to get up, but Cooper grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. "Mason, it isn't stupid. It's not that I

don't want to kiss you. I just want to know why you want me to kiss you."

"I've only ever been really kissed once, and that was by Jack when he was too drunk to remember it. I've never even kissed anyone else. Well, except that one guy and he doesn't really count because nothing really happened. I just wondered if—well, if it was Jack or—"

Before Mason could continue Cooper pushed him back down on the bed and partially covered Mason's body with his own. He pressed one leg between Mason's thighs. He grabbed Mason's face and kissed Mason, sliding his tongue between Mason's lips.

\* \* \* \*

"Hey, Janet, where's Mason?" Jack asked as he gave her a small kiss on the cheek after he came in the door. Through the kitchen window he could see several people gathered together in the backyard. Some he recognized. Some he didn't. He couldn't have cared less. He only wanted to see Mason.

Jack could hardly believe it when Janet called him and said that Mason was planning a pool party and specifically asked that he be there. After the strange phone call he had received from Mason last week he hadn't expected to hear from Mason again.

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, he had eagerly agreed to come. Now that he had arrived he was so nervous he could puke. His stomach was tied into knots. He was

excited to see Mason again, but he was afraid of what Mason would say to him.

"Oh, hello, Jack, he's upstairs changing into his swim suit. Why don't you go on up and see him. I know he's been anxious for you to get here."

Jack nodded, not quite as sure as Janet, but he headed for the stairs anyway. Jack stood in front of Mason's door, taking a couple of deep breaths for courage before he opened the door. He felt the air whoosh from his lungs at the sight that met him. It was one he truly had not expected.

Mason lay on his back on the bed, a man on top of him with a leg wedged between his thighs. The man's hands were buried in Mason's brown curls as he held Mason's head still. His lips were clearly attached to Mason's.

What astounded him even more were Mason's hands, gripping the man's arms. Jack didn't know if Mason was trying to push him away or hold him closer. Jack just saw red as anger filled him.

"What the hell is going on here?" he growled as he stalked into the room and pulled Cooper off of Mason. Mason was supposed to be in love with him. Is this how he showed it?

"Jack?"

"Who is this man, Mason? Why is he kissing you?" Jack demanded.

Mason was too shocked at seeing Jack to lie to him. "I asked him to."

"You—you asked him to kiss you?"

"Yes," Mason nearly squeaked as Jack took a step toward him.

His hands clenched into fists. Jack glared down at Mason, the rage filling him as he glanced quickly over at the stranger that had kissed Mason. Jack felt like ripping the man's head off. He didn't know whether to be angry with the strange man that sat beside Mason, or Mason.

"So, all this time you kept telling me you love me? It meant nothing to you? You just fuck the first man that comes along? Way to show that you've grown up, Mason," Jack yelled as he looked back toward Mason.

Mason slowly stood up from the bed. He pushed his way past Jack, trying to touch the least amount of Jack as he could. He walked over to the door then turned to glare at Jack.

"I did love you, asshole. I waited for you for ten years. I'm tired of waiting for you, tired of sleeping alone, tired of not having someone to hold me at night. You clearly don't want me. You've gone out of your way to prove that. Now, I'm done waiting. Since you don't want me, I'll find someone else who does."

As Mason walked out of the room, Jack just stood there, his mind in shock. Mason was leaving him, finding someone else to love? What was he supposed to do now? How could he convince Mason that he did want him?

"You idiot. You're about to lose the best thing that ever happened to you and you just stand there?" said a voice from behind Jack.

Jack turned to look at the man who had kissed Mason. He watched the man stand up and walk toward the door, glancing over his shoulder at Jack. "Despite what he says,



Mason still loves you. Probably more than you will ever deserve. If you really don't want him, let him go so someone else has a chance with him because right now all he can see is you."

"What? Who are you?" Jack asked, still a little dazed.

"The name's Cooper. I'm Mason's friend. And if I'm really lucky and you're too stupid to take what's right in front of you, I'm going to fill that hole you're ripping out of Mason's heart. Because if you don't want him, I do."

Jack took a threatening step toward Cooper. "He's mine! You can't have him," he growled deep in his throat. He clenched his hands into fists and started to bring them up, ready to fight for what belonged to him when the man started to chuckle.

"Oh really, and how do you plan on stopping me? I'm not Mason, Jack. I won't sit by and wait for you to make up your mind. I will take him and stake my claim. And I won't wait ten fucking years to do it."

\* \* \* \*

Cooper could barely contain his glee at the thunderous look that Jack gave him as he left the bedroom. He needed to find Mason and fast. Jack was sure to be right behind him, and the next little scene in this little romantic comedy had to play out in front of an audience.

Jordan met Cooper at the bottom of the stairs, looking up toward the bedroom. "What the hell happened up there? Mason just tore down the stairs like the hounds of hell were after him."

"Jack happened," Cooper laughed. "Oh, it was all totally innocent, but Jack doesn't know that. Mason asked me to kiss him. Nothing big, he just wanted to see what it felt like since the only man he has ever kissed is Jack. Anyway, Jack found us together, you might say."

Jordan looked astonished briefly before he burst out laughing. "Oh, this is going to be good. What's next on your little agenda? Suicide?"

"Close, but no, I'm going to go out to the patio and console my friend and soon to be conquest Mason. I just hope Jack gets out there before Mason punches me."

"Oh, yeah, poor Mason," Jordan said. "I hope when this is all over he understands why we did this."

"When this is all over, if I'm still alive, Mason will be too happy basking in the glow that is Jack to be mad at us. Until then, it's the tightrope of death that I walk. Have you seen Jack? He's ready to kill me already," Cooper chuckled.

"Nope, haven't met him yet. But be careful. I'd hate to have to break in another partner now that I have you so well trained."

Cooper batted his eyelashes at Jordan. "Oh, you sweet talker you."

Jordan laughed some more as he followed Cooper out to the patio. Both of them made a beeline for Mason who was busy talking to Neil and Patrick.

Cooper quickly wrapped his arms around Mason. He pulled Mason's head close to whisper into his ear. "Guess that didn't go so well, huh? Want to try again? If nothing else, we can show Jack what he's missing."

Mason yelped when Cooper groped his ass through his tight swimming trunks. "Uh, Coop, I'm not sure how to say this, but—"

"Relax, honey, I've already figured out that I don't do a thing for you. And that's okay. But I know someone who does. And he's on his way out the door as we speak. No, don't look. Just stay right where you are. It's time for Jack Spencer to either put up or shut up. Besides, a little torture is good for the soul. Now, kiss me, Mason."

"But I—" Mason's words died as Cooper leaned down and kissed him.

Cooper knew that anyone that was looking would think he was going all out, but he only kissed Mason on the lips, no tongue. But he made sure he was making motions and groaning like he was kissing Mason for all he was worth.

He heard a loud snarl behind him, and he was suddenly ripped away from Mason. He had just enough time to register the rage on Jack's face before Jack punched him in the jaw.

His hand moving up to cup the side of his face, Cooper watched with astonishment as Jack growled at him, "I told you Mason was mine. Keep your hands off!" Cooper tried to hide his smile as he watched Jack picked Mason up. Jack tossed Mason over his shoulder and carried him back into the house.

Cooper glanced around at the shocked faces of those staring after Jack and Mason and chuckled. "That went well."

\* \* \* \*

Jack carried Mason upstairs and slammed and locked the door behind him before he threw Mason down on the bed. He quickly covered Mason's body and pinned Mason to the bed with his own.

"Never again, Mason. Do you understand me?" Jack yelled into Mason's face as he straddled Mason's body, placing one leg on each side of Mason's hips. His hands held Mason's arms against the bed. "You will never kiss another man again, not as long as I live. You belong to me. Me, and only me."

Jack lowered his mouth and claimed Mason's lips. Their lips met for what seemed like the first time. It was unrestrained, frenzied, and needy. He groaned as he ran his tongue along the edge of Mason's lips, before he delved inside.

When Jack heard the soft moans coming from Mason's mouth, he abandoned Mason's lips to nibble at the tender flesh of Mason's neck, leaving a red patch in his wake. He gave a satisfied growl at the love mark, hoping all would see it and know Mason had been claimed.

He pushed himself farther down Mason's body to find perfect, copper colored nipples buried in dark brown chest hair. He licked, then licked again, before he sucked each nipple into his mouth, first one, then the other.

Jack's hands caressed Mason's flesh, covering as much as he could reach without leaving the brown nubs he worshipped with his mouth. When he encountered the edge of Mason's swim trunks, he pushed under the elastic to grip Mason's tight ass.

He wanted to feel more of Mason's naked skin. Jack quickly stood up and shucked off his own clothes. He pulled a

condom and some lube out of his jeans and tossed it on the bed then climbed back on. Jack grabbed Mason's swim trunks and pulled them down his legs and dropped them on the floor. Then Jack crawled up and settled himself between Mason's wide-open thighs.

"Oh god, Jack, please tell me you're not drunk again," Mason begged.

"I'm not drunk, baby. I know exactly what I'm doing." Jack nipped at the corner of Mason's lips as he rubbed their cocks together. He leaned back so that he could look into Mason's beautiful, dazed, blue eyes.

"I'm making love to the man I've been dreaming about for years," he whispered, never taking his eyes from Mason's. Jack watched in awe as Mason's eyes rolled back into his head. Mason's head arched back, the muscles on his neck tensing as he cried out.

"Jack!"

He felt Mason's hardness pulse against his own, the wet spurts of seed coating his cock and abdomen as Mason came. He felt Mason's fingers bite into the flesh of his arms. It was the most beautiful sight Jack had ever seen and it instantly had him following Mason into ecstasy. He yelled out his release before he collapsed down on Mason's body.

Jack rested his forehead against Mason's, his breath ragged in his chest. His hands idly rubbed up and down Mason's sides, Mason's hips. Jack hadn't come like that, with no physical stimulation, since he was a teenager. As he opened his eyes and looked down at Mason a few moments later, Jack saw fear and anxiety fill Mason's eyes.

"What's wrong, baby?" Jack asked as he brought a hand up to caress the side of Mason's face.

"Isn't this where you tell me that—" Mason began as tears formed in his eyes.

Jack knew Mason was waiting to be rejected again. He couldn't let Mason think that was what was going to happen, not when the only thing he wanted was a second chance.

"This is where I tell you how much I love you and how sorry I am that I am such an utter ass. This is where I beg you to forgive me," Jack said seriously.

"Jack, I don't—"

"Please give me another chance, Mason."

Jack waited for several moments as Mason looked at him. Jack knew that Mason had to decide for himself if he wanted to give Jack another chance. Jack couldn't influence Mason, no matter how much he wanted to. Jack had done a lot of stupid things where Mason was concerned, so he wouldn't be surprised if Mason told him to go to hell. But he hoped Mason wouldn't.

"Why?" Mason finally asked. "Why now? What's changed?"

"I have. Oh, baby," Jack whispered as he caressed Mason's face. He ran his fingers over Mason's eyes, Mason's nose, down along his jaw. "I've been so stupid. I just didn't realize how much you meant to me until you were already gone."

"And now? How mu—how much do I mean to you now?"

Jack could see a spark of hope come to life in Mason's eyes, clouded by a whole lot of fear and doubt. He knew that he had to lay it all on the line for Mason before Mason would believe that Jack really did want him.

"I love you, Mason, and I want you. But it's more than that. I want to get to know you, the real you. I want to know everything about you, what you like and dislike, what you want out of life, whether you can find a place for me in your life."

"You're saying all the right things, Jack, but how do I know this is how you really feel? What if you change your mind? Or decide I'm too irresponsible? I mean, what do we really know about each other? I thought you were straight all of these years, for god's sake."

"You thought I was straight?" Jack asked in surprise. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

"I've never seen you with another man, and you've always brought women to any of the family functions. What else was I supposed to think? Besides, family rumor is that you're going to ask Angela to mar—to marry you."

"Marry Angela?" Jack laughed, "I was never going to marry Angela. I don't have the right equipment. Angela's a lesbian. She's also a good friend and my law partner. That's why we spend so much time together. There are a lot of functions that we have to attend for work. We usually go as a couple because neither of us have a significant other. That's all it is. We've never been in a relationship."

"And all the other women you've brought? Were they all lesbians, too?" Mason asked doubt clouding his voice.

"No, not all of them. Most were my friends or friends of friends. A couple of them were dates, but not in the romantic sense. I like women. Well, I like men more, but when you take a man to a party, they expect something. With a woman

who knows I'm gay, I don't have to fight off any sexual advances. When I drop them off at night they don't expect anything, and I don't have to call them in the morning."

"So, you're not going to ask Angela to marry you?"

"Baby, if I ask anyone to marry me its going to be you, not Angela. And once we get to know each other better and, god willing, start a life together, maybe that's where our relationship will go. But I am definitely not marrying Angela."

"You'd—you'd do that? Ask me to marry you?" Mason whispered in shock.

"In a heartbeat. But I think we have a ways to go before we get to that step. We really don't know that much about each other, Mason. But I want to. I gave you up all those years ago because of a promise to Randy. It was stupid, but I can't change it now. I nearly lost you because of it. I'm not letting you get away from me this time. The only way I will leave is if you tell me to my face that you no longer love me and don't want to try to build a future with me. Is that what you want, Mason?"

Jack held his breath as he waited for Mason to reply. The future of Jack's world depended on what Mason said in the next few minutes. Unfortunately, it was all in Mason's hands now. Jack would do whatever Mason wanted, no matter what the answer was.

"I'm scared, Jack. What if you decide you don't like me? What if I'm not good enough? I've never been with anyone else. How can I possibly please you?"

"If anyone isn't good enough, it's me, not you. You're perfect just the way you are. As for pleasing me, baby, you



please me just by breathing. You're still the hottest thing I've laid eyes on in years. Earlier, watching you come, the look on your face—that was—that was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I want that look on your face at least once every day."

Jack tried to smile, but it was hard. He was too filled with anxiety and worry that Mason would not forgive him and give him another chance. Jack wouldn't blame Mason in the least if Mason kicked him to the curb. After everything he did, Jack knew he deserved it.

"Baby," Jack said as he reached up and brushed a stray curl back from Mason's face. "I can't promise that things will work out. You may decide that you don't want to be with me after getting to know me. I'm egotistical, domineering, and very possessive. I like to get my own way, even if I'm wrong. And I'm a neat freak. I love jazz, but hate new age music. I like to sleep in on Sundays, like getting early morning blowjobs, and I'm allergic to cats."

Jack grinned down at Mason as he continued. "You really may not like me once you really get to know me. So, I can't promise everything will be okay. All I can promise you is that I will try. I want this with you, more than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

"Jack, I—"

"Mason! It's real simple. Do you still love me?" Jack asked vehemently.

"Yes," Mason answered without hesitation.

Jack's eyes closed briefly as he thanked the powers that be for Mason's love. As long as they loved each other, they had something to work on, something to build on.

"Do you want me?" Jack opened his eyes and looked back down at Mason.

Mason blushed a little and nodded, his eyes darting quickly away from Jack's. Jack was pretty sure of his answer anyway. The hard bulge of Mason's cock pressed against his stomach was a dead give away.

"Do you believe that I love you?"

Mason's eyes came back to his briefly before he lowered them once again. "No," he whispered.

"Fair enough. I guess that's something I will have to work on. But I do love you. I don't care how long it takes for you to believe me. I will prove it to you. In the meantime, I would really like to get to know more about you. Talk to me, Mason."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. What's your favorite food? Do you like cats or dogs? What do you do for fun? What kind of music do you like? Are you allergic to anything? Who do you fantasize about when you masturbate? What's your favorite sexual position?"

Mason's eyes grew back to saucer size at Jack's last two questions.

Jack was not shy about asking things, very personal things. He didn't think Mason felt the same way. But the slight blush filling Mason's face was kind of a turn on.

"My favorite food is my Mom's apple pie. It used to be strawberries, but ever since that—well, I just don't like them

anymore. I like both cats and dogs equally. I do a lot of different things for fun ... reading, dancing, and hiking. I like all kinds of music. It just depends on the situation. And I'm not allergic to anything, as far as I know."

Jack grinned. "And the rest? What about those?"

When Mason shook his head, Jack understood. Mason didn't want to answer those questions. They were probably a little too personal right now. He wasn't ready to open himself up to Jack that much, not yet. But Jack had no such hesitation.

"Please, baby, tell me. Would it help if I told you first?" Jack encouraged, rubbing his cock against Mason's, drawing a quiet groan from Mason. "I fantasize about you, Mason. I have for years. I remember the first time I realized that I wanted you. You were barely nineteen years old. You had just graduated from high school and been on a camping trip. When you got home you jumped into the pool, clothes and all. When you stood up, your clothes were wet, hugging your body. Nothing was hidden from my view; not your strong, muscular chest," Jack rubbed his hands down Mason's chest, his fingers briefly flicking over the erect nipples.

"Not your flat, six pack abs," Jack whispered as he rubbed circles into Mason's abdomen.

"Not even this delicious cock of yours," Jack scooted down Mason's body until that erect cock stood at attention in front of his face. "Oh, baby, you have such a perfect cock, so nice and thick, with just the right length. I can't wait to feel you inside of me."

Jack heard Mason groan louder as his tongue swiped at the head of Mason's cock. Jack licked up the drops of pre-come that glistened on top. "God, you taste so good, baby. I'm gonna eat you up."

Mason clutched desperately at the sheets as Jack swallowed the head of his throbbing cock. Jack's tongue ran over the small slit in the top before he swallowed all of Mason.

"Fuck, Jack, I've never—it's so—fuck," Mason moaned as Jack began a rapid sucking motion, his fingers caressing the silky sack below. He jumped when a wet, lubed finger rubbed against his tight hole before it slowly sank in and rubbed around.

"Jack!" he wailed as Jack pumped a second finger in and out of Mason, mouth continuing to lavish his throbbing cock. When Jack inserted a third finger it was nearly more than Mason could take. He felt so full.

When Mason began to squirm, Jack quickly pulled off of Mason. He grabbed the condom off the bed and ripped the package open. Jack's hands shook as he rolled the condom down his aching cock.

Looking back down at Mason, Jack quickly smeared lube over the condom, then squirted more into the crack of Mason's ass. He spread the lube around and pushed it into Mason's ass with his fingers.

He climbed to his knees and hooked Mason's legs over his arms then pushed the head of his cock against Mason's hole. As he pushed in past the first ring, he dropped his head back

as he moaned out the pleasure of being inside of Mason for the first time.

"Oh damn, Mason, you're so tight." He slowly pushed in another inch, then another until he was seated to his balls inside of Mason. "Fuck, baby, I'm so sorry. I'm not gonna last long."

Jack began a slow pumping motion, holding onto his control by a thread. Mason was everything he had dreamed of and more. Knowing that he was the first, that no one had ever loved Mason like this, just made the moment even more special.

"Touch yourself, Mason. I want to see you touch yourself," Jack demanded as he increased his thrusts, aiming for Mason's prostate. As he began to hit the sweet spot repeatedly, he watched Mason's cock harden into steel.

Mason's eyelids were slightly closed and his eyes fuzzy as he grabbed his cock and began stroking it.

"Faster, Mason, stroke that beautiful cock faster. I want to see you come with me inside of you, baby. I want you to squeeze my cock with your tight ass—oh yeah, baby, just like that—fuck, you are so damn perfect."

"Jack—now, Jack—oh god, Jack—Jack—gonna—fuck—Jack, love you," Mason yelled as the head of his cock blew off and he sprayed them both with small drops of his silky cream.

That was it. That was the beautiful look Jack wanted to see on Mason's face. He was breathtaking in his pleasure. It was the look Jack had waited for. Now he could find his own release.

He began rapidly thrusting into Mason, all of his control gone. He felt Mason's inner muscles squeeze his pulsing cock, milking him as he came. "Oh fuck, Mason, love you—love you—love—Mason," Jack roared as he thrust one last time into Mason as far as he could. Then Jack collapsed down onto Mason's chest, his head buried in Mason's neck. His hands released Mason's legs and he felt them drop back down onto the bed beside him.

Jack's arms wrapped around Mason and held Mason tight against his chest. There was no way he was letting go of Mason now. He wanted to be right where he was, still connected to Mason, still inside of Mason. He never wanted to be without Mason again, not after tasting the ecstasy that Mason could give him.

So, it was with great regret that he started to lift himself off of Mason. He felt Mason's arms tighten around him when he tried to lift himself up.

"No, stay where you are," Mason whispered into Jack's hair.

"Baby, I'm too heavy."

"No, you'll never be too heavy. Just stay, please. I need you here, need to feel you in my arms—just for a little while, Jack."

Jack leaned down to kiss Mason lightly on the lips. His hand gently caressed Mason's cheek. "Okay, baby," he whispered, hoping the tears in Mason's eyes were tears of joy.

Jack wiggled around into a more comfortable position with his arms still wrapped around Mason. He tucked his head

between Mason's neck and shoulder, then closed his eyes and settled against him.

"Love you—" Mason whispered against Jack's skin as he faded off to sleep.

Several moments later Jack answered him, after he knew that Mason had fallen asleep. "I love you, too, Mason." Wrapping his arms more tightly around Mason, he followed Mason into dreamland.

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## Chapter Seven

Jack opened his eyes and instantly knew that Mason was no longer in bed with him. He quickly sat up and looked around the room. There was no sign of Mason. He was alone. Jack rolled off the bed and grabbed his clothes, pulling them on as fast as he could. He had to find Mason.

He came to a sudden halt as he ran out the bedroom door. Mason stood at the bottom of the stairs and Cooper had his arms around Mason. Cooper was kissing Mason on the cheek. Mason ... his Mason ... laughed at something the man said.

Rage filled Jack. How could Mason go from his arms to this Cooper's? They had just experienced what Jack had thought was the most wonderful moments of his life. He thought Mason had felt the same way. Could he have been wrong?

"Mason! Come up here right now," he snapped angrily down at the two figures. He saw Mason jump a little as the two of them turned to look up at him. Somehow, Jack knew that the burning glare in Mason's eyes was not a good thing.

"Jack, you can either treat me like an adult and stop ordering me around. Or you can treat me like a child, in which case, you don't get to suck my dick anymore," Mason said matter-of-factly.

Jack's mouth dropped open as he stared at Mason in surprise. He couldn't believe what had just come out of Mason's mouth. Jack had never heard Mason talk like that before. It was kind of a turn on. He saw Cooper laugh.



"Once you decide, why don't you come down here and I'll introduce you to my best friends. While you make up your mind, we will be out on the patio enjoying ourselves. Don't take too long thinking about it, Jack."

Jack was even more shocked when Mason wrapped an arm around Cooper and walked away. Wait a minute! This wasn't supposed to happen. Mason was his, and Jack wasn't going to let Mason get away.

Jack scrambled down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door. He spotted Mason standing by the pool. Mason was laughing with a bunch of guys Jack had never seen before. Jack tried to mask his anger under a polite smile as he walked up to them.

He wrapped his arms tightly around Mason's waist and leaned down to whisper into Mason's ear, "I'm sorry."

Mason chuckled and turned in Jack's arms to look up at him. Mason leaned up and kissed Jack lightly on the lips before he whispered back. "I'm glad you made your decision. I'd hate to give up having you suck my dick. You're very good at it."

Jack was glad that Mason had wrapped both arms around him because his knees suddenly went weak at the thought of Mason's hard cock in his mouth. Jack's cock hardened in his jeans as he remembered how good Mason tasted. He couldn't wait to try it again.

"Jack, I'd like you to meet my best friends. This here is Cooper. He's a police detective with the City of Portland. He was the detective in charge of the missing person's report

mom and dad filed," Mason said as he gestured to the other people that stood around them.

"Yeah, we've met." Jack glared at Cooper as he shook the man's hand. Cooper just laughed at Jack's possessive grasp on Mason, as if he knew something that Jack did not. Jack frowned as the other three men standing there chuckled right along with him.

"This is Jordan, Cooper's work partner. He's also a police detective. Neil is Jordan's cousin and an EMT. Patrick, who is a firefighter, is Neil's partner. Everyone, this is Jack."

Jack felt like he sat under a magnifying glass as the four men stared at him. He knew they were assessing him, debating his fitness as a partner for Mason. And not a single one of them looked like they liked what they saw.

"Hmmm, the famous Jack. Finally we meet." Cooper slapped Mason on the back and gestured to the patio table covered in food. "Mason, why don't you go over and grab yourself something to eat while Jacky boy and I have us a little talk. Go on now."

"Uh, okay, Coop." Mason let go of Jack and walked to the patio table to grab a plate.

Jack's gaze followed Mason across the patio. He felt somehow ... abandoned by Mason. Jack had uncertain feelings about how quickly Mason did what Cooper said, especially after he had ripped into Jack minutes before.

"Now, Jack, let's have us a little talk about Mason," Cooper drawled as he wrapped an arm around Jack's shoulders and led Jack away from everyone to stand next to the house.

Jack didn't think Cooper had anything to say that he wanted to hear. He might be Mason's best friend, but as far as Jack was concerned, Cooper was the competition. He had said so himself when Jack had found him kissing Mason.

Cooper stopped and turned to Jack, his arms crossed over his chest as he glared at Jack. "First thing you need to know is that I have no designs on Mason. He isn't even attracted to me physically. He's giving you a big chance here, however, and if you fuck this up, I will do everything within my power to take him away from you, even if all I ever am to him is a friend."

Jack crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Cooper. "If he isn't attracted to you, then why were you kissing each other? Experimenting?" Jack asked bitterly as he remembered Cooper's body pressed against Mason's, those lips covering Mason's.

"Basically, yes. The only man he has ever kissed is you, and you treated him like shit. He wanted to know if he could feel the same way with someone else. Apparently not. I couldn't get anything out of him. However, the minute he saw you standing in the doorway he was as hard as a rock."

Jack's eyebrows shot up as his head snapped back in surprise. His arms fell to hang limply at his side. That wasn't what he expected Cooper to say. "What—why are you telling me this?" Jack asked in confusion.

"Because I don't plan on losing Mason. Don't get me wrong, I know that all I will ever be is Mason's friend, just like I am with Neil and Patrick. Just like I hope we will be. I'm fine

with that. But I will not lose Mason's friendship because you're jealous over nothing."

"Nothing?" Jack asked incredulously.

Jack watched Cooper glance past him, a wince coming over Cooper's features before he plastered a smile on his face.

"Smile," Cooper demanded of Jack.

"What?" Jack asked in confusion.

"Smile, shit head. Mason's looking over here and he's worried. Smile at him right now or I'll punch your lights out," he said through his gritted teeth as he continued to smile at Mason.

Jack turned his head and smiled at Mason, who he saw immediately calmed down, sending a smile back to Jack. Jack looked back at Cooper, seeing him in a different light. "You really do care about him, don't you?" he asked in wonder.

"We all do. You can't help but care about him. His heart is so big. He'd do anything for anyone. And as you have found out, he forgives way to easily. He can also be so fucking naive at times it boggles the mind. He makes you want to protect him from all the evils of the world. Makes for a hell of a combination," Cooper said as he looked back at Jack.

"Do you ... love him?" Jack asked hesitantly.

"Yes, I love Mason, but I'm not in love with him, if that's what you're asking. Besides, wouldn't do me any good if I was. Mason loves you. He's always loved you, and I suspect, he always will."

"Look, Jack, it's real simple. Mason loves you. We've all watched him pine over you for weeks. Jack this and Jack that. Jack—Jack—Jack. And every damn time he tried to reach out

for you, for some reason it didn't work. So, we put our heads together to figure out how to get the two of you together." Cooper grinned at Jack. "Granted, I could never have imagined it working out quite how it did, but jealousy did play a part in the plan. We were going to get you and him in the same room and I was going to put on this show of flirting with Mason to get you jealous enough to make your move."

Cooper looked sheepish as he shrugged his shoulders. "Guess it worked."

Jack stared at Cooper several moments. His mouth hung open in shock then he burst out laughing until tears streamed down his face. He laughed so hard that Cooper had to hold him up.

When Jack could finally stand on his own he wiped the tears from his eyes as he looked up at the thoroughly confused Cooper. Jack waved Mason over as he patted Cooper's back to reassure the man that he hadn't lost his mind. Once Mason walked up, Jack wrapped his arms around Mason's waist.

"Baby, your friend Cooper is an absolute hoot. Once we get you all settled into my place we're going to have to have him and your other friends over for dinner. I think I want to get to know them all a lot better," Jack said before he leaned down to kiss the top of Mason's head.

"Uh, yeah, sure, but who says I'm moving in with you? I don't remember agreeing to that," Mason replied as he settled his body back against Jack's.

"Yeah, but you will. Either now or later, so what does it matter?" Jack asked.

"Because I won't have you planning my life for me again. You did that once already and look where it got us. It took ten years for you to get your head out of your ass. I'm not waiting another ten years. Either we discuss things and come to a mutual decision, or I do the planning from now on."

"Fine, you plan our life. But remember that I want a dog, a big dog. And remember that I'm allergic to cats. And I like to sleep in on Sundays. And—" Jack laughed.

"I know—I know—you like early morning blowjobs." Mason rolled his eyes at the lust filled look that came over Jack's face. Seemed like Jack's mind was constantly in his pants ... or Mason's pants ... or ... whatever.

Jack snuggled Mason closer into his arms as he gave Mason a kiss on the neck. "Yeah. There are a lot of other things that I like, too, but we'll try them out later."

Cooper laughed. "Hell, from all the noise we heard from upstairs earlier I'm surprised you have anything left to try out."

Mason buried his face in Jack's neck as everyone laughed. Jack held Mason closer as he tried not to laugh himself. He gave the Cooper a mean little glare. "Be nice to my baby, Cooper, or I'm gonna have to whip your ass."

"Oooohh, another sweet talker. You should get together with Jordan. The two of you could put on quite a show," Cooper said.

"Jordan? Isn't he your partner?" Jack asked as he looked around for the man in question.

"Yes, we work together, but sadly he's as straight as they come. I've done my best to save him, but, alas, he remains a

confirmed heterosexual. What a waste!" Cooper exclaimed lightly.

"Really? No go, huh?" Jack asked.

Cooper shook his head. "No, he's still as straight as they come."

"Then I have the perfect woman for him. Her name is Angela. She's a lawyer in my firm, a good friend, and currently single. She's the sexiest little blonde you've ever seen. Long hair, legs that go all the way up, and breasts to die for. Hell, if I were straight, I'd go after her myself."

"Sounds just like Jordan's type."

"But Jack, I thought you said that Angela was a lesbian?" Mason asked in confusion.

"She is—" Jack laughed. Cooper joined him until tears streamed down their faces. "She'll drive him nuts. She can't stand men period, but she really hates heterosexual men."

"Then why would you want to—ooh," Mason asked, the light suddenly dawned in his head. He started to chuckle. "Oh, that's not nice, not nice at all."

The three of them laughed harder when Jordan walked up and gave them a quizzical look. He didn't have a clue what was about to come into his world. "What's so funny?" he asked curiously.

Jack didn't miss a beat. "Cooper here was just explaining to us his master plan to get me to pull my head out of my ass and finally admit how much Mason means to me. I understand you had a hand in it also. I'd like to thank you for that. It made things a little simpler and cut through all the crap."

"Yeah sure, man, anytime. Mason's pretty cool. He deserves to be happy," Jordan replied.

"I promise I'll do my best to make him happy. I don't plan on being that stupid again," Jack said as he hugged Mason tighter against his body.

Mason rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah, that's going to happen. Don't make promises you can't keep, Jack," he replied, sending everyone into laughter again. Jack leaned over and nipped him on the neck.

Jack smiled to himself when he felt a shiver pass through Mason's body. He wrapped one arm around Mason's face and turned Mason's head up for a kiss. After breaking from the kiss he looked into Mason's deep, sea blue eyes.

"How about I promise to try?" he murmured against Mason's lips. He gave Mason his best puppy dog look. When Mason nodded, Jack rewarded him with a huge smile. It was complete with the sexy dimples Mason loved so much. Jack leaned back against the house wall. He pulled Mason back against his body and wrapped his arms tightly around Mason. This felt good. Mason's friends and family were here, there was plenty of food and laughter, and Jack finally had Mason in his arms. He felt content.

As Jack laughed and talked with everyone, he spotted Randy and Kari step into the backyard with their twin boys. Kari walked right to Janet and started to talk with her, but Randy stood by the gate entrance. He looked cautious when he saw Mason wrapped in Jack's arms.

From where he stood Jack couldn't read Randy's expression. He nudged Mason and nodded toward Randy and



felt Mason stiffen against him. Seemed like Jack wasn't the only one with some resentment toward Randy.

Jack watched Randy push his hands into his pockets and slowly walk toward them. He looked as if he was walking toward his own execution. Randy stopped a few steps from them and stared at the ground for several moments before he looked up at them.

"Mason, could I talk to you for a few moments?" Randy asked quietly.

Mason was slow to nod, but when he did, Cooper and Jordan walked over to join Neil and Patrick by the pool. Randy stared at Jack for several moments before Jack shook his head. "I'm not leaving, Randy."

"Jack—" Randy began.

"Randy, whatever you have to say can be said in front of Jack. He's not leaving," Mason added to Jack's words.

Randy stared at them both for several moments then nodded his head. "Fine, I guess this concerns you, too." He was silent for a moment as he gazed at Mason and Jack.

"As your older brother I have always tried to look after you, ever since you were a small kid. I guess I never grew out of that. I never let you grow out of it either. I truly thought I was doing the right thing. I really did, Mason."

Randy waved his hand in the air absently, then gestured toward Jack. "Jack, well, Jack is much more experienced than you are. And I'm not talking sexually. I'm talking about being out in the world. He was back then, too. I didn't want you to be hurt. I did what I thought was right at the time. I had no idea how you felt about Jack. To be totally honest, though, as

much as I regret the pain that it cost you both, I can't say I wouldn't do it again."

"Well, that's blunt and to the point. Do you ever think you will let me grow up?" Mason asked.

"Mason, it's not that I don't want you to grow up, I don't want you to be hurt."

"And you don't think the last ten years didn't hurt? Ten years of loving someone that I thought I could never have? Ten years of being alone all the time? While you were off getting married and having children, sleeping in Kari's arms every night, where do you think I was? Alone—every damn night I was alone," Mason said fiercely.

"I know you said that, but surely there have been others. I mean, you're gay. You had to have—" Randy scoffed.

"No, Randy, there were no others, ever," Mason cut in. "If I couldn't have Jack I didn't want anyone else. When I said I've been alone for the last ten years, I meant I've been alone. There's been no one. Hell, I just lost my virginity a couple of hours ago."

"What about your friends over there? Haven't they—well, you know—" Randy turned a little red in the face as he asked his question.

Mason seemed surprised when Jack laughed. Jack saw Mason glance up at him an eyebrow raised in question.

"What's so funny?"

"Baby, don't you get it? It took me awhile, but I finally figured out what Randy was trying to protect you from. It's actually kind of funny," Jack chuckled.

"Funny? What could possibly be funny about this?" Mason asked, his voice filled with tension.

Jack could feel the anger in Mason's stiff body. He turned Mason around to face him and stroked his hand down the side of Mason's face to calm Mason. "Calm down, baby. I know this situation is far from funny, but I just figured out what your brother has been trying to protect you from all of this time."

"What?" Mason cried out.

"Me ... or men like me ... gay men. He doesn't think a gay man can be in a committed relationship, Mason. He thinks we just go from one guy to the next. Don't you get it? He really was trying to protect you from being hurt."

Jack felt Mason scrutinize him for several moments. Finally, Mason nodded his head. "Mason, no matter how stupid it was, Randy was trying to protect you. It doesn't excuse him, but it does explain it. You might want to think about the fact that he was trying to protect you. Not that he was being a jackass."

A small chuckle escaped Mason's lips at Jack's words. Jack started to think that maybe they could get past this whole thing when Mason walked over to glare at Randy.

"Randy, I'll be honest, I'm still angry at you for keeping Jack and I apart for the last ten years. However, I now understand why you did it, and I know you were just trying to protect me. But that doesn't mean I forgive you. That's going to take a little while. But I do admit that both Jack and I had a hand in this also. Not all the blame is on your shoulders," Mason said as he stared at his brother.

"I guess that's all I can ask for," Randy replied.

"Randy, you have to realize that I am an adult. You can't protect me anymore. You keep saying I need more experience in the world, but I'm not going to get that if you don't let me experience it. Let me grow up!"

"I don't know if I can ever stop protecting you, but I do see what you're saying. I'll try my best. That's all I can promise. I just hope this means you'll let me still be a part of your life."

"Great, more promises—" Mason chuckled quietly.

"Mason's in charge of planning our life now. You'll have to discuss it with him," Jack added as he grinned down at Mason.

Randy looked at the two of them in confusion. "Huh?"

"I made a lot of decisions concerning Mason without his permission. We discussed it and decided that he gets to make all the decisions from now on. As long as he remembers—" Jack started only to be interrupted by Mason.

Mason rolled his eyes. "Ah jeez, Jack, not the blowjob thing again."

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## Chapter Eight

Mason opened his eyes and let out a groan as he glanced at the clock beside the bed. Ugh, it was only 6:30 in the morning ... on a Sunday. Why was he awake this early? It just wasn't fair to be awake this early on a weekend. There must be some law against it somewhere.

He smiled when he felt the arm around his waist tighten and he was pulled back against Jack's warm body. Jack had one hand tangled in Mason's curly, brown hair, the other wrapped around his chest. Jack was caressing Mason's chest even in his sleep.

Mason couldn't believe how well he and Jack fit together already. After just two weeks, they were sleeping cuddled together like they had been sleeping together for years. And Mason couldn't have been happier about it ... or the erection pressing against his ass.

Mason pushed back against Jack, wiggling around until Jack's cock slid between his ass cheeks. Just the feeling of Jack's hard cock as it pushed against his sensitive entrance was enough to make Mason hard. Well, he was certainly well trained and it had taken less than two weeks.

A little grin on his lips, Mason reached over and grabbed the lube off of the nightstand. He popped the top open and squirted some out on his fingers before dropping the tube on the bed.

Lifting one leg and reached down to push his finger into his hole, spreading the lube around.

Once Mason could get three fingers in, he pulled his fingers out and pressed the head of Jack's cock against himself. He pushed back and bit his lip to contain his moan of pleasure when the tip of Jack's cock pressed into him past the first ring. Damn, that felt good!

He arched his body to push more of Jack's cock into his body. He reached down to grab his own throbbing cock and began to stroke himself as he pumped his hips back and forth. He impaled himself repeatedly on Jack's cock.

He tried to be quiet, to not wake Jack up, but soon he was so enthralled with the pleasure he received from it that he couldn't contain himself any longer. As his cock began to pulse with impending eruption, he let out a series of groans, each one louder than the last.

Just as the head of his cock started to explode, strong hands grabbed his hips and Jack rammed into him, increasing the level of Mason's orgasm until he shot stream after stream of creamy fluid across the bed.

Before Mason could even catch his breath Jack rolled him over onto his stomach, pushed him up onto his knees, and slammed into him from behind. Jack's hands gripped his hips so hard that Mason was afraid that they would leave bruises. Mason couldn't have cared less.

The harsh breathing coming from Jack told Mason that he was close. Mason reached down between his legs and softly caressed Jack's sack. Reaching farther back, he rubbed his finger over Jack's hole. He felt like a pretzel, but the loud groans and sudden furious pumping of Jack's hips told him that it was worth it.

"Mason, oh god, baby—in—put it in—oh fuck—" Jack begged. Mason pushed his finger into Jack's ass and moved it around.

"Oh fuck—right there—oh yeah—Mason!" Jack pushed himself all the way in with one final furious thrust. His orgasm roared through him before he collapsed down onto Mason's sweat drenched body.

Mason felt Jack place small kisses along his neck and around the side to his ear. "Morning, baby," Jack whispered into Mason's ear in between kisses.

"Morning, Jack." Mason giggled. Mason pushed back against Jack to get him to lift up then rolled over until he was facing Jack.

"Save this spot for me," Jack said as he jumped up and ran to the bathroom to clean up. He brought back a wet washcloth and quickly cleaned Mason up then crawled back between his legs.

"Now, where were we? Oh, yeah, I remember," Jack grinned at Mason, flashing his deep dimples. "Hi, gorgeous, did you sleep well?"

Mason smiled up at Jack and nodded his head. "Yeah, but waking up was better."

"If you have no experience, where in the hell did you learn to do that thing with your finger?" Jack asked mischievously.

Mason's face flushed. "I said I never did anything with anyone. I said nothing about fantasizing. And I have a lot of fantasies I want to try out." Mason laughed when he saw Jack swallow hard.

"Oh man, you're out to kill me, aren't you?" Jack choked out.

"Down, boy," Mason laughed when he felt Jack's cock harden against his. "I need to go to my apartment and take a shower, change my clothes, check my messages, that sort of thing."

"You wouldn't have to go to your apartment if you lived here, Mason," Jack growled as he rolled off of Mason to sit on the side of the bed.

"Jack, it's only been a couple of weeks. Let's give it some time before we take that step."

Mason could tell from Jack's stiff posture his feelings were hurt. Mason felt that he had to take this slow. He needed time to get to know Jack as a friend and lover before he committed himself that much.

"Why do we need to wait? I love you. You love me. I don't see what the problem is. What? Do you think I'm going to suddenly stop loving you or something?" Jack jumped to his feet and grabbed his jeans and pulled them on.

"Jack—" Mason began as he scooted to the side of the bed and reached for his own clothes.

"Do you love me, Mason?" Jack demanded as he placed his hands on his hips and glared at Mason from across the bed.

"You know I do, Jack."

"Then why won't you move in with me? Do you think I don't really mean it when I say I want a relationship with you? Is that it? Do you think I'm lying to you?" he asked as he waved his hand around in agitation.



"God, no, Jack. What ever gave you that idea?" Mason asked in surprise.

"I just don't understand why you won't move in with me then. We love each other. We want to be together. Do you have any idea how much I hate the fact that you have to leave to go home and change? This should be your home. Changing should involve grabbing something out of your dresser, not driving somewhere else."

"Jack—" Mason tried again. He didn't want to fight with Jack, but he just wasn't ready to take that step yet. He needed more time.

"No! Either you want to be with me or you don't, Mason."

"Jack, do you know what you're saying?" Mason whispered. If he understood correctly Jack was giving him an ultimatum. He either gave in to Jack's demand to move in with him or give him up.

"Yes. I want you here with me. I don't want you going to some other place at night. I want you in my bed every night. I want to wake up every morning with you in my arms. I want to share everything with you."

"I want that, too, Jack, but—"

"No buts, Mason. You said you wanted me, loved me, for ten years. Why now are you suddenly unsure? Were you lying this whole time or are you just not sure you really love me?"

"I will not be forced into a decision I am not ready to make, not by you or anybody else," Mason stated firmly as he got to his feet. "If you can't understand that then maybe I'm right to not move in with you yet. We obviously have some issues we need to work out. The first being that you can not

force me to do something you want by making me feel bad. I will not make a decision like this without thinking about it first."

"God, you really are young, aren't you?" Jack shook his head. "Sometimes I forget just how young and inexperienced you really are."

"Fuck you, Jack," Mason whispered through the tears that suddenly clogged his throat. Mason pulled his shoes on and walked to the door. He stopped briefly at the bedroom door, one hand braced on the doorframe. The other hand rubbed over his face.

He really did not want to fight with Jack. He knew that they could work this out. There just had to be a way. He took a deep breath then turned back to face Jack.

"Look, Jack—" Mason began only to stop when he saw the bathroom door shut behind Jack. He walked over to the bathroom door and tried to turn the knob. Jack had locked the door. He knocked softly on the door.

"Jack?"

"Go, Mason, just go," he heard Jack whisper through the door.

"Jack—"

"Go, Mason!" Jack said a little louder.

Mason fell back a step from the door. He couldn't believe that Jack was telling him to leave. His hand went to his chest as it tightened up, his breathing harsh. This couldn't be happening.

"Jack, please, we need to talk about this—don't—I—" Mason pleaded.

"Mason, I want you to leave," Jack yelled through the door. Mason jumped back a step when he heard Jack's hand slam against the door. He suddenly found himself standing in the bedroom doorway. He didn't know how he had gotten there. He didn't remember walking across the room.

"I love you, Jack," he whispered one last time before he turned and walked away. His mind was a total blanket of anguish as he left Jack's condo and walked down the street. Nothing registered except the pain of losing Jack. Not the rain that started to fall or the cars that honked at him.

He just couldn't believe that it was over because he hadn't wanted to move in with Jack without taking some time to think about it first. Mason knew that if he could take back the last half-hour and tell Jack he would move in, he would. It wasn't what he wanted, but if it meant he could have kept Jack, he would have done it. He would have done anything to keep Jack.

Why had he felt the need to be so pig-headed about it? Wasn't moving in with Jack what he had wanted? Why had he been so adamant about taking his time? Maybe Jack was right and he still hadn't grown up.

Mason didn't know how much time passed when he started to feel raindrops fall on him. He looked up at the sky and realized that it was night out and raining. It had been morning when he had left Jack's condo. How much time had passed?

Mason stood up from the bench he sat on and began to walk again. He wasn't even sure where he was. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed Cooper's number.

"Hello, this is Cooper."

"Coop?" Mason whispered through chattering teeth.

"Mason? Is that you?" Cooper asked in surprise.

"Could you come get me?"

"Sure, Mason. Where are you?" Cooper asked, suddenly concerned.

Mason looked around. Nothing he saw looked familiar. "I don't know."

"Okay, what do you see around you? Are there any road signs? Do you see any stores or anything?" Cooper asked carefully.

Mason looked around again. He spotted a road sign several feet away. "Yeah, there's a road sign that says Nimbus Avenue and Hall Boulevard. Do you know where that is?"

"Sure do, honey. You just stay right there and I'll be there as soon as I can. Okay?" Cooper asked.

"Okay. Please hurry, Coop." Mason could hear Cooper's car start up and knew that Cooper was on his way before he even said anything.

"I'm already on my way, baby," Cooper assured Mason. "You just stay put."

Mason walked the few feet to stand under the bus stop cover. At least he could get out of the rain. He sat down on the bench there, shivering when his rain soaked clothes stuck to his cold body.

"Talk to me, Mason. Tell me what happened? How did you end up all the way in Beaverton?" Cooper asked.

"Is that where I am?" Mason laughed harshly. He had no idea how he had gotten here. He didn't remember anything

since he had left Jack's condo in downtown Portland, nearly five miles away.

"Talk to me, Mason. Tell me what happened," Cooper pleaded.

"There's nothing to talk about." Mason shrugged his shoulders even though he knew Cooper couldn't see it.

"Is it Jack? Did something happen with Jack?"

"It's over. There is no Jack. Maybe there never was. Maybe this is all some horrible nightmare and I'll wake up in the morning and none of this will have ever happened," Mason replied softly.

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

"They say that ignorance is bliss. I wish I was still blissfully ignorant," Mason laughed bitterly. "Not knowing what I am missing is so much better than knowing and not being able to have it."

\* \* \* \*

Cooper grew more concerned by the second as Mason's laughter became almost hysterical in nature then turned to sobs. He wished he had Jack's neck in his hands right there and then. He'd be wringing it.

He didn't know what had happened between Mason and Jack, but it had obviously been something major. He wondered if he was going to be able to get Jack's ass out of this one.

Pulling off the freeway, Cooper drove down Hall Boulevard until he spotted Mason sitting at the bus stop. He pulled over and opened the passenger side door. Seeing Mason's wet,

chilled body shiver as he climbed into the car, Cooper turned up the heat and then drove back toward the freeway.

Cooper glanced over at Mason. He didn't look so good. His eyes were all red and swollen, showing that he had cried a lot. He was soaked to the skin, shivering. His eyes had a sort of sad, desolate look to them. All of the usual light and vibrancy had gone out of them.

"You want to talk about it?" Cooper asked.

"No."

Okay, that was even more worrisome to Cooper. Usually Mason wanted to talk about his problems. Besides, if Mason wouldn't talk about it, how was he supposed to help? Maybe he should go talk to Jack.

Twenty minutes later Cooper pulled into a parking spot in front of Mason's apartment. He glanced over at Mason who had spent the entire ride back to town staring out the window not saying anything.

"Look, honey, I'm gonna go back to my place and grab a few things, maybe stop and get us some chow, then I'll be back, okay?"

"I'll be fine, Coop, just go on home."

Cooper looked at Mason with concern. "Mason, I'm not so sure you should be alone right now."

"I'm fine, Coop. I'm going to go inside, take a shower, and go to bed. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"Mason—" Cooper tried again.

"Cooper, I need to do this on my own. I can't keep relying on you every time my life doesn't go the way I want it to. I'm

a big boy. I can handle this," Mason said as he opened up the car door.

Cooper reached over and placed his hand on Mason's arm. "I know you're a big boy, Mason, I just don't..."

"Cooper, it's okay. Thank you for coming to get me. Now go home," Mason said as he pulled his arm away from Cooper's grasp.

Cooper watched as Mason climbed out of the car and walked to his apartment. He turned and gave Cooper a little wave before unlocking his door and walking in, shutting the door behind him.

Oh yes, Jack was definitely his next stop.

\* \* \* \*

Mason closed the door behind him and turned on the living room light. He blinked several times at the sight before him before he quickly turned and opened the front door. He looked for Cooper, just in time to see his tail lights turn around the corner.

Damn! Mason closed the door behind him and cautiously walked through the remains of his apartment. Everything looked to be destroyed. The cushions from the couch were ripped open and spread all over the floor. Pictures were broken, books ripped apart, knick-knacks shattered.

In the kitchen area, dishes were shattered all over the floor, food dumped everywhere, chairs turned over. But the bedroom was the worst. The mattress had been sliced to shreds, the sheets and blankets torn apart, the pillows destroyed, his clothing shredded.

A Promise Kept  
*by Stormy Glenn*

The most frightening of all were the words written in red above his bed.... You have been a very bad boy, Mason. Get rid of Jack or I will, permanently. You belong to me and only me and no other shall have what is mine!

Under the words was the one remaining picture he had of Jack, stuck to the wall with a knife. Mason fell to his knees in shock as he stared around the room at the sadistic destruction of everything he owned.

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## Chapter Nine

Cooper knocked on Jack's door and waited for him to answer. He didn't know exactly what he was going to say, but he had to help Mason. As Jack opened the door, Cooper's anger took over.

Before he could stop himself he punched Jack right in the face. Jack fell backward. His hand came up to cup his face as he looked at Cooper in confusion, and just a little anger.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Jack asked as he wiped the blood from his lip.

Cooper stepped into Jack's condo and slammed the door behind him. "You stupid jackass! I told you to be careful with Mason and what's the first thing that you do? You hurt him. Does it make you feel good knowing how much you hurt him? Does it?" Cooper yelled at Jack.

"What are you talking about? I didn't do anything to Mason," Jack yelled back as he looked at Cooper in confusion.

"Then why in the hell did I find him wandering in the rain in Beaverton with no idea how he got there, soaked to the bone and crying his eyes out? What did you do to him?" Cooper shouted.

Cooper suddenly felt the world tilt when he saw the color drain from Jack's face and worry filled those eyes. What exactly was going on here?

"Where—where is he? Is he okay? Coop—" Jack stammered anxiously.

"Jack, what happened? When you left the party two weeks you two couldn't have been more in love with each other. What happened between then and now to change that? Why did I find Mason so upset?"

Jack took a couple of steps back and sank down onto the couch. He rubbed his hands over his face several times then dropped them back to his knees. He looked up at Cooper, his expression helpless.

"Is he okay? Please, Cooper, just tell me that," Jack whispered.

"Hell no, he's not okay. He's convinced that your relationship is over. But he's safe, if that's what you mean."

"Where is he?" Jack asked as he twisted his hands together.

"I dropped him off at his place. I was planning on grabbing some clothes and food and heading back but Mason doesn't want me to. He told me he needed to handle this on his own."

Cooper sat down in the chair across from Jack. "Now, are you going to tell me what happened to make Mason think you two are over?"

"I don't know what happened. We had an argument, but that's all it was, an argument."

"What were you arguing about?"

Jack blew out a deep breath and sat back in the couch. "Oh man, I just wanted him to move in with me, like today. Mason wanted to wait. That's all it was, just a disagreement. I don't understand why he would think we were over because of that. Couples argue. It happens. It doesn't mean the end of the relationship just because we disagree."

"Did you say anything else to him? Argue over anything else?"

"No, we had just—well—said good morning to each other when we started talking about him moving in. I guess, actually, I started talking about it. He said he needed to go home and change, and I told him that if he lived here he wouldn't have to leave. Mason said he wasn't ready for that. I got angry."

"Why did you get angry? Doesn't Mason have the right to make the decision on his own? You can't rush these things, Jack."

"I know. I just wanted him here so bad. Waking up with Mason in my arms this morning—it was one of the best mornings I've had in years. It's been that way every time Mason spent the night the last two weeks. I wanted to experience that feeling every morning, not just when Mason could come over and spend the night. Is that so wrong, Cooper?"

"No, not at all, Jack. In fact it sounds pretty good to me. But you have to understand that Mason has spent the last ten years convinced that you could never love him. No matter how much you might wish differently, that will take more than a couple of days to change. You just have to give him some time. Just continue to love him and eventually he will believe it."

"And in the meantime? If he gets so upset over a little argument, what will happen if we have a big one? Will he run to you every time we don't get along?" Jack asked.

"Jack, Mason didn't run to me. He was lost, and he didn't know how to get home. I don't know what you said that upset him so much, but it did. He obviously thinks you two no longer have a relationship. Are you sure you didn't say anything else to him?" Cooper asked.

"No, I mean things did get a little heated. Sometimes I forget how young he really is. When he told me to fuck off I knew I was going to say something stupid so I locked myself in the bathroom until he left."

"And he just left, just like that without saying anything? He just told you to fuck off and left?" Cooper asked in astonishment. Granted, he hadn't known Mason all that long, but he had never heard Mason get that angry before.

"Not exactly. He did try to get me to come out of the bathroom and talk about it, but I just knew that I was going to screw things up. Sometimes I tend to talk with my foot in my mouth. So, I told him to leave. I thought that if we had a couple of hours to calm down then we could discuss him moving in reasonably."

Cooper's head dropped forward. "Oh, hell!"

"What?" Jack asked anxiously when Cooper didn't say anything more.

"Jack, you can be such an idiot. I have no idea how you have ever survived as long as you have. Did you tell Mason you needed a little time to cool down before you talked or did you just tell him to leave?" Cooper asked as he looked back up at Jack.

It was like watching a train wreck. Cooper could see the confusion in Jack's face, followed swiftly by dawning horror as

he realized exactly what he had said to Mason and how badly he had screwed up.

"Oh my god, Cooper, I—" Jack dropped his head into his hands as anguish filled him. "What have I done? Mason's never going to forgive me now."

"Jack, calm down. It can't be that bad."

"But it is, Cooper. You don't understand what I said to him. I told him to leave. I wouldn't listen to him when he tried to talk to me. Fuck man, I locked myself in the bathroom and refused to listen to him."

Cooper watched as Jack slammed his fist down on his thigh several times. He shook his head at how stupid some people could be. "Jack, this is nothing we can't fix. You just have to understand how Mason's mind works. Mason's mind works a little differently than ours do."

Jack's head snapped up, his eyes filled with sudden anger. "Stop saying that. There is nothing wrong with Mason!"

"Whoa there, cowboy. I never said there was anything wrong with Mason," Cooper said quickly, holding up his hands in surrender. "In fact, I think that if there were more people like him in this world it would be a better place. However, that does not change the fact that Mason does think differently than you or I do. We've been around the block a time or two. We know the score. Mason doesn't even know he's playing the game."

"So what am I supposed to do? Watch everything I say from now on? If I say the wrong thing is he going to leave me again? What if I disagree with him? Then what?" Jack asked anxiously. His hand trembled as he ran it through his hair.

"It takes time, Jack, you know that. It's the same with any relationship. Mason just needs the time to learn to trust you and know that no matter what, you want to be with him. Until then, yeah, I think you're going to have to watch what you say."

Jack heaved a large sigh. "And will I know when he trusts me?" he asked quietly.

"My guess is that you will know he trusts you when he argues with you and doesn't leave, no matter what you say, no matter how mad either of you get. When Mason knows that you love him no matter what, that's when it will happen."

"But I do. I love him more than my next breath. I don't know when it happened, but it did. It was like getting hit by a baseball bat. I just suddenly knew that I loved him, that I needed him in my life."

Cooper watched Jack suddenly get to his feet and start pacing in front of the couch. He wished he had a camcorder right then so that he could record the anguish Jack was feeling and show it to Mason. Maybe then Mason would understand that Jack did love him.

"I've known for years that I wanted Mason, but this—this is so much more, Cooper. There's no way to explain it, how Mason makes me feel just by being in the same room with me." Jack said as he stopped walking to turn and stare at Cooper, desperation on his face. "To think that something I did, something I said, hurt him. It makes me want to jump off a bridge."

"Ah hell, don't do that. I still need you to hook Jordan up with Angela," Cooper laughed. "After you do that, then you

can jump off a bridge—if you still want to. Personally, I'd want to stick around to watch the fireworks."

"Oh, you're all heart, Cooper. Thanks," Jack said as he punched Cooper playfully on the arm.

Cooper stood to his feet. "Come on, Jack, let's go collect your man."

Jack nodded his head. "Yeah, okay. Let me go grab some shoes and I'll be right with you." Jack went into the bedroom, leaving Cooper standing there chuckling at him.

Cooper stood in the living room as he waited for Jack, gazing around and admiring the neatness of the spacious room when his cell phone rang. Pulling it out of his pocket, he flipped it open.

"Hello, this is Cooper."

"Cooper? Janet. Mason just got here and he's really upset. His clothes are sopping wet, he's shivering, and he looks like he's been crying. He won't tell me what's going on. Do you know?"

Cooper shook his head. Sometimes he felt like he should be the one going to school for his psychology degree instead of Mason. He seemed to spend a lot of his time counseling his friends. "Yeah, Janet, sorry about that. Jack and Mason had a little misunderstanding. I'm with Jack now, and we were just on our way to Mason's place. Guess we'll head to your place instead."

"Are you sure that's all it is? Mason is really upset. I've never seen him like this, Cooper," Janet replied.

Cooper could hear the anxiousness in Janet's voice. "That's because he's never had a boyfriend before. It's a new experience for all of us," He assured her.

"Maybe. I just can't help feeling there's something more going on. He's really upset, Cooper."

"I'll explain it all to you when we get there. I don't want you to worry, though. This is nothing Jack and Mason can't work out. Jack understands things better now, and once he talks to Mason, your son will understand, too."

"All right, if you say so. I guess I'll put on some coffee then. Looks like it might be a long night," Janet said with a sigh.

"Yeah, probably. We'll be there soon. Don't tell Mason we're coming, though. He's upset with Jack right now, and he might leave. Jack really needs to talk to him, to explain things to him. He needs this chance to make things right with Mason, and I think that Mason needs this, too."

"Okay, see you soon then."

Cooper hung up his phone and dropped it back in his pocket just as Jack came out of the bedroom. "Did I hear you talking to someone?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, that was Janet. Mason showed up over at her house."

"I thought you dropped him off at home," Jack said in confusion as he grabbed his house keys off the side table.

"I did. Guess he decided to go home to mom. Come on, let's hit it. Janet says he's pretty upset," Cooper said as he headed for the door.



"Oh man," Jack started saying as he followed Cooper out the door. "He's never going to forgive me. I just know it."

"Shut the hell up, Jack. You're as bad as Mason is. Didn't I already tell you once that Mason would forgive anyone almost anything? Just talk to him. Don't assume your relationship is over before then or it will be."

"I just don't want to lose him, Cooper."

"Just get in the car, Jack," Cooper said as he climbed in. Oh man, these two needed to be locked in a room together and not allowed out until they settled things completely. Either that or super glued together. That thought put a smile on Cooper's face.

It was gone by the time Cooper and Jack were on the road. Cooper spent the next fifteen minutes listening to Jack go on and on about how badly he had screwed up. By the time they reached Janet and Bob's house he was ready to strangle Jack.

He climbed out of the car and walked toward the house, followed slowly by Jack. When Janet answered the door, Cooper just rolled his eyes at her and asked where Mason was. When she pointed upstairs, he asked her to get him some rope, then grabbed Jack by the arm and dragged him up the stairs to Mason's room.

When he got to Mason's door he grabbed the door handle and looked at Jack. "Now you go in there and repair the damage you did. Do not come out until you have both worked things out. If you need something, use Mason's cell phone to call downstairs. I do not want to see this door open until there is a smile on both your faces."

Cooper quickly opened the door and shoved Jack into the dark room then closed the door behind him, leaving Jack standing there in the dark. Cooper held the door shut until Janet brought up the rope.

She covered her mouth with her hand to stifle her giggles when Cooper tied the rope around the door handle on one end. The other end he tied around a couple of stair spindles.

"There, that should hold them for awhile. Now, didn't you say something about fresh coffee?" Cooper asked as he winked at Janet and followed her back down the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Jack stood in front of the bedroom door until his eyes adjusted to the dim light that shone through a crack in the curtains. He glanced around the room until he spotted a lump huddled under the covers on Mason's bed.

He knew from the shape that it was Mason. He walked over to the side of the bed and sat down next to Mason and flipped on the light on the nightstand. He pulled back the covers enough to see Mason's face.

"Mason, wake up." Jack reached down and caressed Mason's cheek. "Come on, baby, open those beautiful, blue eyes for me."

Mason slowly opened his eyes and turned them up to Jack. His grin was beautiful as he whispered, "Jack."

Jack watched the happy smile on his face slowly fade into sadness then despair as the day's events played over in his head. Mason pulled away from Jack and sat up. He scooted

back against the headboard even as he pulled the covers up to hide his nakedness.

"What do you want, Jack?" He asked cautiously.

"Won't you look at me, Mason?" Jack asked, as Mason looked everywhere else but at him. "Please?"

Mason slowly raised his eyes to Jack's. Jack could tell from the apprehension in his eyes that Mason was waiting for Jack to hurt him again.

"I love you, baby. I always will. Nothing is ever going to change that. We had a disagreement. It's going to happen. But when I told you to leave I did not mean that I wanted our relationship to be over. I just needed some time to calm down before we talked. I can't tell you how sorry I am that I hurt you. That was not my intention. I was upset and frustrated."

"But—" Mason began, his fingers picked nervously at the blankets covering him.

"No buts, Mason. No matter how upset I get, I still love you. That will never change. We're going to argue. That's a given. It's going to happen no matter how hard we try not to. We are individuals with our own wants and needs. For example, I need you in my life, but I want you to live with me. I don't want to live without you even if that means that I have to wait ten years for you to trust me enough to live with me. If that's what it takes, that's what I will do. I'm not saying that I won't try to convince you before that, but I will wait if that's what you need. However, I can not live without you in my life. Do you understand that?"

"Jack, I'm just not—I'm not ready for that. I'm not saying that it won't change tomorrow, or next week, or next year.

Just not right now. This is all too new for me. I can't move as fast as you. I have to do this at my own pace."

"I guess I can understand that and even respect it. I'm not happy about it, and I can't promise that I won't try to change your mind. I also can't promise that I won't get angry or upset. But that does not mean that I won't wait for you."

"I don't know, Jack. What if you decide that I'm not worth it? How long are you willing to wait? You already think I'm too young, too inexperienced. What if you get tired of waiting for me? Or you meet someone else that is willing to live with you?"

Jack caressed the side of Mason's face again. "Not going to happen, baby. First of all, if anyone is not worth it it's me. Second, I'll wait for you for however long I need to. I don't care how long it takes. Third, there will never be anyone that can take your place. I belong to you and you belong to me."

Jack was shocked when the color seeped from Mason's face. He quickly thought over what he had said and couldn't think of a thing that would make Mason have such a look of utter horror on his face.

"Mason, baby, what is it? What did I say?" Jack grabbed Mason's arms as Mason began to shake. He could feel the tremble of Mason's body all the way through his own. Mason was clearly terrified, but Jack didn't understand why.

"Mason? What's wrong? Baby, talk to me. Whatever it is we can work it out," Jack pleaded.

Mason shook his head as he desperately tried to push Jack away. "No ... no ... you have to go. Get away from me."

"Mason, what's going on?"

"You can't be here. You have to go—now!" Mason was nearly hysterical. "Please, Jack, if you love me, please. Just go."

"Mason, tell me what's going on. What are you afraid of? I won't hurt you. Is that what you're afraid of? If you don't want to live with me, I won't pressure you, baby, I promise. I'll wait until you're ready. I swear, Mason."

Jack couldn't understand what was going on. Why was Mason so freaked out all of a sudden? What had he done to upset the man so much?

He watched in confusion as Mason jumped from the bed and frantically pulled his clothes on. Jack sat on the bed, still bewildered, as Mason ran to the door and yanked on it to open it. The door wouldn't open. The more he pulled, the more upset he became.

"Baby, calm down. Cooper probably just booby-trapped it or something. All we need to do is call him on your cell phone and he'll come up and let us out," Jack said as he climbed off the bed.

Jack walked up behind Mason and tried to wrap his arms around Mason's trembling body, but Mason began to fight him, hitting Jack's chest. Tears streamed down his face as he yelled at Jack to leave and get away.

Jack saw no other alternative.

He wrapped his arms around Mason. Jack held Mason prisoner in his arms until Mason stopped fighting. Mason's body lost strength and his yells turned into sobs.. Jack slowly sank to the floor with Mason.

Jack leaned back against the door. Mason dropped his head onto Jack's chest and wept. Jack rubbed his hands up and down Mason's back and softly murmured until the sobs quieted down to the occasional snuffle.

"Mason, baby, please tell me what you're so afraid of? Why do you want me to go away? Don't you believe that I love you?"

Jack waited for what seemed like forever until Mason nodded his head. "I love you, too, Jack," Mason whispered quietly.

"Then tell me, baby. Tell me what's going on. I don't understand what you're so afraid of. I swear I won't pressure you to move in with me. We'll take this just as slow as you need. I won't do anything you don't want."

"I'm just so scared, Jack. I don't want anything to happen to you," Mason whispered against Jack's neck.

"Baby, nothing's going to happen to me," Jack assured him, still bewildered by Mason's odd behavior.

"If you stay it will. You have to go away, Jack, far away. As far away from me as you can get. Why don't you take a trip, go on a vacation? Haven't you wanted to go somewhere, visit some place? See the world?"

"Honey, that sounds wonderful. Maybe a vacation away would be good for both of us. What do you think? Where should we go?"

Mason quickly shook his head. "No, no, I can't go. I have to stay here. But you can go. Yes, you go. Take a few weeks—a month. You'll have a great time." Tears streamed down Mason's face again as he talked.

"Mason—Mason—stop. I'm not going anywhere without you."

Mason looked up at Jack, his eyes begging. "Please, Jack, you have to. If you stay here you're going to get hurt. I would die if anything happened to you because of me."

The way that Mason was looking at him, begging him, made Jack begin to wonder if something more was going on than just the argument that they had had earlier. He had never seen Mason so scared, so upset, not in all of the years that he had known the man.

"Mason, you need to tell me what's going on. This is about more than our argument. Something else is going on. What is it?"

"Oh god, please, Jack, for me, please. I don't want anything to happen to you. He said he would hurt you if I didn't make you go away. He says that I belong to him, and I have to make you go away."

Jack grabbed Mason's chin and tilted his head up. "Who, Mason? Who are you talking about?"

"Wallace! Cooper said his name was Wallace. Coop said that he's dangerous, and I needed to be careful, keep my doors locked and not answer the door for anyone I didn't know. I haven't. I did what Cooper told me to do. But tonight when I got home—he's been in my house again, Jack. Everything—he destroyed everything. It's all gone, all of it, everything I own is destroyed. And he—and he—"

Mason spoke so fast that Jack could barely understand the man, but he caught enough to know that something was seriously wrong and he needed to talk to Cooper as soon as

possible. Jack could barely keep his rage under control as he spoke again.

"Ssshhh, baby, it's okay. We can replace your stuff. We can't replace you. I'm just glad you weren't home. Now, I want you to hand me your phone so that we can call Cooper. He's downstairs. He needs to hear this, too."

Mason refused to move out of Jack's arms. He just pounded on the floor several times. "That should get him up here."

Jack laughed when he heard feet running up the stairs. "Now why didn't I think of that?"

Jack stood with Mason still in his arms and carried Mason to the bed where he sat down and placed Mason in his lap. He quickly grabbed the comforter and covered Mason up. He sat comfortably against the headboard with Mason snuggled in his arms when Cooper pushed the door open and walked in.

"You rang?" Cooper smiled as he spotted the two of them cuddled on the bed.

"Did you forgot to mention a certain gentlemen named Wallace? Seems he paid Mason a visit and left quite the calling card at his apartment," Jack spit out through gritted teeth as he glared angrily at Cooper.

Jack felt a lot of satisfaction as he watched the blood drain out of Cooper's face. He'd much rather punch Cooper square in the jaw, but right now Mason needed him more. Besides, Cooper looked sick to his stomach. Jack didn't want to take any chances.

He watched Cooper reach into his pocket and pull his cell phone out. He talked briefly to the person on the other end



before he hung up and put the phone back into his pocket. He looked back at the two on the bed.

"Okay, you want to tell me what's going on?" Cooper asked.

"You first. Who in the hell is Wallace?" Jack demanded.

"Mason—" Cooper began only to be interrupted by Jack.

"Oh no, you tell me. Mason is in no condition to talk about this. He's scared out of his mind. Now, start talking, Cooper," Jack demanded.

Jack continued to glare at Cooper as he walked to the end of the bed and sat down, then leaned back against the bed frame at the bottom of the bed.

"Several weeks ago we were all dancing at this bar that we go to. Mason was out on the dance floor, minding his own business really. Enjoying the music. Then this guy came up and started dancing with him. You know that's not unusual in a bar," Cooper said.

Jack nodded.

"Anyway, at some point the guy started saying things to Mason that Mason took issue with—"

"He said that he was going to make me beg him when he fucked me," Mason whispered against Jack's neck. "Then he started touching me. I told him to leave me alone, but he wouldn't. He kept touching me. Then he tried to drag me out of the bar. Cooper and Jordan stopped him, but he came back."

Jack pulled Mason tighter to him as more anger filled him. "And you didn't think to tell me about this?" he asked through

clenched teeth. He couldn't remember the last time he was this angry.

"Hell, Jack, you weren't in the picture then. You've only been around for the last two weeks and, to tell you the truth, we had a few other things on our minds at the time. Like getting you to pull your head out of your ass and admit that you love Mason. Wallace wasn't at the top of my list of things to discuss. Besides, when he didn't make any more advances on Mason, we hoped that it was over," Cooper replied.

"Okay, I guess I can understand that." Jack calmed down as he admitted that other things had taken precedence over the last several weeks. "But still, this guy has to be stopped, Cooper. He's obviously crazy."

"Oh, I have no doubt about that. Jordan did a search for him, but so far we haven't been able to find anything on him, but this guy—I'm telling you, Jack, he has to have done something like this before. The things he's done—well, we haven't been able to prove anything, even when he left all that stuff in Mason's apartment the first time—"

"The first time? How many times has he been in Mason's apartment?" Jack knew he was nearly yelling, but he couldn't believe what he heard. This guy had threatened his baby before and he wasn't locked up? "And why the hell isn't he in jail?"

"Because we can't prove that he is a threat to Mason. He left champagne and chocolate covered strawberries, flowers, and silk sheets. That's what lovers do, Jack, not maniacs. No judge in the state would issue an arrest warrant for

something like that. No matter what Mason said, Wallace could say that they were just having a lover's tiff."

"Champagne and chocolate covered strawberries—that's what the strange conversation was about a couple of weeks ago, wasn't it, Mason?"

Mason nodded his head sadly. "I thought—I thought you had left it there, that you were trying to—to—"

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry. I wish I had been the one to do it." Jack tucked Mason's head back under his chin. He pressed small kisses on the top of Mason's head as Mason shed silent tears. Jack rubbed Mason's back and arms until Mason stopped crying.

"I hate strawberries," Mason whispered against Jack's neck.

"I'll remember that," Jack laughed as he tilted Mason's head back for a quick kiss. "I promise never to give you strawberries, okay?"

"Well, maybe if I were positive they were from you—" Mason giggled. Jack felt better when Mason smiled at him and the tears began to dry up from those eyes. He vowed to himself to do everything in his power to keep that smile on Mason's face.

"Mason, I'm sorry to interrupt this special moment, but I really need to know what happened at your apartment. I know you don't want to talk about this, but Jordan's on his way over there and I need to know what happened."

Mason lifted his head and glared at Cooper, who held up both hands in surrender. "Sorry, honey, but you know I need to know what happened. The quicker we get this done, the

quicker you and Jack can get back to making up," Cooper quickly said.

"Oh, all right." Mason sat up a little more in Jack's lap. Jack instantly tightened his arms around Mason. He wasn't ready to let Mason go just yet.

"After you dropped me off I went into my apartment. The place was destroyed. All of my furniture was torn apart. Books were ripped up and things smashed everywhere."

Jack could feel the small shudder that passed through Mason's body. He moved his thumb against Mason's skin, letting Mason know he wasn't alone. He smiled to himself when he felt Mason's hand grab his, giving him a little squeeze.

"He even dumped food all over the floor. But the bedroom was the worst. My mattress was slashed into pieces and all my clothes torn up," Mason continued.

"You said that he left you a message?" Jack added.

"I have this picture of you. It's the only one I kept when I gave you back your stuff. Wallace put it on the wall with a knife through it. He left a message written on the wall ... You have been a very bad boy, Mason. Get rid of Jack or I will, permanently. You belong to me and only me and no other shall have what is mine!"

Jack could only stare at Mason, the shock in him overwhelmed by the rage at what Mason told him. "He actually said for you to get rid of me? How does he even know who I am? We've only been together for a couple of weeks."

"He has to be watching you, Jack, and Mason, too. Have you noticed anyone following you? Anything?" Cooper asked.

"No, to be honest, I haven't noticed anything except Mason for the last two weeks. Hell, someone could have been camped out in my bathroom and I wouldn't have noticed. My entire world has been wrapped up in my baby," Jack replied.

"I believe that's the way it should be," Mason giggled as he glanced up at Jack.

"What about strange phone calls? People calling and hanging up? Wrong numbers?"

"Huh, I'm not sure how to answer that one," Jack replied hesitantly. He could feel his face heat up as he looked from Mason to Cooper, then back down at Mason.

"I think he means strange phone calls from anyone other than me, Jack," Mason laughed.

"Then, no. The only strange phone calls I have received have been from Mason."

Cooper leaned back against the footboard of the bed. "Okay, this guy obviously has it out for Mason. He thinks that Mason belongs to him and sees Jack as his rival. Somehow, he knows everything Mason does. We can assume that he knows all about Jack, where he lives, where he works, everything. We can also assume that he knows about Mason's friends and family. So far, this guy has had the advantage. We need to take it back."

"And how do you plan on doing this? I will not agree to anything that will put Mason in danger. And that is not up for debate," Jack said vehemently. Just the thought of Mason

being in danger of any kind made Jack want to hit something, or someone.

Mason sat up to turn and look back at Jack. "Jack, you don't have the right to make that decision for me."

"Mason—" Jack started.

"No, Jack. You really have to decide if you are going to treat me like an adult or like a child. Either I'm your partner or I'm not. There is no in between here," Mason said as he waved his hands around between them.

"Mason, I just don't want anything to happen to you. I don't mean to treat you like a child, really I don't. But if something were to happen to you—I just don't know what I would do, Mason." Jack tried to express his feelings to Mason through his eyes and the desperate expression on his face. He felt he might have accomplished that when Mason patted his cheek.

"I understand that," Mason said. "I don't want anything to happen to me either. But you need to discuss it with me before making that sort of decision. I have a right to say how my life goes. Besides, weren't you the one that said I get to plan our lives from now on?"

Jack reluctantly nodded as he reached up and held Mason's hand against his cheek, rubbing against it. "You know, this is going to be a reoccurring issue with us. I tend to be pretty dominant and think I'm right most of the time. Are you going to be able to deal with that?"

Mason smiled. "I like you dominant. It makes me feel safe and protected. But don't worry, baby, I have no problem

standing up to you when I feel it's important. I'll put you in your place when I feel you've stepped out of line."

"Oh, Jack, he so has your number!" Cooper suddenly laughed.

"Hey!" Jack yelled as he pulled Mason up against him again.

"Oh ... oh, yeah, that's right," Cooper said through his laughter. "You're the big bad alpha male, the dominant partner in the relationship. Did I ever tell you that I could foresee the future? I predict that Mason will have you totally wrapped around his little finger and doing his bidding in no time at all. You don't have a chance, my friend."

Jack lifted an eyebrow as he watched Mason smirk. When Mason held up one little finger and waved it in Jack's face, giving him a knowing grin, Jack felt his cock swell with need.

"Would that be this little finger?" Mason asked.

Jack was mesmerized as he looked at Mason's finger, remembering what Mason had done to him with that one little digit earlier. "Oh, hell yeah. That'd be the one," he gulped audibly.

Jack could hear Cooper's laughter suddenly lessen. He was filled with an overwhelming need to have Mason naked and on a flat surface as he gazed at Mason's wiggling finger.

"Um, did I miss something here? Jack, you're looking at Mason's finger like it's the crown jewels or something." Cooper gave both of them a quizzical look. "I didn't say anything to offend you, did I?"

A Promise Kept  
*by Stormy Glenn*

Jack blushed as Mason threw back his head as he laughed.  
"No, Coop, you just reminded Jack how much he loves being wrapped around my little finger."

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## Chapter Ten

"Okay," Cooper said as he and Jordan slid into the booth across from Mason and Jack at the bar a week later, "my captain has signed off on the plan. He doesn't like it, but he's in agreement with me that Wallace has to be stopped."

"His main goal is keeping Mason safe," Jordan added as he waved his hand in the air to signal the waitress, holding up two fingers and pointing toward the table. "He doesn't like the idea of using Mason as bait. He even tried to get us to use someone else undercover, but—"

"But Wallace has his sights set on me," Mason replied. "He's not going to go after anyone else and we all know it." Mason watched Jordan and Cooper reluctantly nod their heads in agreement. "So, how do we do this?"

"Wallace is obsessed with you, Mason, and he sees Jack being in your life as a betrayal. He thinks that Jack took something that belonged to him," Cooper explained.

Mason shook his shoulders as a shiver ran through his body. "That's just creepy."

"I agree, but it's the truth. When you gave your innocence to Jack, you gave away something that Wallace sees as belonging to him. What we need to do is convince him that Jack and I are ruining you," Cooper said seriously.

"Ruining me?" Mason asked in bewilderment. He was even more confused when he saw Cooper's face flush. "Coop?"

"If Jack and I are debauching you—" Cooper began again.

"Debauching? Ruining? What is this? The middle ages?" Mason laughed. "You sound like you're afraid you're going to ruin my good name. Next thing you'll tell me that I'm going to get a bad reputation."

"You just might," Cooper said, his face still red. "We need to convince Wallace that Jack and I are ruining the innocence he sees in you. There's only one way to do that, Mason."

"How?" Mason asked. He almost laughed again as Cooper sent Jack a desperate look.

"A little help here, Jack?" Cooper asked.

"We're going to go out on the town, do a little dancing and a little showing off. Then you're going to go home with both Cooper and I. As far as anyone watching will be concerned, both Cooper and I will be your dates for the night," Jack explained carefully.

This time Mason did laugh. "Oh, so I'm going to be a slut for the night."

"Yeah," Jack laughed as he wrapped an arm around Mason's shoulders and hugged him, "but you're my slut."

\* \* \* \*

"Jack, I'm scared. Are you sure this will work? What if something goes wrong? What if Wallace doesn't take the bait?" Mason said as he leaned up to whisper into Jack's ear. Mason was so nervous he wanted to throw up.

Jack wrapped an arm around Mason and pulled him close as they continued walking toward the bar. "The plan is going to work, baby, just give it some time. Everyone is in place and ready to go. Wallace will not get to you. I promise."

"But what if—"

"Mason, baby, it's going to be fine. Just follow the plan and under no circumstances leave my side. No matter what happens. Understand? Wallace is going to make his move, and I need to have you with me to make sure that nothing happens to you."

Jack stopped right before the entrance and turned Mason in his arms. "Now, kiss me like you love me."

"I do love you, Jack," Mason chuckled. He leaned up and kissed Jack and wrapped his arms around Jack's neck. He moaned deeply when Jack's hands slid down to cup his ass.

"Damn, I love these tight jeans of yours. Promise me you'll wear them a lot. They leave almost nothing to the imagination." Jack groaned against Mason's lips as he gently squeezed each rounded globe.

Mason chuckled again as he rubbed his semi hard cock against Jack. "Nothing?"

"Mason," Jack growled as he swatted Mason on the butt. "Come on, let's go inside before I forget why we're here. If I remember correctly, Cooper said you're quite the sight on the dance floor."

Jack chuckled as he saw Mason blush and dip his head a little.

"Coop taught me a few moves. I think I can hold my own. I may even be able to show you a thing or two," Mason winked at Jack as he preceded Jack into the bar.

Jack chuckled at the devilish grin on Mason's face as he followed Mason into the bar. He had no doubt that Mason was going to put on just the type of show Cooper wanted so that

they could draw Wallace out into the open. He just hoped that he survived watching Mason perform.

Mason and Jack quickly found Cooper, Neil, and Patrick and joined them at their big booth. Jack could tell from the glazed look in Patrick's eyes that Neil's missing hand was once again groping Patrick under the table.

Jack waited until Mason scooted into the bench seat beside Cooper before sitting next to him. He smiled and greeted their friends. "So, how's the dancing tonight? See any good moves?" Jack asked.

Cooper shook his head. "No, nothing yet. But the night is still young. I'm hopeful."

Jack's smile was a little strained as he looked out onto the dance floor. Cooper had told him that Wallace might be using some sort of listening device. A person could purchase them almost anywhere. So, they were essentially talking in code. So far he knew that no one had spotted Wallace yet, but, as Cooper said, the night was still young.

The plan that Cooper and Jordan had outlined was fairly simple. They needed to make Wallace jealous enough to make a go for Mason, at which time they would capture him. Jack hadn't been thrilled with the plan as Cooper had laid it out. He hadn't wanted anyone to touch or kiss Mason except him, but he understood how the plan was supposed to work.

Mason was just supposed to do his usual thing and dance the night away. Jack and Cooper would alternate dancing with him, flirting with him, even kissing him. Jack had really hated that part, but he understood that Cooper wanted to give Wallace the impression that they were corrupting Mason.

Mason didn't really have to do anything but dance and enjoy himself. Jordan, Cooper, and Jack would be on the lookout for Wallace. Jack had even called in a couple of friends that none of them knew just to help keep an eye out for Wallace..

Jack looked over when Mason nudged him with an arm. "Come on, babe, let's go dance. I love this song."

Jack chuckled at Mason's animated face. He nodded and scooted out of the booth, holding his hand out for Mason. Dragging Jack onto the dance floor, Mason began to dance.

At first Mason's movements were stilted and stiff. He looked really uncomfortable. Jack started to get worried when he felt a hand land on his shoulder and turned to see Cooper standing behind him, a wide grin on that face.

"Don't worry. He's always like this when he first gets out here. He just needs to loosen up and feel the music. Usually it takes a few minutes, and sometimes a little persuasion, but he'll get into the music soon enough," Cooper said.

"Persuasion?" Jack asked, one eyebrow lifted in query.

Cooper chuckled. "Yeah, it's a lot of fun. Drives guys wild every time they see me get Mason in the mood. He gets more propositions that way than any man I've ever met. And frankly, he doesn't have a clue. Here, stand in front of him and dance with him, real close."

Jack stepped in front of Mason and put his hands on Mason's hips. He pulled Mason close enough to him that their bodies brushed each other every time they moved. He watched over Mason's shoulder as Cooper stepped behind

Mason and placed both hands directly over his on Mason's hips.

The three of them slowly started to move to the music, their hips moving as one, back and forth, then side to side. Little by little they found the beat of the music. Cooper sent Jack a smug smile when Mason lifted his hands over his head and moved to the music on his own.

"See, he just needed a little push in the right direction."

Jack watched Mason moving. He felt more turned on by the second. The music seemed to flow through Mason, each beat moved him in a different direction. Damn! Mason was exquisite. He looked past Mason to Cooper's laughing face. "You taught him how to dance like this? Were you out of your ever loving mind?"

"Hey, at least you get to take him home with you tonight. The rest of us poor suckers just have to dream about it. So stop your belly aching, Jack."

Jack laughed right along with Cooper. "There is that." Just to tease Cooper a little, Jack leaned in and kissed Mason, his tongue ran along the length of those full lips. Mason groaned and brought his hands down to wrap in Jack's shirt.

Jack knew he was in trouble when Mason rubbed himself against Jack. If he didn't slow things down, and fast, Cooper's plan would fall apart. Because he was just about ready to drag Mason out of the bar himself.

Jack lifted his lips from Mason's and trailed them around Mason's neck, kissing each inch of skin, all the way to his ear. He tugged lightly on Mason's earlobe and whispered quietly, "Mason, baby, we need to slow this down a bit. We're getting

a little too heated here. Why don't you give Cooper a little attention."

Mason's eyes widened briefly at Jack's suggestion, but he leaned his body back against Cooper's anyway. Per their plan, Cooper leaned down and kissed Mason on the lips. It was the same sort of kiss he had given Mason out on the patio at the party last week to get Jack's attention—all for show.

Jack hoped that anyone watching would have no doubt that two men were loving Mason at the same time. Jack in the front. Cooper in the back. Mason pressed between them. Their hands roamed all over Mason's body, kissing his neck, his cheeks, his lips.

"You're doing great, baby," Jack whispered into Mason's ear as nibbled at the soft flesh there. "Just a little longer."

Jack felt Mason grab him by the shoulders as he leaned in for another kiss. Mason trailed his lips around to Jack's ear. Mason nipped Jack softly before he whispered back, "Not sure how much longer I can last. Fuck, Jack, I'm so hot right now that I could melt butter at fifty paces. I just want to take you home right now and lick you from head to toe."

Jack chuckled as he looked down at his baby. "Getting to you, is it?" He looked past Mason to meet Cooper's grinning face. He watched, entranced, as Cooper leaned in to run his tongue across Mason's ear. From the sensual light he had seen in Mason's eyes, Cooper was playing the roll of lover to the hilt.

Jack watched as Mason started to turn into an aroused pile of goo. His breathing turned rapid and shallow, his eyes had

taken on a half-lidded, glazed look, and the erection in his tight jeans looked ready to bust through his zipper.

As Cooper's hand lowered to squeeze Mason's ass, Mason groaned. "Jack, fuck!" Mason's head fell back onto Cooper's shoulder. Mason's eyes closed in ecstasy as Jack rubbed against his hard cock. Between Cooper and Jack, Mason looked ready to explode.

"Jack, I don't know how much more of this I can take," Mason groaned as he pushed himself against Jack.

Jack watched as Cooper used one hand to pull Mason's shirt up to his neck, baring his chest and stomach for all to view. The little glimmer of silver in Mason's right nipple twinkled in the club lights. Jack had convinced Mason just last week to get his nipple pierced. He was still fascinated with how sensitive it made Mason's nipple.

As Cooper reached over to gently pull on the small, silver ring, Jack groaned, "Damn, that's sexy." He saw Cooper look up at him in surprise, almost as if the man had forgotten that Jack was there. Seeing the lust blazing in Cooper's eyes, Jack chuckled lightly. Apparently, Cooper wasn't totally unaffected himself.

The grip of Mason's hands on Jack's hips was nearly painful in its intensity. It reminded Jack that Mason was close to losing it. Just to tease a bit, Jack ran his hand down Mason's stomach to the edge of those low riding jeans.

Mason moaned and pushed his hips into Jack's. "Jack, please—" he begged. The whine in his voice clearly let Jack know that playtime was over. If they didn't slow things down, Mason was going to lose it.



"Ready to go home, baby?" Jack asked, his voice low and husky.

"Oh, god, yes!" Mason exclaimed harshly, bringing a grin to both Jack and Cooper. Jack chuckled as he pulled Mason's shirt back down. He grabbed Mason's hand and pulled him toward the door.

"Come on, Coop, let's get our baby home and make all of his dreams come true," Jack said loud enough for anyone who stood close by to hear him. Cooper's grin was huge as he grabbed Mason's other hand and followed them out.

Just inside the door Jack felt Cooper jerk on Mason's hand, pulling him to a stop. He watched as Cooper pulled Mason into his arms and lowered his lips to meet Mason's. Cooper made a big show of kissing Mason. Jack even saw Cooper's tongue come out to caress Mason's swollen lips.

He was surprised that he wasn't angry that another man was kissing Mason. He was even more shocked that he was aroused by the sight of Cooper kissing Mason.

Jack chuckled as Cooper lifted his head and looked down at Mason. "Have I got plans for you, sexy. Jack and I are going to show you such a good time you won't walk for a week," Cooper said.

"Really?" Mason choked out.

As Jack pressed up behind Mason he could feel Mason's body tremble with arousal. Mason's expression was one of such stunned amazement as he stared up at Cooper, Jack couldn't help chuckling.

"Oh yeah, I'm gonna give your ass a pounding you'll never forget." Coop winked at Mason.

"Okay," Mason groaned.

Jack knew it was all for show, but he couldn't help but be turned on by the visual image Cooper drew for Mason. Being able to have someone else with them as they both made love to Mason? Who wouldn't be turned on?

"Come on, you two. There's a soft bed waiting for us back at my place. We can have a lot more fun there than standing here in the doorway," Jack finally said as he pulled on Mason's hand.

Coop laughed as he pushed Mason toward Jack. "We're still going to have to flip a coin to see who gets him first."

Jack watched Mason's eyes widen considerably as he laughed. "Who said we have to take turns?"

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As they walked up the stairs to Jack's condo thirty minutes later, Mason turned to look at Jack in concern. "Jack—" he whispered. His hand gripped Jack's tightly. "What if—"

"Baby, there's nothing to be worried about." Jack pulled Mason close up against him. "Coop and I will take good care of you. Promise."

Jack knew that Mason was starting to crack. He could feel the tension building up in Mason. It was all too much for Mason to take in. Mason just wasn't one of those people that could believe there were horrible people in the world like Wallace.

Looking over Mason's head to Cooper as he unlocked his front door and let them in, he motioned to Mason. He had to get Mason's mind back in the game and off of Wallace. Jack

knew that they could presently be under surveillance, so he could think of only one way to do it.

"Baby," he whispered against Mason's soft hair, "I want you to go sit on the couch with Coop."

Mason lifted his head and looked at Jack in confusion. "Why?"

"Come here, honey. I think Jack has a little surprise for you." Cooper said as he walked over to sit down on the couch. Cooper spread his legs to make room for Mason, then scooted back to sit at an angle against the cushions.

Baffled, Mason moved over to sit between Cooper's legs, his back resting against Cooper's stomach. Cooper reached around to lift Mason's shirt up to his neck, baring his lithe form again. When he ran his hands up Mason's chest to pluck at the nipples, Mason jumped.

"Coop, what—" Mason asked in confusion.

"Ssshhh, just sit back and enjoy, honey. Everything is going to be okay," Cooper said.

Jack knelt on the floor between Mason's legs and reached for Mason's pants. He quickly opened them and bared that hard cock. Jack reached in with his hand and pulled Mason's aching erection out. He was delighted when he saw the small drop of pre-come on the top.

"Jack—" Mason groaned, his eyes closed.

Jack looked up to see Mason reach down to stop him, only to have Cooper grab Mason's hands and pull them back. Jack nodded in approval when Cooper placed them up around his neck so that they were stretched over Mason's head.

"Keep them there," Cooper demanded as he slid his hands back down to Mason's nipples, flicking his fingernail across them softly.

"His pants, Jack, get rid of his pants," Cooper demanded. As requested, Jack quickly pulled Mason's shoes off and dropped them on the floor. He reached under Mason's ass and pulled the pants off.

Not to be outdone, Jack looked up at Cooper, a wicked smile on his face. "The shirt," he growled. Cooper chuckled as he quickly pulled Mason's shirt off and toss it to the floor. Both men groaned as they looked down at the beautiful, naked man lying in their arms. He was gorgeous, all lean muscle and dark hair.

Once again, Jack lowered his head to Mason's cock and wrapped his lips around the head. His tongue found the small slit in the top, the sensitive underside, and the long veined length. He moved his head, lowered his mouth until he felt the small, curly hairs tickle his nose, then back up again.

Jack lifted his head from Mason and licked down the side over Mason's sac, then down to the puckered flesh below. He felt his own cock harden to rock when Mason squirmed, groans growing louder.

As Jack lifted Mason's legs, Cooper reached down and grabbed Mason behind the knees and pulled them back against his chest. He held Mason open to Jack's questing tongue. "Fuck, Jack, that's so hot!"

Jack couldn't keep himself from smiling as he licked at Mason's sensitive hole and pushed against it gently with his tongue. Jack glanced up to see Cooper gently pinch Mason's

nipples between his fingers, lips nibbling on Mason's ear and the side of Mason's neck.

Jack could tell that Mason enjoyed the multiple stimulation. Mason's eyes were closed, his mouth opened just enough to let out his deep moans of ecstasy. Mason's hands were clenched tightly in Cooper's hair. Jack chuckled. His baby was in heaven.

Jack quickly pulled some lube out of his pocket and wet his fingers. He replaced his tongue, sinking his finger in to the knuckle. As Jack pumped his finger into Mason, he captured Mason's cock in his mouth again and lavished it with his lips and tongue.

Jack felt Mason lose control. Mason humped his hips wildly as he cried out. "Fuck, Jack, don't stop. Oh, god, please, harder!" Mason demanded.

Jack thrust his finger harder into Mason, faster. He inserted another finger and pumped again. Jack moved his fingers around and stroked Mason's sweet spot until he could add a third.

Mason pounded himself down on Jack's fingers so hard that Jack could barely keep Mason's cock in his mouth without hurting the man. Jack pulled his fingers out and lifted his mouth from Mason's cock to look down at his love.

"Ass or cock, baby? Which do you want?" Jack asked harshly.

"Ass," Mason cried out as he let loose of Cooper's hair and reached for Jack. But Jack grabbed him and quickly turned him over until he knelt on the floor between Cooper's legs.

Jack quickly undid his own pants and freed his hard cock. He poured some more lube on his cock then placed himself at Mason's sweet entrance and grabbed Mason's hips as he thrust in. As Jack impaled Mason, he heard Mason cry out.

Jack was just starting to get into a rhythm of thrusting when Mason looked back over his shoulder. Jack looked down at Mason to see the hard bulge in Cooper's pants pressing against his chin.

"Jack?"

Jack knew what Mason was asking. He was silent for a moment as he watched the thick tent in Cooper's pants throb intensely. Finally Jack nodded. "Just this once, Mason, understand?"

He watched as Mason nodded and turned back to Cooper. As he unbuttoned those pants, Cooper's hands came down to stop him.

"No, Mason, it's okay, honey. You don't have to—"

It was with a bit of apprehension and a lot of desire that Jack watched Mason smile up at Cooper and push his hands aside. When Mason opened Cooper's pants, Cooper's cock sprang forward and nearly smacked Mason in the face. Mason quickly grabbed at it and brought it to his mouth.

"Fuck, Mason!" Jack heard Cooper groan as Mason sucked him in to the root and back up again. When Mason's hands moved down to softly squeeze his sac, Cooper groaned in earnest.

Jack watched with a sense of awe as Mason generously tongued Cooper. He realized that he was watching his lover make love to another man, but it was hot—and it was Cooper.

Jack also knew that Mason would never do something like this without him there. That made it even hotter.

"Fuck, baby, that's so hot! Suck that beautiful cock. Show Coop how sweet that pretty mouth of yours is." Jack groaned as he pounded into Mason in quick, rapid jabs, hitting Mason's sweet spot over and over again.

Mason tightened around him, squeezing him like a vise. As he pounded into Mason, Jack saw Mason reach down and stroke himself to the rhythm of Jack's thrusts. He knew from experience that Mason's moans were sending vibrations down Cooper's aching cock. He had been on the receiving end of Mason's blowjobs before and there was no one better as far as Jack was concerned.

Mason erupted first and spilled his seed all over the floor, his deep moan of completion and suddenly hard sucking took Cooper over the edge. Jack watched as Cooper's back arched and he filled Mason's mouth to overflowing with a loud groan.

Mason's quivering muscles massaged Jack's pulsing cock. With a loud roar, Jack thrust himself into Mason one last time, the quick swell of his cock making it nearly impossible to move as he emptied himself into his love.

Jack couldn't move for several moments as he tried to catch his breath. The room was silent until Jack, with a groan, began to pull out. Mason, his mouth still around Cooper's cock, cried out in disappointment.

The slight vibration of Mason's moan vibrated Cooper's cock, causing him to moan. "Fuck, Mason!" Cooper started to laugh. The situation was just too funny. Every time one of

them moved it was like a chain reaction. It affected the next one, then the next, and so on.

Mason lifted his head and looked up at Cooper curiously. He turned and sat down on the bench seat and joined Cooper in his laughter. Jack just shook his head, chuckling at the two of them.

He quickly pulled up his pants and buttoned them, then reached for Mason's clothes. He smiled as he held them out to Mason. "Unless you plan on streaking around the house, baby, you might want to put these back on."

Mason laughed and turned slightly red as he reached for the clothes and dressed before sitting back down on the couch. Jack sat down beside Mason and pulled the man into his arms, tucking Mason's head under his chin.

Jack lifted his head and watched Cooper quickly shoved his softened cock back into his pants. Jack saw Cooper's laughter slowly trail away as Cooper realized what had just happened between them.

Jack watched the distressed look that come over Cooper's face as he sat back down on the couch. Jack knew that Cooper was feeling a little uncomfortable. He could even understand it. Jack had just fucked his Mason while Mason had sucked off Cooper. If that wasn't a little uncomfortable, Jack didn't know what was.

Jack reached over to pat Cooper on the shoulder. "Hey, Coop, it's okay. No harm done. It's not something we're going to do on a regular basis, mind you, but tonight we were all a little geared up. Besides, we pretty much guaranteed we'd show Mason a good time back at the club."



Jack glanced down at the dazed look still on Mason's smiling face as he snuggled back into Jack's arms. "I think we've accomplished that, don't you?"

Cooper looked down at Mason. He chuckled when he saw Mason's eyes fade closed. Mason was on his way out. Cooper chuckled at the dreamy look that started to cross Mason's face as he passed into unconsciousness. The poor guy had been sexed to death, but he sure had a satisfied smile on his face.

"See?" Jack asked as he too stared down at Mason. "Have you ever seen a more satisfied look on a man's face before?"

Cooper chuckled some more. "Yeah, yours!"

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## Chapter Eleven

Cooper opened the bedroom door as Jack carried his sleeping lover in and laid Mason down on the bed. Mason didn't move as Jack undressed him. As Jack handed Cooper Mason's clothes, Cooper folded them and laid them on the end of the bed.

Cooper smiled as Jack pulled the blankets up to cover his sleeping beauty and leaned down to kiss Mason on the forehead. "Love you, baby," Cooper heard Jack whisper to Mason before he followed Cooper out of the room.

"You want a beer?" Jack asked as they walked back into the main room.

"Yeah, that'd be great, thanks," Cooper replied as he went to sit down on the couch. He took the beer Jack handed him when Jack came back into the living room. Jack down across from Cooper in one of the two brown suede chairs facing the couch.

\* \* \* \*

"Coop, let it go, man. It was a one-time thing. Stop berating yourself over it," Jack said.

Cooper's faced scrunched up in confusion. "How can you say that? The three of us just had sex, Jack."

Jack sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he looked across at Cooper. "Look, Coop, it's real simple. Do you love me?" Jack asked.

"No, what ever gave you that idea?" Cooper asked in confusion.

"Do you love Mason?"

"I already told you—I love Mason, but not like that. He's my friend, my best friend. I would never do anything to come between you two," Cooper said.

"Calm down, Coop. That is what I'm trying to explain to you. You don't love me, and I don't love you, but we both love Mason, even if it's only friendship for you. We both care about him. Tonight was about two things—keeping Mason safe and giving Mason a fantasy."

"A fantasy?" Cooper asked incredibly, one eyebrow raised.

"Sure, haven't you ever wanted to be with two men at the same time? I know I have. And after the way we got Mason's fires burning at the club, don't you think he was fantasizing about it, too? Hell, he was practically turning to mush out on the dance floor."

"And that's okay with you?" Cooper was skeptical as he watched Jack.

"That depends on what your definition of okay is. You do remember that he asked me first, right? Do you really think he would have done anything if I had said no? I trust Mason to be with me and only me. Just as I will be with only him."

"You damn well better!" said a stern voice from the hallway.

Cooper looked up in surprise to see Mason walk into the room.

"Fool around on me and I'll feed you your balls with a spoon!" Mason promised as he made his way into the living room and moved to sit down in Jack's lap.

Cooper watched Mason grab Jack's beer and take a swig before handing it back to him. Then Mason glanced over at him and flashed him a wicked grin. "Hey, Coop."

"Hey, Mason," Coop replied sheepishly.

"Don't worry about us. We're cool. Just because I had your cock in my mouth doesn't mean I want to settle down with you and raise little Masons. That part of my life is for Jack and only Jack. But you're my best friend, Cooper, and you'll always be my best friend. Tonight changes nothing."

Cooper thought they were both nuts. Jack and Mason seemed so calm about the whole thing that Cooper started to wonder why he had such an issue with it. Jack and Mason didn't seem to have an issue with it. If anything, it seemed to have brought them closer together.

"By the way, Coop?" Mason said.

"Yeah?" Cooper asked.

"Nice cock!" Mason giggled. Jack burst out laughing.

"Mason!" came Cooper's appalled reply before he too saw the amusement in the situation and laughed himself. Mason sure had a way of taking the stuffing right out of the tough, dominant males in his life. "Sometimes you are too much, Mason."

"But you love me anyway, right?" Mason asked.

"Yeah, Mason, I love you—despite your outrageous mouth."

"You seemed to like my outrageous mouth earlier."

Coop looked over at Jack desperately. "Can't you control him?"

"Are you kidding? I love his outrageous mouth—especially first thing in the morning," Jack laughed as he wiggled his eyebrows.

Coop threw his hands up in the air, exasperated. "I give up. You two deserve each other."

Jack pulled Mason closer to his side and kissed the top of his head. "That we do, my friend, that we do."

\* \* \* \*

Mason opened his eyes to see sunshine sweep under the tightly closed blinds in the bedroom windows. He blinked several times as he tried to get the sleep out of his eyes. He rolled over and looked around the room.

He was alone, no Jack. Well, that just wouldn't do. Mason pushed the covers back and climbed out. He quickly pulled a pair of pajama bottoms out of Jack's dresser and one of his long shirts then pulled them both on. When he opened the bedroom door he heard voices coming from the kitchen area.

Mason shuffled his feet as he made his way down the hallway to the kitchen. Jack sat at the breakfast table drinking a cup of coffee. Mason ignored the other three men that stood in the room, all strangers, and walked over to squirm his way onto Jack's lap before he grabbed for the cup.

He quickly took several big gulps then handed the cup back to Jack. When he looked up he saw three grinning faces stare at him. "Jack, why are there three thugs in our kitchen?"

If hadn't been for the jeans and dress shirts that the men wore, they would have looked like thugs. Each one of them could have doubled as the entire defensive line of a football team. They were huge. Not a single one of them stood under six foot three. Mason wasn't sure he had ever seen men that big in person.

Jack chuckled. "These are friends of mine, baby. Sam Arnett, Alec Whitely, and Mitchell Jones. We were roommates back in college. They're here to help us with our little problem. They all run a private security firm so they have a lot of experience with this sort of thing. They're going to stay with us until we solve it. A little added protection, you might say. Is that okay with you?"

Mason slowly nodded his head as he took in the three large men. Sam had collar length black hair and a neck as thick as a tree trunk. Mason was pretty sure he was the biggest of the three men. He probably weighed three hundred pounds.

Alec had straight, blond hair. He stood just a couple of inches shorter than Samuel, but he looked nearly as big. The only thing that really distinguished him from the others was the small glint of sadness Mason could see in Alec's eyes as he gazed at Mason sitting on Jack's lap.

Mitch was the most unusual of the three men. He didn't have a hair on his head. The dark tattoos that encircled each of his biceps reminded Mason of a biker. Mason wondered if he ever wore leather.

They all nodded at Mason and lifted their cups to him. Jack looked lovingly down at Mason. "Guys, this is my baby, Mason Philips."

Sam laughed, "So, do we call him Mason or baby?"

Jack laughed over the top of Mason's head at Sam. "Be nice or I'll let him loose on you."

Mason looked over at Jack then quickly back at the three very large men. "Can we afford to feed them?" He had serious doubts that there was enough food in the entire state to feed these men.

All four men chuckled at Mason's astounded look. "Not to worry, baby, they don't eat that much."

Mason looked at the three massive men as they all sat down at the table across from him and Jack. "Right—and you don't like early morning blowjobs either," he quipped.

"Mason!" Jack exclaimed.

Mason looked back at Jack and winked as he chuckled. "What? You thought you were safe because I think you're cute? Don't bet on it." He grabbed for the coffee cup again as the three strangers laughed.

"Well, Jack, it seems you've finally met someone that isn't bowled over by your good looks," Sam stated.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Mitch said. "I think he's probably as susceptible as any other man that's breathing. He just hides it better."

"Nope, I think he's just smarter than the rest of us. Wouldn't surprise me in the least. He seems to know how to handle our Jack well enough," Alec added.

Mason's easy grin quickly fell off of his face as he glared at the three men that sat across from him and Jack. "My Jack!" he growled.

Sam held up his hands. "Whoa there, slugger. No offense intended, seriously. Jack is an old friend of ours. We've all known each other for years. None of us have any designs on him, never have, and never will. We're just friends."

Mason stared at the three men for several moments, wondering if they were telling the truth. Personally, he didn't know how anyone could be around Jack for any amount of time and not want the man. He certainly did.

Finally, Mason nodded his head and settled himself back in Jack's arms. "As long as you remember that Jack belongs to me." Mason knew he sounded possessive, but he didn't really care. Jack did belong to him.

"Hey, Jack," Mason said as he suddenly remembered the previous night's activities, "Where's Coop?"

"He had to run home. He said he'd be back around nine. Why?" Jack asked.

Mason shrugged his shoulders. "I was just worried about him."

"Don't worry, baby, Coop is fine." Jack patted Mason's back gently. "He should be back anytime now."

Mason glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearly 10:45am. "Um, Jack, what time did you say Coop would be back?"

Jack followed Mason's glance to the clock. "He said he'd be back around nine. He should have been here by now. I wonder what's keeping him."

Mason leaned in closer to Jack to whisper in his ear. "You don't think he's still upset about, well, you know?"



"I don't think so. He seemed fine when he left, just like our old Coop." He nodded toward the phone. "Why don't you go call him?"

Mason quickly jumped off of Jack's lap and reached for the phone. He held his breath as he dialed Cooper's apartment. When he didn't get an answer, he hung up and dialed Cooper's cell phone. There was still no answer. Mason hung up and quickly dialed Jordan's number.

"Hey, Jordan, Mason. Did Coop get called into work?"

"No. He has the next three days off as far as I know," Jordan answered.

"Have you seen him then?" Mason asked as he twirled the phone cord around his fingers.

"Not since we left the club last night. Why? Has something happened?" Jordan asked.

"No, but I'm worried about him. He left this morning to go home and change. He said he would be back by nine. It's nearly eleven now," Mason said as he glanced back at the clock on the wall.

"I'm sure it's nothing, Mason. You know how he can be sometimes when he gets an idea in his head. Why don't I drop in over at his place and check on him. I'll call you as soon as I've tracked him down. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Jordan, and don't forget to call me."

Mason hung up the phone and unwound the phone cord from his fingers. He cast Jack a worried look as he walked back across the room and climbed back into Jack's lap.

"Jordan's going to run over to his place and see what's up.

He'll call as soon as he gets there or finds Coop, whichever happens first."

"Baby, I'm sure he's fine. He probably just had some errands to run or something. He'll be here soon. Don't worry." Jack squeezed Mason close. He tucked Mason's head against his neck and kissed the top of Mason's head.

"Coop?" Sam asked. "Is he someone we need to know about?"

Jack nodded. "Coop is Mason's best friend. He left just before you guys got here. He's cool, a detective with the city. Seems to know his stuff pretty well. Jordan, the guy Mason just called, is his partner. They've been investigating this guy Wallace since that first incident at the club. They both think that Wallace has to have a record somewhere, but they can't find it. Coop said that Wallace is too confident not to have done this sort of thing before. He knew just what to do to make it look like he and Mason were just having a lover's tiff."

"And were they? Is there any way that Mason could know Wallace and not know he does?" Sam asked.

"Hell, no! I've known Mason for ten years. If he says he never saw the man before, he never did. Look, I didn't ask you guys here to make comments about Mason. I asked you here to help me keep him safe," Jack nearly shouted.

"Whoa there, Jack," Alec added, "Sam didn't mean it the way you think."

"Then how the hell did he mean it?" Jack yelled as he sat forward. A hand swiftly covered his mouth, cutting off whatever else he was going to say.

"Jack, they have a right to ask these questions. They don't know me, and if you asked them here to help protect me, you know they will be putting their lives on the line. I think that they have a right to know who they are protecting and why. As far as they know, I could be having a tiff with a lover," Mason said. "So stop yelling at them and answer their questions. I am not offended."

"See? I told you he was smarter than the rest of us," Alec laughed. He put his cup of coffee down on the table and looked across at Mason. "Okay, Mason, you tell us about Wallace. Could you have met him anywhere, do you recognize him at all?"

Mason shook his head as he looked over at Alec. "As far as I know, I have only ever met him once. That was at the club that first night. He started harassing me and then tried to drag me out of the building. Coop and Jordan stopped him and told him to back off. I've never even seen him again. I have no idea who he is or why he's doing this."

His body shuddered as he remembered the way that Wallace had talked to him. Funny ... Coop and Jack had talked to him just the same way last night and it had been a turn on, but when Wallace had done it had been disgusting. Go figure. Maybe he would have to ask Jack about that later.

"Tell us about the other times you've had contact with him? Anything specific you remember? Was someone following you? Did you see any strange cars? People walking that you've seen more than once?" Alec asked.

"Not really." Mason shrugged his shoulders, looking at Jack sheepishly. "To tell you the truth, I've been kind of distracted

lately. I haven't really noticed much about anything going on around me, so I couldn't tell you even if a marching band had followed me."

Mason watched the various emotions pass over Alec's face. Alec was looking between him and Jack with what seemed like a great deal of curiosity.

"Yes, Alec, this is him," Jack said, gaining Mason's attention.

Alec's head swiftly turned to look at Jack's face. He lifted one eyebrow as if asking Really? Jack nodded again as a wide satisfied grin broke out over his face.

"Him?" Mason asked, confused by the silent messages that passed between Jack and Alec.

"It's nothing, baby," Jack assured him.

"Oh, I don't know, Jack. Kept you in your pants and out of everyone else's all through college. I think it's a pretty big deal." Mason saw Jack give Alec a fierce glare as Alec continued talking. "Besides, don't you think Mason would want to know that he was the reason that you wouldn't get laid in college?"

"Alec!" Jack yelled at the same moment that Mason's mouth fell open in stunned silence. Mason looked from Alec's smirk to Jack's enraged face.

"Is that true?" Mason asked in surprise.

"Maybe?" Jack answered.

"Honey, maybe only works if you can't decide between white chocolate or dark. Either it was true or it wasn't. Which is it?" Mason demanded. He was shocked to see Jack's face turn red.

"In college, I introduced Jack to nearly every gay man I met, trying to get him hooked up. He turned them all down. After awhile I began to suspect that there was someone he was saving himself for. He refused to admit it of course. But I knew," Alec added.

Mason looked at Jack's embarrassed face. "Is that true?"

"I wasn't a saint, but yeah, I guess it was true. But I didn't know that at the time. I didn't figure it out until recently. I just knew that none of the guys that Alec introduced me to fit. I was only happy when I was back here with you."

"Jack—" Mason whispered as he caressed Jack's cheek with his hand and joy filled his eyes. "That's so sweet."

Mason leaned over and whispered something in Jack's ear that made him immediately turn red. But the grin on his face was huge as he quickly jumped to his feet. He grabbed Mason by the hand and pulled him toward the bedroom.

Alec, Sam, and Mitchell all jumped a little when they heard the bedroom door slam shut, followed quickly by Jack's deep chuckle.

Alec took a large sip of his coffee before setting his cup down on the table. He looked back down the hallway when he heard a loud, deep groan come through the bedroom door. "Anyone wonder what Mason said to Jack?"

Two laughing faces said yes. Alec chuckled. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I know, too. Lucky bastard!"

\* \* \* \*

Jack chuckled as Mason curled into his side after giving him a spectacular blowjob. Mason really did have a great

mouth, and he knew just how to use it. "That was nice, baby, thank you."

"Yeah, it was," Mason replied as he kissed Jack lightly on the chest. "I like having you in my mouth. You taste good."

"Thank god for that," Jack chuckled again as he hugged Mason. Having Mason for a lover was absolutely wonderful. He seemed to be open to nearly everything Jack mentioned to him. Jack wondered what else Mason would be open to.

"Hey, Mason?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Do you think you would ever like to fuck me?"

Mason was so quiet Jack wondered if he had said something wrong. "If you don't want to—"

"You'd actually do that? Let me fuck you?" he asked in wonder.

Jack lifted his head off the pillow to look down at Mason curiously. "Well, sure, why wouldn't I? It feels good, almost as good as being inside of you." He grabbed Mason's hand and wrapped it around his suddenly hard cock.

"Just the thought of you in my ass gets me so hard I could pound nails."

Mason's hand lightly stroked Jack's cock as he thought about it. Jack wanted Mason to make love to him, to actually fuck him? For some reason Mason had never considered that possibility. Jack just seemed like such a dominant male, always on top type of thing.

"You know I've never—" Mason began.

"Of course I do, baby, but what does that have to do with it? Don't you want to fuck me?" Jack asked.

"Well, yeah, I guess. I just never really considered it. I didn't think you'd want me to, well, you know," Mason said as he shrugged his shoulders.

Jack scooted up to sit against the headboard. He pulled Mason to sit between his legs. When Mason wouldn't meet his eyes, Jack grabbed his chin and lifted Mason's face to his.

"Mason, look at me."

Mason slowly raised his embarrassed eyes to meet Jack's. He looked so cute, all flustered and blushing. Jack knew that Mason wasn't used to discussing the more intimate side of their relationship. He usually just went along with whatever Jack wanted.

It wasn't that he didn't fully participate or anything. Mason just didn't usually initiate anything sexual between them. Jack hoped it was just a matter of getting used to being in a relationship versus being totally submissive.

While he liked Mason's more submissive nature, Jack didn't want Mason to feel like he had to do everything Jack wanted. If Mason wanted to try something or initiate sex between them, Jack was all for it.

"Baby, there is nothing that is taboo between us. You should have figured that out last night. I mean, I'm not into pain or anything, but if there's something you want to try, discuss it with me. The only way we are going to learn about each other is by talking and experimenting."

Jack gulped at the nearly feral look that suddenly came over Mason's face as he pushed himself onto his knees and leaned toward Jack, who felt like he had just unleashed a monster. And he couldn't have been more delighted.

"There's a lot of things I've read about that I'd like to try, Jack," he whispered, his voice husky with arousal. "Are you sure you're up for it?"

Both men's gaze fell to Jack's hard cock suddenly jutting up from his groin. "Hmmm, guess you are," Mason giggled as he leaned down and took Jack's aching cock into his mouth. Mason's mouth bobbed on Jack's cock several times as he wetted Jack's cock thoroughly then lifted his head to look at Jack.

"But right now, I just want you to fuck me," Mason demanded.

"Oh, yeah," Jack murmured as Mason scooted up to straddle Jack's lap.

"Lube?" Mason asked, holding out his hand.

Jack chuckled as he reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the lube, handing it to Mason. He watched, fascinated, as Mason squeezed some lube out on his fingers then dropped the bottle on Jack's chest.

"You might want to use that while I do this," Mason said, nodding toward the bottle of lube.

Jack quickly grabbed the bottle and dribbled the lube out onto his cock. He dropped the bottle onto the bed and reached for his cock. Jack's eyes watched Mason's face as he prepared himself. All the while, Jack slowly stroked his aching cock, spreading the lube around.

"Ready?" Mason asked, bringing his hands around to grab Jack's cock.

Jack eagerly nodded his head.



Mason scooted forward and placed Jack's cock against his tight entrance. He slowly sank down until he was fully impaled on Jack's throbbing flesh. Jack could tell from Mason's slight wince that there was a little pinch of pain.

Jack watched with awe as Mason took a deep breath and grabbed his hands, placing them on Mason's hips. Mason then put his own hands on Jack's chest to brace himself. His grin was very wicked as he looked down at Jack.

"Now, I'm not asking you, Jack Spencer, I'm telling you. I want you to fuck me hard and fuck me fast. And I do mean now, Jack"

Jack chuckled as he grabbed hard onto Mason's hips and thrust up into Mason. "Yes, sir."

Mason lifted his hips and dropped back down as he met Jack's thrusts. His head fell back and his eyes closed tight. "Oh yeah, just like that, Jack. Fuck me hard—let me feel you—all of you!"

Mason opened his eyes and looked back down at Jack. He moved his hands a fraction of an inch to tweak Jack's nipples, gently pinching them between his fingers. Jack moaned and his head sank back against the headboard as he pumped his hips faster.

"Not gonna last much longer, Mas—" Jack growled between clenched teeth.

Jack watched Mason grin down at him. His eyes widened as Mason grabbed a hold of his own leaking cock. "Good," Mason whispered as he stroked himself.

A sudden knock on the bedroom door had them both freezing in place. "What?" Jack yelled hoarsely.

"Sorry, man, but your friend Jordan is on the phone."

"Fuck! I'll be right there," Jack growled as he started to lift Mason up.

Mason rapidly shook his head. "No, Jack, fuck! I'm almost there. You can't go yet. Please!"

Jack could see the desperate look in Mason's face as he continued to stroke his hard cock. Making a quick decision, Jack rolled over and pinned Mason beneath him. As he grabbed Mason's legs and placed them over his shoulders, he whispered harshly "Okay, baby, hold on."

Jack felt like he was on fire as he began to rapidly thrust into Mason. Before, Jack had always been so gentle with Mason, but now he felt out of control as he pounded into Mason with all of his strength.

Jack could feel his orgasm build, his balls draw up tight against his body. He ached. His pulse pounded in his chest as he pounded into Mason's welcoming body. He knew he was just moments away from exploding.

"Jack—Jack—harder—oh fuck—" Mason bellowed as Jack angled his hips a fraction of an inch and hit Mason's sweet spot with each jab. It was too much for Jack and not enough all at the same time.

"Come for me, baby. Come now," Jack ordered as he watched Mason stroke himself. Just like that the top of Mason's cock blew off and he spurted streams of come over his stomach and chest, his body tightening around Jack like a vice grip.

Jack's roar followed seconds later as his orgasm filled Mason. Mason's quivering muscles milked Jack of every last

drop, stealing the breath from his body as he collapsed down onto Mason.

Heavy breathing was the only sound in the room for several moments. Finally Jack lifted his head and looked down at Mason's flushed and sweaty face. "Fuck!" he chuckled.

"That was intense."

Mason giggled. "Don't you have a phone call to answer?"

"Shit!" Jack regretfully pulled out of Mason and quickly ran to the bathroom to clean up and get dressed. He flashed Mason a quick grin as he headed for the door. "You going to get your lazy ass up or just lay there in bed all day?"

Mason shrugged his shoulders and wiggled his eyebrows. "You going to be back?"

Jack looked at Mason, all laid back on the bed as his hand idly caressed his flaccid cock. Jack pointed to where Mason's hand stoked himself. "Just keep doing what you're doing and I'll be back in five minutes to take care of that for you."

Jack sent Mason a hungry look before he turned and left the room, shutting the door behind him. A few minutes later, he was back. Jack clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms as he opened the bedroom door and stepped in.

Jack saw Mason turn to look at him, the smile on Mason's face slowly fading away. "What?" Mason asked as he sat up.

"Coop's missing."

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## Chapter Twelve

Jack watched Mason pace back and forth in front of the couch as he chewed on his fingernails. He wished that there was something he could do to comfort Mason. Unfortunately, he didn't think that Mason was going to feel better until they found Coop.

Jordan had gone to Cooper's apartment and found the door open, the apartment ransacked. Written in big black letters on the wall were the words ... You were warned. Mason is mine! Except for a few of drops of blood in the entryway and signs of a struggle, there was no trace of Cooper.

With Cooper being considered kidnapped, the police were officially investigating the entire situation as more than a simple stalker. Cooper's apartment was presently designated a crime scene, dusted for fingerprints, and searched for evidence. Jack and Mason waited for the detectives assigned to the case to come by to question them.

In the meantime, Jack watched his baby quietly go out of his mind. Mason was so worried about Cooper that he couldn't seem to sit still. Jack wasn't sure how much more he could handle.

"Mason, baby, why don't you come sit down?" Jack held his arms open to Mason. When Mason launched himself across the room and into Jack's arms, Jack pulled him close, kissing the top of his head. "Ssshhh, baby, we'll find him," Jack whispered into Mason's soft hair.

"I can't stand just sitting here and doing nothing. Why won't they tell us what's going on?" Mason cried as he clutched at Jack's shirt. "Why aren't they doing anything?"

"I'm sure they are working just as fast as they can. Jordan said that they had to collect the evidence from Coop's apartment, and after that the detectives would come here to talk with us. They need to know everything we know about Wallace."

"How is that going to help find him? Coop—Coop and Jordan already know everything. What more is there to tell? Wallace is whacked! He needs to be put out of our misery," Mason said vehemently.

"I know, but anything we can tell them may help find Coop. Jordan will make sure we know what's going on, okay?" Jack assured him.

Before Mason could answer him there was a loud knock at the door. Mason jumped up and ran to the door only to be blocked by Alec.

"Let me answer the door. You go sit down with Jack," Alec said.

"But—"

"No buts, Mason. This is my job. I'm here to protect you. Now go. Let me do my job."

Mason rolled his eyes. "Fine!"

Mason watched as Alec cautiously opened the door to see three men standing there. Two were dressed in suits, one in jeans and a dress shirt. Alec cocked an inquiring eyebrow at them. "Can I help you?" Alec asked.

"Who are you?" The one in jeans pushed his way to the front.

Alec cocked his head to one side. "Who are you?"

"Where's Mason and Jack?" He demanded as he stepped forward.

"Jordan?" Mason asked from behind Alec as he recognized Jordan's voice.

"Mason?" Jordan pushed his way past Alec and caught Mason in his arms.

He hugged Mason tight. "It's okay, honey. We're going to find Coop, don't you worry. We already have several new leads. Why don't we go into the living room? These detectives need to ask you and Jack some questions."

Jordan walked toward the living room, his arm around Mason's waist. "Where's Jack—and who is that guy at the door?"

"Jack's in the living room. That's Alec. He's an old college friend of Jack's. Jack asked him to come help protect me from Wallace. Have you heard anything about Coop? Do you know where he is? Does Wallace have him?"

"Hey, Jack, you hanging in there?" Jordan asked as they walked into the living room.

Jack nodded as he reached to shake the hand Jordan held out. "I'd be better if we could find Coop. Mason's about to lose his mind."

Jordan nodded and sat down on the couch, Mason sat down between them and curled into Jack's arms. Mason looked up as the detectives and Alec walked in. Alec sat down across from him, the detectives in the two other chairs.

Mason watched Jordan hold out his hand to Alec as he introduced himself. "Jordan Bennett.

Alec shook his hand. "Alec Whitely."

"Alec Whitely? And you know Jack from college? You attended Harvard with him?" Jordan asked.

Alec nodded, giving Jordan a strange look. "Yes, why?"

Jordan stared at him for several moments as if measuring his worth. "No reason, really. Just checking." But the look on Jordan's face told a different story. He knew something and he wasn't talking.

Mason wanted to ask what the hell was going on between Alec and Jordan, but he was more concerned with Coop.

"What about Coop? Do you know where he is? Does Wallace have him?" he asked.

"What can you tell us about Wallace? How well do you know him?" Mason turned to look at one of the detectives. He didn't like the tone in which the detective had asked his question. The tone seemed to hint at something.

"I don't know him at all. I've only ever met the man once. Jordan knows that; he was there. He saved me from Wallace when Wallace tried to drag me from the club." He looked over at Jordan in confusion. "Didn't you tell them this already?"

"Yeah, but they need to hear it from you. These are detectives Brown and Curtis, Mason.

Just answer their questions," Jordan said.

Mason gave a slight shrug and turned back to the detectives. "I never met Wallace before that night, nor have I seen him since, at least not in person. He broke into my apartment a couple of times. The first time he left ... stuff.

The second time he trashed my apartment and left a threatening message on my bedroom wall."

"Stuff? What kind of stuff?" the Detective Brown asked.

"Champagne, strawberries, flowers ... stuff like that," Mason replied, feeling like an idiot.

"Things a lover might give you?" the detective inquired slyly.

"Wallace is not my lover!" Mason crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the two detectives. "Never has been, never will be."

"But he left you items a lover might leave you? Why would he do that? Did he have some reason to think that you might return his advances?" Detective Brown asked.

"Look, I told you, except for that one time at the club, I have never even seen Wallace. I haven't talked to him on the phone or anything. I—do—not—know—the—man! Clear enough for you?" Mason replied.

"What is your relationship with Detective Cooper Thomas?" Detective Curtis asked.

Mason turned his head quickly to look at Alec when he inhaled sharply. His face was ash white. He watched with concern as Alec suddenly jumped to his feet and stalked to the bathroom. Sam trailed after him.

"Mr. Philips?"

"Oh, sorry," Mason replied as he looked back at the detective. "Uh, Coop is my best friend."

"Your best friend?" Detective Brown asked skeptically.

"Yes, why?" Mason started to get really uncomfortable with this line of questioning.



"Just exactly how close of a friend is he?"

"What exactly are you getting at, detective?" Jack asked suddenly.

"I am just trying to ascertain how close Mr. Philips is to Detective Thomas. It might have a bearing on our investigation. We need to figure out why Wallace felt Detective Thomas was a threat," Detective Brown explained.

"He was my best friend. What else do you need to know?" Mason said. "He taught me to dance, helped me move into my apartment, went to dinner at my parent's house. He helped Jack and I get together. He's always been there when I needed him. What else is there?"

"Is your relationship sexual?" Detective Brown asked.

"What?" Mason shouted, outraged.

"Please answer the question, Mr. Philips."

"Detective, I think you are out of line here. Mason has already told you that Coop is his friend, not his lover," Jack added.

"What about you, Mr. Spencer?" Detective Curtis flipped through some notes on his pad then looked back up at Jack. "I understand that you had an altercation with Detective Thomas a few weeks ago. Would you like to explain that?"

"It wasn't an altercation. I found Coop kissing Mason so I punched him. There was nothing to it. We worked it all out," Jack said.

"You found them kissing, but you still maintain that Mr. Philips and Detective Thomas do not have a sexual relationship?" the detective inquired as he looked up at Jack.

"No, Coop was just trying to make me jealous so that I would get my head out of my ass and realize how much Mason meant to me. That's it. He was doing it because he is Mason's friend, not his lover."

"So, Mr. Spencer has never had sexual relations with Detective Thomas?" the detective asked.

Mason looked at Jack, not sure how to answer that question. He also felt that Coop's sexual preferences were his own private business. Letting the cat out of the bag, so to speak, was not for him to do.

He glared back at the detectives. "Coop has never been my lover, nor will he ever be. Jack is my only lover." Well, at least he wasn't lying about that. Cooper wasn't his lover. Never had been. They had just played around a little last night.

"Could any of your past ... lovers ... have a beef with you? Could one of them be involved or helping Wallace?"

"I just told you. Jack is my only lover—ever! I have never been with anyone but him. I have no past lovers. Would you like me to list my sexual history? Will that make you feel better?"

The detectives looked a little suspicious. Jordan covered his mouth to keep from laughing as Mason continued.

"Fine! Up until a few weeks ago I was a virgin. Then this sexy man here popped my cherry," Mason said as he nodded toward Jack. "Since then, we have been fucking like rabbits. In fact, we've already done it twice today and a few times last night. If I'm lucky, we'll do it again tonight. I'm hoping to not

be able to walk by the end of the week. Does that help your case any?"

The two detectives just stared at Mason in stunned silence until Mason finally waved his hand in front of their faces.

"Hello, you still with us? Look, I realize my sexual history is fascinating, but snap out of it!"

The one detective that had been silent most of the time looked at Mason in astonishment.

"You've had sex five times in the last twenty-four hours?" Detective Curtis just shook his head at Mason's nod. "Man, I've got to get out more!"

Mason's mouth dropped open then he laughed. "That's all you got out of this whole conversation? How many times I've had sex? Dude, you do need to get out more. I suggest the Club over on 10th street."

"The Club? Is that where you met Wallace?" Detective Curtis asked.

"Yeah, Coop took me there to go dancing. Jordan, Neil, and Patrick were all there. In fact, we were there last night. Coop had this idea of drawing Wallace out after he trashed my apartment. He never showed. So, we came home. Coop spent the night ... on the couch ... and went home to change clothes this morning. When he didn't show back up here on time, I called Jordan."

The detective looked over at Jordan. "Does this club have video surveillance?"

Jordan shrugged his shoulders as he reached for his cell phone. "I'm not sure, but that's a good idea. I'll call Darius,

he's the owner, and ask him." He stood up and stepped into the kitchen to make his call.

The detectives both looked back over at Jack and Mason. "Is there anything else you can tell us that might help us find Detective Thomas?"

"I think at this point you pretty much know everything. Wallace is a mental case and, as someone who's less than a year away from getting my Ph.D. in psychology, I say that in a professional manner. He's off his damn rocker."

Detective Curtis quickly wrote something down in his notepad then looked up at Mason. "You attend the university? Could you have met Wallace there? Could he be in any of your classes?"

"You guys just aren't getting it. I've only met Wallace once. It was at the Club. That was the only time I have ever seen him. He made some sexual advances toward me. I said no. When he wouldn't take no for an answer, I tried to leave. At that point, he tried to drag me out of the building. Coop and Jordan stopped him. End of story. I've never seen the guy again."

"Then how do you know that he's the one doing this? Was there some reason you have assumed that he is the one that left the stuff in your apartment or ransacked it? Could it have been someone else?" Curtis asked.

"You tell me. You guys are investigating it."

When the two detectives looked confused, Jordan sat forward and handed them a file. "This is what Coop and I have found out about Daryl Carlton Wallace. We found his fingerprints at Mason's apartment during both incidents. He

has no record, not even a parking ticket. And that bothers me. He's a no-bit slimy private investigator. There should be something on his record somewhere."

"Private investigator?" Detective Curtis said, sounding interested. "That may be how he knows so much about Mr. Philips."

"Oh, I have no doubt. Jack hasn't even been Mason's partner for more than a few weeks and already Wallace knows about him. That tells me he's keeping pretty close tabs on Mason somehow. I just can't figure out how," Jordan said. "Cooper and I kept an eye on Mason's apartment for the first week following the second incident, but after Wallace didn't show we decided keeping Mason here at Jack's place was the best thing."

"Okay, Mr. Philips, were do you go? What do you do? I want you to walk me through a normal day for you—before and after Mr. Spencer came into your life."

Mason shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I work at a counseling center for troubled teens. I'm there usually until around five or so, depending on my caseload. I'm not in school at the moment. I'm taking a term off. I recently moved into a new apartment so I don't know my neighbors at all. I lived in my last apartment for about five years while I was going to school."

The detective wrote in his notepad again then looked back at Mason. "Okay, let's concentrate on your off hours then."

"Um, well, before Jack I usually went to see my parents or hung out with Neil, Patrick, Jordan, and Coop. If I wasn't with

one of them, I was home alone. If we went out it was usually to The Club. Other than that, I can't think of anything."

"And after Mr. Spencer?"

Mason chuckled. "Um, we've pretty much been here. We went out to the club last night, and we had a pool party at my parents' house a couple of weeks ago. But other than that—I haven't even been to work since the pool party."

"Why not? Did something happen at work?"

Mason shook his head. "No. Cooper and Jordan thought it would be best if I stayed home until Wallace was caught so I took a leave of absence. If Wallace could get into my apartment so easily, he could get me at work."

"Okay, I guess that's everything then. If any of you think of anything, give us a call, day or night. If you can't reach us, call Detective Bennett." The detectives rose to their feet, one of them handing Mason a card.

Jack walked them to the door while Mason went to find Jordan. Jordan sat in the kitchen table talking with Alec, who did not look happy. There was no sign of Sam or Mitch. Mason grabbed a juice out of the fridge and leaned back against the counter to stare at the battle of wills going on between Alec and Jordan.

Since Mason had walked into the room neither Alec nor Jordan had said a word. They just glared at each other. Mason rolled his eyes as he walked across the room and sat down in the chair between them.

"If you two don't stop glaring at each other, I'm going to strip off all my clothes and dance naked on the table!"

Two heads swung simultaneously over to look at Mason, eyebrows raised in shock. "You're gonna what?" Alec asked.

"You heard me," Mason replied with a grin as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Now, do I strip, or do you tell me what's going on? Because I have to tell you, I'm a little perturbed with both of you that you're acting like cavemen when my best friend is missing."

At least they had the decency to look ashamed of their behavior. Mason nodded his head, feeling Jack's hand land on his shoulder. He placed his hand over Jack's, smiling at both Alec and Jordan.

"Now, do you want to talk about this little issue between you two, or should we concentrate on finding Coop?"

Jordan answered first. "I believe that Alec and I can—put aside our differences for now. Don't you, Alec?"

Alec gave Jordan one last glare before he nodded his head. "Yes, for now."

"Good. Now, we know where Coop is not. The question is where could he be? Ideas?" Mason asked, sitting forward, elbows on the table.

"The police have been by Wallace's office and his house. Coop's not there. We've checked as many of Wallace's haunts as we can find. There's just no sign of Coop anywhere, or Wallace. I just don't know where else to look," Jordan added as he wiped his hand over his face.

"Has anyone thought to check out my place?" Mason asked curiously before he took a drink of his juice. He looked up to see three heads suddenly turned to look at him, a stunned silence filling the room.

"What?" It made Mason nervous the way everyone stared at him.

Jordan jumped to his feet and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket as he ran for the door. Alec was so close on Jordan's heels that the chair he sat in turned over and crashed to the floor. Mason jumped at the loud sound, nearly dropping his juice.

He looked up at Jack's shocked face in confusion. "What did I say?"

Jack shook his head. "We didn't think to look at your apartment, but we should have. No one's been back there since last week. It makes perfect sense that Wallace would take Cooper there. He's just twisted enough to see a certain symmetry in doing something like that."

As Jack's words suddenly sank into Mason, the blood drained from his face. This time he was unable to hold on to his juice as it fell to the table, juice spilling all over the place.

"Jack—" Mason whispered desperately as he reached his hand out for Jack's.

Jack grabbed onto Mason's hand and pulled Mason up into his arms. He gently rubbed his Mason's back. as Mason burrowed into his Jack's arms and buried his face in Jack's neck.

"It's okay, baby. We're going to find Coop. Just you wait and see. And you were so smart to think of checking your apartment. Coop would be so proud of you. You're keeping your head and thinking. The rest of us are just chasing our tails. If anyone can find Coop, it's going to be you. I'd bet on it."



"But what if we don't find him?" Mason whispered against Jack's neck. "Or what if we find him too late? What if Wallace hurts him?"

"We just have to hope for the best, Mason. Coop is a police detective. He knows how to keep his head in dangerous situations. He's strong, too. He can handle himself. Besides, he has us waiting for him to come home, and whatever happens, we'll be there to help him."

Jack rocked Mason back and forth until his cries quieted down to the occasional snuffle. His baby hurt so much. He couldn't even imagine what Cooper must be going through right now.

If he ever got his hands on Carl Wallace, escaping the police would be the least of the man's worries. He just needed five minutes in a room alone with Wallace. It wouldn't fix anything, but it sure would make him feel better.

"Hey, Jack," Sam interrupted. "Can I see you in the living room for a moment?"

Jack turned his head to see Sam standing in the doorway to the dining room. He had pad of paper and a pen clutched in his hand. There was a resigned but cautious look on his face. Jack felt a sudden chill go up his spine. This couldn't be good.

"Go ahead, Jack. I'm just going to clean up this juice."

Jack nodded his head at Mason and let go of him to follow Sam into the living room. Sam gestured to a chair while he sat down across from Jack. Sam placed the pad of paper on the table in front of him, pen in hand.

"I was wondering if you could tell me how you met Cooper. I've heard bits and pieces of the story, but not the whole thing," Sam began.

Jack stared at Sam like he had lost his mind. "You want me to tell you how I met Coop? Now?"

Sam nodded, gesturing to the pad of paper on the table between them. Then he held a finger up to his lips and pointed to the paper again.

Jack scooted forward and quickly read the large, bold letters written across the piece of paper, his mouth falling open.

YOUR APARTMENT IS BUGGED!!!

"It was at a pool party a few of days ago," Jack began as he grabbed the pen and wrote on the pad of paper before he turned it toward Sam to read.

ARE THERE BUGS IN EVERY ROOM? WHERE ARE THEY LOCATED?

"I hadn't seen Mason in a few weeks and so I was excited when his Mom called and told me to come over," he continued to speak.

THE LIVING ROOM, THE KITCHEN, AND THE BEDROOM, Sam wrote back before turning the paper back around for Jack.

Sam stood to his feet and gestured with his finger for Jack to follow him. Jack jumped to his feet and walked over to Sam, stopping at the side table. His eyes widened as Sam tilted the lamp sideways and pointed to the small, black, metal device inside the lampshade.

"Sounds like it was a great party," Sam stated

"Yeah, it was. Coop decided to make me jealous and kissed Mason. It worked. I went out of my mind and punched him. That was the altercation they were talking about earlier. But it wasn't anything, really. Coop admitted to me that Mason is totally not into him."

"Wow! That would have been interesting to see," Sam said as he pointed to another device behind a painting on the living room wall.

"It was a hoot!" Mason chuckled as he walked into the room. "You should have seen him, getting all possessive and shit. I still can't believe he punched Coop in the face, and over a stupid kiss. It wasn't even a good kiss—no tongue or nothing."

Jack grabbed Mason by the hand and pulled him over to the table to point at the lamp. He held his other finger up to his lips, gesturing to Mason to be quiet. When Mason's trembling hand showed his anxiety, Jack gave him a small squeeze and pulled him over to the couch.

Jack sat down, pulled Mason down to sit next to him, and gestured to the pad of paper on the table. Mason leaned over to read it. Those eyes quickly darted back up to his. They were as big as saucers. He grabbed the paper and quickly wrote his own message then handed the pad to Sam.

WHAT DO WE DO?

"I was jealous. Coop shouldn't have been kissing you. I understand why he was doing it, but still," Jack continued to fill in the break in conversation.

"What about you, Mason? How did you meet Cooper?" Sam asked.

JUST KEEP TALKING. MITCH IS DISABLING THEM RIGHT NOW, Sam quickly wrote before he handed the paper back to Mason and Jack to read.

"I was on my way to D.C. where I was moving to, pulled over to a motel and got skunked for four days. When I found my way out of the bottle I had crawled into, my parents had reported me missing. Cooper was the detective in charge of the case," Mason said.

"I didn't know that," Jack replied as he turned to look over at Mason. "Why did you never tell me that?"

"You never asked," Mason said as he shrugged. "Besides, I wasn't very proud of it. It was the day after that one night we spent together when I picked you up at the bar. I wasn't—I guess I just needed to escape for a little while."

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry," Jack said as he wrapped his arms around Mason. "God, I was such a jerk to you. I still don't understand why you ever forgave me. I certainly didn't deserve it, but I'm glad you did."

Mason laughed as he punched Jack in the arm. "You're still a jerk, but you're a cute jerk."

Jack looked up to see Sam lay a metal briefcase down on the table and open it up. A moment later, he pulled the listening devices off of the painting and the lampshade and put them carefully into the briefcase.

Jack was never so relieved as he was when Mitch walked into the room, several electronic listening devices clutched in his hands. He nodded once to Sam then dropped all of the small devices into the small, metal briefcase and closed the lid with a click.

A Promise Kept  
*by Stormy Glenn*

Sam let out a loud sigh. "Okay, guys, we're clear."

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## Chapter Thirteen

"Are you sure? Could there be any more that you may have missed? Could Wallace be watching us?" Mason whispered cautiously.

"No, Mitch got them all. Luckily there weren't any video devices, just the listening ones. Mitch is going to go over to your parents' house, Mason, and search there. I need you to write out a note to them telling them to let Mitch search their house."

"Can't I just call them?" Mason asked.

"No." Sam said as he shook his head. "We can't take the chance that there might be a device on their phone. In fact, it might be better if you just called them and asked them to come over here. Tell them that Coop is missing and you want them here with you. It would be better if Mitch can search without them in the way. You can explain things to them when they get here."

Mason hesitated briefly, then reached for the phone and dialed his parents' house. His heart beat heavily in his chest as he waited for his mother to answer the phone. Knowing that Wallace might be listening to his conversation made him nervous. He wanted to scream into the phone for Wallace to go away and leave him alone.

Instead, he just spoke softly to his Mom as he let the anxiousness in his voice convince her of his need for her to come over. Janet said that they would be right over. Mason hung up the phone and looked over at Sam.

"Okay, they're on their way. How long do you think it will take Mitch to search their house?"

"Not too long, maybe an hour or so. Mitch needs to go through every room in the house and check all the vehicles and phone. Don't worry, he's done this before. He knows what he's doing. He'll find everything."

Mason nodded as a sudden thought came to him. "What about my brother and sister? Should we have their houses checked out, too? Would Wallace bug their houses? And my office? What about my office?" Mason's voice was taking on a high pitched, emotional tone.

"Honey, if he bugged your office, Mitch will find the bugs. I think your suggestion that we check out Randy and Debra's places is a good one, too. You can never be too careful. See, I told you that you were the one thinking here," Jack assured Mason.

"Jack's right, Mason, you are using your head. If you think of anything else, no matter how bizarre it may seem, let us know. We may not think of it. You have to remember, I'm used to working with nutcases. Sometimes I forget the simple things."

Mason chuckled as he pushed his hair back from his face. "God, maybe you should try going to college. You could get a Ph.D. in shoveling shit."

"Mason!" Jack exclaimed..

"Oh, please," Mason said as he rolled his eyes. "I know I seem young and naïve, but I'm not stupid. Yes, I may think a little differently than you. That's certainly true. But I'm not an idiot, and you don't have to treat me with kid gloves."

"We're not trying to treat you with kid gloves, Mason," Sam said. "We're just worried about you. We know this is all very hard on you, and we want to make as easy as possible for you. None of us like seeing you hurt."

"I know that, but this isn't going to be easy on me no matter what you say or do. Coop is missing, and there's a maniac out there that thinks I belong to him. It doesn't get much more real than that."

"Mason—" Jack began only to be interrupted by Sam.

"Mason, have you ever thought of the fact that we need to protect you, that you may be what's holding everyone together?"

Mason looked over at Sam, an eyebrow raised in disbelief. "You have lost your mind."

"No, Mason, I'm serious. The rest of us—Jack, Alec, Mitch, Jordan, me—hell, even your friend Cooper—in our lines of work we see the dirty, grimy, sludge—the worst that world has to offer. Alec, Mitch and I all work in private security and protection. Jack is a lawyer. Cooper and Jordan are police detectives. We all work with the dregs of society on a daily basis. And then there's you."

"Me? I'm a college student. I work with troubled teens" Mason crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Sam. "You don't think that I see the terrible things that people do on a daily basis?"

"Maybe, but you still have hope that you can fix it. You're getting a psychology degree so that you can help troubled teens turn their lives around. The rest of us pretty much think that there is no hope. You give everyone around you hope



again. That's what you do for us. That's why we need you so much," Sam said.

"We have to protect you, baby. We can't let your—your light, your hope—die. If we try too hard, or if we protect you from what we see as the evil's of the world, it's because we need to see that light in you continue," Jack added.

"I've only known you for a few hours, but I already see something in you, something I lost somewhere along the way. When I protect you, even if I'm smothering you, I'm trying to protect that. Why do you think so many people have rallied around you, Mason? Because we have to—we need to. When I said that you hold everyone together, I wasn't lying," Sam said.

"So, if we try to sugar coat things or wrap you in cotton wool, its because we have to, not because you necessarily need it. You can't change the way you are, Mason, and neither can we. We all, every last one of us, care about you," Jack added.

Mason looked from Sam to Jack as he thought about their words of encouragement. The silence in the room was almost deafening. Finally, Mason chuckled as he shook his head. "I still think you're all full of shit, but whatever floats your boat."

Jack pulled Mason back to lean against him, one hand softly brushed Mason's chest, the other stroked his hair. He leaned down and gently kissed the top of Mason's head where it was lying on his chest.

"I love you, baby, you know that, right?" Jack whispered against Mason's hair.

Mason nodded his head as he leaned back to grin up at Jack. "I'm beginning to think you might."

Jack and Mason both looked over at Sam when he began to laugh.

"What?" Jack asked curiously.

"Oh, man, if you could only see your face right now, Jack." Sam laughed and shook his head. "Everything has always come so easily to you—school, work, everything. You got straight A's in college in your sleep. Now, you actually have to work for something. It's kind of refreshing to see."

"What do you mean?" Mason asked.

"We all know you love Jack, Mason. Hell, anyone watching you looking at Jack could tell that. But for the first time in Jack's life he has to jump through hoops and prove himself. He's never had work so hard to get something before. I think it's good for him," Sam continued.

Jack glared over at Sam. "Mason knows I love him."

Sam chuckled. "Yeah, okay, you go with that. Personally, I think it's good that Mason makes you work for it. It will make you appreciate it even more. If he just blindly accepted it, it wouldn't mean as much to you."

"Hey!" Jack yelled.

"No, I'm serious, Jack. Mason loves you. From what I've heard, he's loved you for years, so it's no surprise to any of us that he shows it to you constantly or tells you that he loves you." Sam pointed his finger over at Jack. "You, on the other hand, you're going to have to prove it to him."

"Jack loves me," Mason whispered.

"Of that, I have no doubt, Mason," Sam said as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "I think he would do anything for you. But I also don't think that you believe he loves you the way you love him."

Sam chuckled and sat back in his seat again. "Look, Mason, I'm in private security. It's my job to observe things, and from what I've seen and heard of you I think that you've believed for too many years that you would never have a chance with Jack. I think that you're still waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Jack glanced down at Mason when he didn't say anything. "Mason? Is that true?"

Mason shrugged his shoulders. He dropped his head down to look at his hands as he plucked a piece of lint off of his pants. "Maybe."

He yelped and grabbed onto Jack's arms as Jack suddenly stood up, Mason in his arms. "Sam, I think Mason and I need to have a little discussion, alone. Would you please let his parents in when they get here and keep them entertained? We shouldn't be long."

Without waiting for Sam to answer him, Jack carried Mason into the bedroom and kicked the door shut behind him. He sat Mason down on the edge of the bed and climbed in. Jack leaned back against the headboard and gestured with his hands for Mason to come curl up between his legs.

Mason crawled over the bed and settled himself down between Jack's legs, resting back against Jack's chest. Mason felt Jack wrap both arms around him as he laid his head against Jack's shoulder.

Jack was silent so long Mason began to get sleepy. His eyes dropped closed and he snuggled down into Jack's arms. No matter what was going on in the world around them, lying in Jack's arms was the safest place in the world to be.

Finally, Jack began. "Mason, I don't know how to prove to you that I love you."

"Jack—" Mason whispered, shaking his head to wake up.

"No, Mason, let me say this," Jack said as he gently covered Mason's mouth with his hand. "I don't have any way to prove it to you. All I can do is keep loving you. It's like when we had that argument. Coop told me that you didn't trust me, that you didn't trust in our relationship. That until you did, I was going to have to be careful with what I said to you. But one day, when we were arguing, you would stick around and argue back, no matter what. That is when you would understand that our relationship was for real and that I wasn't going anywhere."

Mason pulled Jack's hand off of his mouth. "Jack, I don't want to argue—"

"Neither do I, Mason, but you know we will. Pretending we won't argue is stupid. It doesn't mean we won't care about each other, it just means we have a difference of opinion. Don't kid yourself, Mason, we're both stubborn enough that it will happen."

"Well, I don't have to like it."

Jack almost laughed at the stubborn look on Mason's face. It was adorable. But, somehow, he knew Mason wouldn't like being considered adorable—hot, sexy, maybe even manly,

but never adorable. It just wasn't masculine, and Mason was very masculine. He was also adorable.

"No, you don't, and I don't like it either. However, it will happen. But it's a lot like my loving you. All I can do is keep on loving you until you believe that I do. Hopefully, one day, you'll believe me," Jack said.

"It's not that I don't believe you, Jack. I do. I guess it's just hard for me to believe that it's true. I've loved you for so long, nearly ten years. Most of that time, besides in my fantasies, you never loved me back. Now, suddenly you do. How can I not be cautious? What if I wake up tomorrow and this has all been a dream? What if I'm right back where I started, dreaming over you, watching you from across the room, doing something stupid so that you'll smile at me?"

"Not going to happen, baby. And I'll smile at you anytime you want me to." Jack smiled down at Mason, showing off his dimples. "I do love you, Mason. I don't know how it happened or why I was lucky enough to find you before you gave up on me. But if you love me enough that you're willing to stick with my stupid ass until I can prove it to you, then I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. I'm keeping you."

Jack saw the tears in Mason's eyes. He knew they mirrored the ones in his own eyes. It wasn't easy for either of them to lay their feelings out on the line like this.

"Jack, I need—" Mason was interrupted by the deep rumble of Jack's voice.

"I know what you need, baby," Jack murmured as he leaned down to kiss Mason. Jack's kiss was slow and thoughtful and sent shivers of desire racing through Mason.

Mason let out a low moan of protest when Jack suddenly pushed him aside. He watched as Jack rolled to the edge of the bed to stand up and quickly began to strip. Jack dropped the last item of clothing onto the floor and looked down at Mason, his face filled with lust.

"You're not naked, Mason," Jack said.

Mason, who was still lying on the bed fully dressed, his lust filled eyes slowly traversing Jack's glorious naked body, let a deep breath escape from his lungs. "Damn it, Jack!"

Jack chuckled as he climbed up on the bed and began crawling toward Mason. He moved up between Mason's legs until he was kneeling over the top of Mason. "We could both have a lot more fun if you didn't have any clothes on, baby."

Mason slowly reached down and started to pull his shirt up his abdomen. He could see the heat in Jack's eyes as Jack watched each inch of naked skin being revealed. Maybe he should take stripper classes. This seemed to really turn Jack on.

Mason pulled his shirt over his head, threw it onto the floor, and reached for the elastic waistband of the pajama bottoms he had stolen out of Jack's dresser. He could see Jack's eyes intently watch every move he made.

"Want to help me out here?" Mason asked.

He felt Jack's hands shake with arousal as Jack grabbed for the waistband of Mason's pajama bottoms and pulled them down. Mason assisted by lifting up his hips until Jack could pull them all the way down and toss them on the floor.

Mason's look was nearly feral as he gazed back up at Jack's naked body displayed so nicely above him. Jack was,

without a doubt, the sexiest man he had ever met in his life. And he was all Mason's.

"Need you, Jack," Mason whispered as he reached for Jack.

Jack settled down against Mason, their chests moved together as he leaned down to run his tongue across Mason's lips. "You have me, Baby."

Mason couldn't contain his moan as Jack took his lips and that tongue gently explored. It wasn't a heated, aroused kiss filled with passion, but slow and sensual, filled with longing and need. It was the kind of kiss Mason only dreamt about. It said that Jack couldn't survive without him.

Jack broke from Mason's lips and kissed his way around Mason's jaw to his neck. He reached under the pillow and grabbed their bottle of lube, flipping it open with his fingers. Squeezing a small amount onto his hand wasn't easy, but his other hand was too busy playing with Mason's nipples.

Jack kissed his way down Mason's arching neck and chest to his other nipple. He nibbled and licked the hard little nub. With his other hand he reached down between them and rubbed the lube over Mason's puckered hole.

Mason groaned and spread his legs farther apart when he felt Jack press in with one finger. Jack was really good at preparing him—really good! He reached down with his hands and grabbed his cheeks and pulled them apart for Jack.

"Damn, baby, you were made for me," Jack whispered as he sat back on his knees, looking down to where his finger was joined with Mason's body. His eyes were intent as he inserted a second finger and moved it around, much to Mason's delight.

A third finger was quickly added as Jack pumped them in and out of Mason's eager little hole. As he moved his fingers, Jack bent down and swallowed Mason's cock, his tongue licking up the drops of pre-come.

"Jack—Jack—need you—now, Jack," Mason begged.

Jack chuckled as he let go of Mason's cock with a little slurp. He pulled his fingers out and wiped them on his shirt before tossing it to the floor. Jack knelt between Mason's legs and hooked them over his shoulders as he lined himself up.

"Here I come, baby," Jack whispered as he slowly pushed himself into Mason's tight grip.

"Me, too," Mason cried out as his head arched back, his eyes closed, and his cock erupted. He shot pearly white cream over his stomach and chest. Mason thought he would pass out when, right in the middle of his orgasm, Jack pushed into him to the root.

"Jack!" he screamed.

Jack released Mason's legs. He leaned down until he was pressed against Mason's chest. He continued to move his hips as he looked down to watch Mason flushed face. "You are so beautiful to me," Jack whispered breathlessly, his face merely inches from Mason's.

Mason opened his eyes to look up at Jack, smiling at the wonder on Jack's face. He brought his hands up to cup each side of Jack's face and pulled Jack down for a soft kiss. As Mason looked into Jack's beautiful, blue eyes once again, Mason whispered up to Jack. "I love you, Jack Spencer. I always have and I always will."



Jack lowered himself down and mirrored Mason's motion, his hands gently cradled Mason's face. "Don't ever stop, Mason."

"I won't. I promise," Mason whispered back as he leaned up to kiss Jack again. He squeezed his muscles together around Jack. He could hear the small hitch in Jack's breathing that heralded an imminent climax. "Come for me, Jack."

He watched as Jack's eyes nearly crossed and Jack's breathing became rapid. But his hip movements remained slow and steady. It was a slow loving, gentle, unlike any either of them had ever experienced together before.

"Mason, love you, forever, promise," Jack groaned as he came, his cock pulsed inside of Mason as he filled Mason. Jack's eyes never left Mason's. Jack finally buried his head into Mason's neck, his breathing still rapid.

Mason wrapped his arms around Jack. He rubbed up and down Jack's sweaty back until Jack's breathing returned to normal. He always enjoyed Jack's love making, but this time it had been different. This time hadn't been about sex or getting off. It had been about connecting.

"I meant what I said, Mason," Jack said as he leaned back to look down at Mason. "I will love you forever. I promise. And you know from personal experience that when I make a promise, I keep it."

Mason chuckled. "Not a good example, Jack."

"But it's the truth," Jack countered.

"That as it may be, it's still not a good example. It may prove that you know how to keep a promise, but it also

proves that you're an idiot. Not something I like to think about when I consider my boyfriend."

"Partner," Jack corrected him.

"Huh?" Mason asked, perplexed.

"I'm not your boyfriend, I'm your partner. Lover—boyfriend—they both say that this is a relationship that might be temporary. Partner is much more permanent. I'd prefer husband, but I can wait for that."

Mason tilted his head to one side as he contemplated Jack. "You're serious."

"Hell, yes, I'm serious. I know we've only been together for a little while, Mason, but I love you. I want you with me forever. I want to come home to you every evening, curl up with you on weekends, buy a house, get a dog, and raise a family. You name it, I want it, but only with you."

Mason winced as Jack pulled from him and grabbed his shirt to clean them both off. As soon as Jack was settled against the headboard, Mason curled up in Jack's lap again, resting his head on Jack's chest. "I think I'd like that, too, Jack."

Mason jumped a moment later when he heard someone pound on the bedroom door. "Jack? Mason? Your parents are here."

"Crap!" Mason swore as he started to sit up. He had really been enjoying just sitting with Jack. He didn't want it to end. It seemed that they hardly ever got time to just talk, to just be together. Something was always interrupting them.

Mason knew that they were usually too eager to get their hands on each other to talk. He wasn't disappointed in that.

Jack made him feel loved and wanted, needed. But sometimes, he liked to just be with Jack.

However, the real world called. Mason scooted to the edge of the bed and reached for his shirt.

"Hey, Mason?" Jack called from the other side of the bed.

"Yeah?" Mason asked as he pulled his shirt over his head then reached for his jeans and pulled them up his legs.

"Not that I want to pressure you or anything, especially considering everything that's been going on, but do you think maybe you might think about moving in with me? I mean, lately, you've spent more time at my place than yours."

Mason smiled as he slipped his shoes on. He could hear the hesitation in Jack's voice. He knew that Jack didn't want to start the argument they had had before. "Yeah, Jack, I'll think about it."

"You will?" Jack asked as his head quickly turned to look across the bed at Mason, the hope evident on his face.

"On one condition."

"Anything."

"I want us to find a new place together. We're definitely going to need something bigger than your place, and my little apartment is a joke. We need something with an office for both of us and a yard for that dog you want."

Jack couldn't contain the huge grin that crossed his face. "Okay."

Mason just rolled his eyes as Jack walked around the edge of the bed. "God, you are so fucking easy."

Jack wrapped both arms around Mason and leaned in to kiss him. "You have no idea how easy I am."

A Promise Kept  
*by Stormy Glenn*

Mason laughed as he felt Jack's cock harden against him.  
"Want to bet?"

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## Chapter Fourteen

A few minutes later, Jack and Mason made their way into the kitchen to greet Mason's parents. Janet took Mason into her arms the moment he stepped out of the bedroom. Bob shook hands with Jack as he was introduced to Sam and Mitch. Once Mason could pry himself from Janet's arms, everyone moved to the kitchen to sit down at the breakfast nook.

"Coop has really been kidnapped?" Janet asked, shocked.

Jack nodded his head. "His name is Carl Wallace. Apparently he's a private detective here in town. That's why we needed you to come over here. Wallace bugged my apartment, and we think he may have bugged your house also."

"Why would he bug your apartment?" Bob asked.

Jack looked at Mason for permission to tell them everything. Mason nodded, his hand moving to hold Jack's under the table.

"For reasons we have yet to figure out, Wallace has decided that Mason belongs to him. He's gotten obsessive about it." Jack looked over at Janet, hesitating briefly. "Do you remember that night Mason came to your house, when he was so upset? We had had an argument? Remember?"

Janet nodded her head. "Of course I remember that night. Mason was so distraught. Coop had said that it was because of the argument between you and Mason, but I always thought it was something more."

"You were right, Mom," Mason said. "Before I went to your house I went to my apartment. Wallace had trashed the place. He left a note telling me to get rid of Jack or he would. He said that I belonged to him and that I had been very bad."

Janet gasped and reached for Bob's hand. "Oh my God, why didn't you tell me?"

Mason shook his head. "I didn't want you to worry, Mom. Besides, Coop and Jordan were looking into it. We can prove that he was at my house, that he destroyed everything. We just can't find him."

"What does this have to do with bugs at our house?" Bob finally asked.

"He knows too much about us. He destroyed Mason's apartment, warning him to get rid of me. How could he know? I hadn't told anyone at that point, neither had Mason. He hasn't even been back to work since then. He had to know somehow," Jack stated.

"I found electronic listening devices in the living room, kitchen, and bedroom a little while ago. We think he may have bugged your house, too. That's why we needed you to come over here. If he bugged your phone, he would know that we knew," Mitch said.

Bob looked over at Mitch, measuring him. "You know how to take care of these things? How to find them? Get rid of them?"

Mitch nodded. "Yes, sir, Mr. Philips. We all went to college with Jack, so he knows us and he knows what we can do."

Bob watched Mitch for several moments before he nodded his head. He dug his house keys out of his pocket and handed

them over to Mitch. "I trust Jack. If he says you're okay, then I guess you're okay."

Jack laughed. "Well, I'm not sure I would say he was okay, but he can get the job done."

Jack laughed as he saw Mitch glare at him. He opened his mouth to respond only to be interrupted by the ring of Mason's cell phone. Jack watched as Mason scrambled across the table to grab it and flip it open, Mason's face intent as he listened to the speaker on the other end.

Jack didn't know what to expect by the emotions that crossed Mason's face. He looked hopeful, excited, afraid, and saddened all at once. Mason finally handed the phone to Jack and dropped his face into Jack's shoulder.

"Hello?" Jack asked.

"Hey, Jack, Mason was right. We found Coop at his apartment," Jordan stated.

"Is—is he alive?" Jack asked hesitantly.

"Yes, but it's not good, Jack. Wallace really did a number on him. He's on his way to the hospital right now. Alec is going with him. As soon as I get done here, I'm headed that way. Why don't you all meet me up there?"

"We'll be there," Jack assured Jordan.

"Okay, I'll see you there, and Jack, you'd better prepare Mason. I mean it when I say Wallace did a number on Coop. Nothing major, but he's pretty beat up."

"Did he—did Wallace—was Coop—" Jack stammered, not quite being able to put into words his biggest fear.

"No, I don't think Wallace raped Cooper, but I can't be sure. He's in pretty bad shape," Jordan replied sadly. "We'll

know more after the doctor's exam. I will tell you this much. Wallace had Cooper tied down to Mason's bed, naked, and I'm pretty sure he was getting ready to rape Cooper when Alec and I broke in."

"Oh, thank god," Jack murmured quietly. "Okay, we're on our way now. We'll see you up there. Don't worry, Jordan, we'll get Coop through this."

"I know. But it's not going to be easy. Just remember that we haven't caught Wallace yet. Keep an eye out. We can't let him get to anyone else. I shudder to think what Wallace would do if he got his hands on Mason," Jordan said.

"I'll kill him first," Jack growled.

"I didn't hear that, but I agree with you," Jordan replied. "Look, I have to go. I need to give these guys my report. I'll see you soon."

"Okay," Jack replied. He hung up the phone and looked up at the eager faces around him. Jack took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He wrapped his arms around Mason and gave everyone the news.

"They found Coop. He's alive and on his way up to the hospital now. Jordan's going to give the police his report and then he will meet us up there. He wants us all to be on our toes, though. Wallace is still at large. He could be anywhere."

"Oh, thank god," Janet let out.

"We need to head up there. Mitch, I know you need to head over to Janet and Bob's place, but I wonder if you could ride with them up to the hospital first? I don't want them to drive alone. Sam can ride with us."



Mitch nodded his head. "Consider it done. I'll follow them in my car so I can leave from there."

"Mason, I need to speak with you for just a moment before we go," Jack said solemnly.

Jack stood up and reached for Mason's hand. He pulled Mason into the bedroom and into his arms. "We found him, baby. You found him. He was at your apartment. I told you that you would find him. You did great."

"What aren't you telling me, Jack. Don't hide it from me."

"Cooper is alive, but he's not in good shape. Wallace—Wallace did things to him, bad things. Coop's—"

"Did he rape Coop?" Mason choked out as tears clogged his throat.

Jack shrugged. "Jordan doesn't think so, baby, but it still looks bad. I don't know what else he did, but Jordan says that Coop is in pretty bad shape. He's alive, but beyond that—he's going to need us to get him through this."

"Oh god, this is my entire fault," Mason cried as he buried his face in Jack's neck.

"No, baby, no—this is Wallace's fault. You didn't do this. You didn't ask for Wallace to become obsessed with you. Wallace did all of that. Not you," Jack said as he brushed the hair back from Mason's face.

"But—"

"No, Mason. If you think that, then it would be my fault, too. If I hadn't gone after you, he wouldn't have kidnapped Cooper. He was just fine romancing you until I came on the scene. He didn't do anything violent before that."

"No—"

"Exactly, Mason. It's not your fault, and it's not my fault. It's Wallace's fault. He's a nutcase. You said it yourself. He's deranged. He hurt Cooper to teach you a lesson. He wanted you to get rid of me and you didn't. Does that sound like a sane man?"

Mason shrugged his shoulders. "I guess not. But—"

"Look, Mason, everyone is looking for Wallace. What we need to do now is get to the hospital and be there for Cooper. He needs us right now. Let's leave the catching of Wallace up to the police."

Mason nodded. "Okay."

"Let's get the tears out of those pretty, blue eyes of yours and get down to the hospital," Jack said as he tilted Mason's head back and gently wiped at his eyes.

"God, I must seem like such a wuss," Mason complained.

"No, baby. You're not a wuss. You just have a big heart, and you hurt when someone you care about is in pain. That's not a bad thing, Mason. It's part of who you are, part of the man I fell in love with. I don't ever want you to be ashamed of having strong feelings."

Mason blushed a little. "Really?"

"Oh yeah, honey. I figure if your emotions are strong, it won't only be your pain and sorrow. It will extend to your happiness and your love. And if you can love me so strongly that it brings you to tears, all the better for me."

Mason rolled his eyes. "You are such an ass." He turned and walked out of the bedroom to the living room.

"I thought you liked my ass," Jack yelled after him.

Mason knew that everyone had heard him when he walked into the living room. They all laughed as they tried not to look him in the face.

"Jack," Mason growled.

"Yeah, baby?" Jack asked as he walked up behind Mason.

"No more comments about your ass in front of my mother."

"Oh, I don't know, Mason. Jack does have a nice ass. Not as nice as your father's, mind you, but a nice one none the less," Janet giggled as she slapped her husband on his ass.

"Mom!" Mason wailed, his face burning brighter.

"Oh please, like I haven't ever had sex before. I'll have you know—" Janet giggled as she followed Bob out the front door.

"Mom!"

\* \* \* \*

"We're looking for Detective Cooper Thomas. He was brought in a little while ago," Jack stated to the attendant behind the nursing station counter.

"Are you family?" she asked without even looking up.

"Uh, yes. This is his baby brother, Mason," Jack quickly replied as he pulled Mason over to stand in front of him.

"Hmmm, Mason Philips? Are you Jack Spencer?" she asked as she finally looked up from the computer screen in front of her and smiled at them.

"Yes," Jack replied..

"He's in room 234. Go right down that hallway, turn left at the first corner, third door on your right. Oh, and only you

and Mr. Philips are allowed in right now, please. There's a waiting room right down the hallway where everyone else can wait," she said when she saw the small crowd of people that stood behind them.

Mason looked up at Jack, confused. How had the nurse known who they were? And if they weren't really family, why were they being let in?

Jack just shrugged his shoulders and headed down the hallway to Cooper's room. He pointed out the waiting room to everyone else then walked on to room 234, an anxious Mason close on his heels.

Mason peered past Jack's shoulder as he opened the door and peered in. He saw that Alec stood by the window. Alec's arms were crossed over his chest. Cooper lay in a hospital bed. An IV was in his hand and a heart monitor clip on his finger. A large, white bandage covered the side of Cooper's head.

Mason could see that Cooper was awake from the nervous way he twisted his hands in his lap. The only sound in the room was the constant beep of the heart machine.

"Hey, Coop," Jack said softly as he walked in to stand beside the bed.

Cooper looked up anxiously. "Jack. Where's Mason?"

"I'm right here, Coop," Mason whispered as he stepped forward. Tears formed in his eyes when he saw all of the bruises on Cooper's face and arms. He wanted to hug Cooper, but he didn't know where to touch the man where it wouldn't hurt. Cooper's face was black and blue and swollen so much he could barely look out one of his eyes.

Cooper grabbed Mason's hand, a worried look on his face as he looked between Mason and Jack. "He didn't get to you, did he?"

Mason and Jack both shook their heads. "No, everyone has kept me real safe. I still haven't seen him since that night at the bar," Mason said as he stroked his hand down Cooper's arm, mindful of the IV needle in the top of Cooper's hand.

Cooper sank back against the white hospital pillows and closed his eyes. "Thank god," he whispered.

Mason looked up at Jack, the confusion and worry clear on his face. He didn't know what to say to Cooper, how to make Cooper feel better, if there was a way to make him feel better. Sometimes there just wasn't anything to say to someone who had been through what Cooper had been through.

"Stop worrying, Mason, you're making my head hurt and my head already hurts enough as it is," Cooper said as he opened his eyes to look up at him and reached for his hand. "I'm okay."

"Jordan said that, well, that—did he—" Mason stammered nervously.

"I'm okay, Mason. Yes, he hurt me, but not like that. He tried to, but Jordan got there before he could. I'm beat up. I have a concussion, but nothing that won't heal with time. Most of what you see is just superficial. I'll be as good as new in a few days."

"Are you sure, Cooper? Don't lie to me. Don't try and hide this from me. It's better that I know up front," Mason said as he gripped Cooper's hand.

Cooper squeezed Mason's hand. He tried to smile through the cuts in his swollen lips. "I'm sure, honey. He didn't hurt me like that. He tried, and if Jordan had been five minutes later than he was, he would have succeeded. But it didn't happen. He heard Jordan breaking in and ran."

"I was so scared that he would hurt you like he wants to hurt me," Mason said, his voice wavering.

"Well, I didn't come out of this without some damage, but the bits and pieces are still all mine," Coop chuckled, then groaned when pain shot through his head. "Oh, I've got to remember not to do that."

"Have you spoken to Jordan yet?" Jack asked from the other side of the bed.

"No, he called to say he'd be here soon, but they have a lead on the asshole and he wanted to track it down. There are some detectives on their way over to question me, though," Cooper said as he turned his head to look at Jack.

"Probably the detectives we spoke to earlier. They've been put in charge of your case," Mason replied. "They're pretty much clueless."

"Did Jordan tell you that Mason was the one to find you?" Jack asked. "We looked everywhere we could think of to find you, but we came up empty. We were all sitting around the table trying to figure out where you could be and Mason asked if anyone had checked his apartment."

"I don't know if I've ever seen Jordan run so fast," Mason chuckled.

"I knew you would find me," Cooper murmured as he squeezed Mason's hand again.

"You did?" Mason asked in surprise.

"Well, sure. Everyone else tries to be all logical and shit. They over-think things. You, on the other hand, your logic is simple, right to the point. I knew that you would find me the minute he took me to your apartment, and I was right."

"I'm not sure whether to be relieved or worried that I thought of that. Does that say I identify with a psycho or what?" Mason chuckled as he smoothed some curls back from Coop's forehead.

"Well—" Jack started, only to let out a yelp when Mason reached across Cooper and slapped him on the arm. "Look at that, Coop," Jack wailed playfully as he rubbed his arm. "We've been together less than a month and already he's beating on me."

"Would you like to press charges, Mr. Spencer?" said a voice from behind them. Everyone turned to see the two detectives that had questioned them earlier standing in the doorway.

Cooper saved the moment, though. "Ah, detectives, you've arrived to take my statement, I assume?"

"Yes, if your friends could wait outside, we can get to this," one of the detectives stated.

"No," Alec replied from over by the window. "We're not leaving."

"No, see here—" Detective Brown began.

"No, you see here. Until Carl Wallace is caught and behind bars, something you can't seem to get done, I am Mr. Thomas' personal bodyguard. I go where he goes at all times. Do I make myself perfectly clear?" Alec asked harshly.

"You know, we can have you arrested for interfering with a police investigation, Mr.—" Detective brown said.

"The name is Alec Whitely. Here's my card. Please, have me arrested. But before you do, you might want to call your police chief and talk to him first. Tell him I said hi when you do," Alec smirked as he crossed his arms over his chest and stared at them, daring them to defy him.

Mason looked from Alec's stiff posture to Cooper, who just rolled his eyes. Mason watched the by-play; curious as to what was going on considering, that as far as he knew, Alec and Cooper had just met.

Then a thought came to him. He leaned over and whispered into Cooper's ear. Mason watched as Cooper quickly turned his startled gaze to look at Alec. Cooper's face turned pale, then he nodded his head. Mason chuckled and just shook his head. Well, that was telling.

"It's called karma, Coop. This is for all of those times when you fed me shit and teased me about my crush on Jack. It's coming around to bite you in the ass," Mason laughed.

"Honey, I never did anything bad enough to deserve that," Cooper said as he gestured behind him to where Alec stood.

Mason's eyes widened as Alec stepped forward to stand next to Cooper's side. "Oh, I don't know about that, Cooper. I seem to remember quite a few things that could come back to bite you in the ass," Alec smirked as he looked down at him.

Mason wanted to laugh when Cooper's face went from pale to flushed. Maybe having Alec around wouldn't be such a bad idea. Mason knew now from talking with Cooper that Alec was



his long lost lover. Mason thought Cooper was still in love with Alec, even if he wouldn't admit it himself.

Well, Cooper had been instrumental in bringing him and Jack together. It would only be fair the he and Jack were instrumental in bringing Cooper and Alec back together. It was the least he could do for a good friend.

"Mr. Thomas," Detective Brown began again, trying to regain control of the conversation.

Cooper glared over at him. "I am a detective, Brown, just like you and Curtis. I know what you need to ask me, and I will help you in any way that I can. However, I refuse to let you treat me like some victim. You can treat me and my friends with respect, or you can turn and walk right on out of here."

"Fine," Detective Brown said sternly as he pulled out a pad of paper and flipped it open. "Do you know the man that kidnapped you?"

"Yes, his name is Daryl Carlton Wallace, but I'm sure you've already been informed of this. Next question?" Cooper asked.

"Why do you think the alleged perp took you?" Detective Brown asked as he looked back up at Cooper.

"Alleged? Please, you and I both know who did this. I can pick him out of a line up. I can give you a detailed description, right down to the knife scar on his right thigh. And I'm sure you will find plenty of DNA evidence at Mason's apartment."

"Coop? I thought you said he didn't—" Mason cried out.

Cooper patted Mason's hand. "He didn't, honey, but he had plenty of fun jacking off all over the place. I'd say he did it no less than ten times the whole time he had me. To tell you the truth, I was a little surprised at his stamina myself."

"Detective Cooper, you are obviously acquainted with the perp. Can you tell me about your relationship with him?" Detective Brown asked.

"Besides when he kidnapped me, I've only met the man once. That was the night that he tried to drag Mason out of the bar. Again, I'm sure you already know this. How about you try asking me questions you don't already know the answers to?"

The detective rolled his eyes. "What questions would you like me to ask you then?"

"Well, you could ask me why he has such a hard on for Mason. Or you might ask me about the things he said while he had me, what I learned about him. I am a detective, you know. I tend to notice the little things," Cooper replied sarcastically. "Oh, I know, you could ask me about the warehouse he has where he was planning on taking me, or maybe about his accomplice."

"Accomplice?" Everyone in the room yelled as they turned to look at Cooper in shock.

"Cooper? Are you saying this nut job has someone helping him?" Jack asked.

Cooper nodded his head. "A little pipsqueak of a guy that Wallace called Ben. He wasn't very old, maybe around twenty-three or twenty-four. About 5'9", maybe 165 pounds.

Brown hair, blue eyes, glasses. Sound familiar?" he asked as he looked meaningfully at Mason.

Mason looked shocked. "You could almost be describing me."

"Yeah, I'd bet if the good detectives did a little more searching, they might find a connection to other men with the same description. Jordan and I always believed that this wasn't the first time this guy has done something like this, and if we don't catch him, it won't be the last."

"You mentioned a warehouse?" the other detective, the quiet one, asked.

Cooper nodded his head as he looked over at Detective Curtis. "He has a warehouse somewhere. I'm not quite sure where, but I got the impression it's down by Swan Island somewhere. He kept talking about the industrial railroad yard. There aren't to many of those around. I'd start there."

"Cooper? Do you think he's going to keep coming after me?" Mason whispered.

"Yeah, honey, I do," Cooper said as he glanced back at Mason. "You're the one that got away as far as he is concerned. He's obsessed with you. But I don't want you to worry. You have a lot of people keeping an eye on you. None of us are going to let anything happen to you."

"I'm not sure that is going to stop him, Coop. He's nuts. Just look at what he did to you because he was trying to teach me a lesson. Sane people don't do things like this. They don't harass people, kidnap people, trash people's apartments. They just don't do these things."

"Baby, we've never said he was sane, but that doesn't mean we're going to let him get to you either," Jack stated as he walked around the end of the bed to take Mason into his arms. "Alec will be here to take care of Coop, Sam and I will be here to take care of you, and Mitch is taking care of the other stuff. We've got this handled."

"Other stuff? What other stuff?" Cooper asked curiously.

"Remember that we couldn't figure out how Wallace knew so much? He was bugging Jack's condo. Mitch found several listening devices. Right now he's over at Mom and Dad's place. Then he's going to check out Randy's place. We can't be sure where all he's left them," Mason supplied.

"Do you still have these devices, Mr. Philips?" Detective Curtis asked as he stepped forward.

"Mitch has them. Why?" Jack asked.

"We might be able to track down where he got them."

"Mitch will already be looking into that. Believe me when I say that I have a lot more resources than you do. As soon as we know something, we will contact you and give you the information. Plus, I don't have to follow the same rules you do. Let me track this down," Alec stated firmly.

The detective watched Alec for several moments then nodded his head before he handed Alec one of his cards. The other detective, Detective Brown, started to sputter at his partner.

"You can't do that. We're in charge of this case. You can't let him keep evidence. How do you know he'll turn it over to us? This goes against all regulations, Curtis. You know I'll have to report you to the Chief."

"Go right ahead. I think that they can get more information than we can. Mr. Whitely is correct. He can work in areas we can't. I trust that he will turn the information over to us when he gets it. Won't you, Mr. Whitely?" Detective Curtis asked.

"Certainly, Detective Curtis. As soon as I have it, you will have it. In fact, here is my card, call me if you have any questions," Alec replied as he dug in his pocket then handed over one of his business cards to Detective Curtis.

"I'll do that."

"Well, Detective Thomas, if you can think of anything else that might help us catch this maniac, please give us a call."

Mason watched as the two detectives left the room. Detective Brown argued with Detective Curtis until the door closed behind them.

"Well, that was a barrel of laughs," Cooper chuckled, gaining Mason's attention. "Just how soon can I get out of this place?"

Mason patted Cooper's arm. "When the doctor says so, Cooper, and not before then. Now, I'm going to go let Mom know you're okay. She's in the waiting room right now with Dad. They're both worried about you. They wanted to see you, but the nurse said only Jack and I could come in."

"Tell them hi for me. And tell your mother we're going dancing as soon as I get out of here, which had better be soon. I hate hospitals," Cooper said firmly.

"Dad's going to be pissed, but I'll tell her," Mason chuckled as he headed for the door, Jack on his heels.

"Hey, Jack, can you stay a moment?" Cooper asked.

"Ah, yeah, sure, Coop," Jack said as he turned around to look at Cooper.

"I'm going to go see Mom. Come find me when you're done, Jack," Mason said from the doorway.

"Wait, Mason, I'll be just a moment. I don't want you going anywhere without me," Jack said.

Mason rolled his eyes. "I am a full grown man, you know. I've even been dressing myself for several years now. I think I can walk two doors down to the waiting room." He was out the door before anyone could stop him.

"I'll get him," Alec replied as he started out the door.

Jack watched him go, relieved, then turned back to look at Cooper. "What's up?"

"How well do you know Alec?" Cooper asked as he looked down at his hands.

"We roomed together in college. I've known him for years. He's also helped me out on several cases in the last few years. Why?"

"You remember me telling you about that long lost love of mine?"

Jack nodded slowly, his eyes widening in surprise. "Alec?"

Cooper nodded his head as he waited for Jack's reaction. It wasn't long in coming.

"Wow! I don't know what to say, Coop. That's, well, wow!" Jack exclaimed.

"Yeah, I'm kind of in that boat, too. I never thought I'd see him again. Hell, I haven't seen him in nearly ten years. You could have pushed me over with a feather when he came running into Mason's apartment with Jordan."

"Yeah, that had to have been rough." He watched Cooper for several moments. "What are you going to do?"

Cooper was silent for several moments before he shook his head. He let out a little chuckle. "I don't have a fucking clue."

"Yeah, I've been there before. Mason has had me in more knots over the last few weeks than I can ever remember being in. But I do have to admit, it was worth every minute of anguish and confusion to finally have him."

"I'm not sure there is a happy ending for Alec and me. There just seems to be too much water under the bridge for that. Besides the fact that we haven't seen each other in ten years, we still have all that shit from our past to deal with."

"Do you think you'll be able to work through it?" Jack asked.

"Hell, Jack, I don't even know if he's still into men, if he's married with kids, what? I know nothing about him except that you went to college with him. I don't even know what he went to college for."

"Criminology. But, what—" Jack started only to be interrupted by Cooper's soft, surprised chuckle.

"No shit? He got a degree in criminology? So did I. How weird is that?"

Before he could answer, the door swung open and Alec ran in. Jack could tell from the worried look on his face that something was wrong. His heart beat faster in his chest when Alec raised concerned eyes to his.

"Mason is gone. He never made it to the waiting room."

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## Chapter Fifteen

Mason knew when he opened his eyes that he wasn't in the hospital anymore. He also knew he was in a lot of trouble. His hands were tied in front of him, his head pounded painfully, and he lay on a dirty mattress that looked like it hadn't been cleaned in forever.

He remembered that he had left Cooper's room and walked down the hallway. He had turned when he heard a noise behind him, then nothing until he opened his eyes again.

Mason scooted himself up and leaned back against the wall. He glanced around the room and realized that he had no idea where he was. There was a single door across the room. Behind and above him, high above him, were two very large, very dirty windows. There was nothing else in the room, not even garbage, just Mason and the mattress.

Nothing except a large, metal hook hanging in the middle of the room from the tall ceiling. Well, that was creepy. Especially since Mason knew exactly who had him—Carl Wallace. There was no way it could be anyone else.

Mason pulled on the ropes holding his hands together several times before he gave up. Apparently, Wallace was just as good at tying knots as he was at kidnapping. There didn't seem to be anyway to get them off.

Mason's shoulders slumped as he leaned back against the wall. How was he going to get out of this? He knew Jack would come for him, but what was he supposed to do in the meantime? What was he supposed to do if Wallace came in?



Speaking of Wallace—Mason looked up when the door opened. He quickly threw himself down on the mattress and closed his eyes. He hoped whoever was coming in bought his pretense that he was still unconscious.

Mason squeezed his eyes closed as he heard the door close softly and the shuffle of feet moving closer toward the mattress. It was all he could do not to jump out of his skin when he felt a hand grab at his shoulder.

"Are you awake?" a small voice whispered. "Come on, wake up, please."

Mason opened his eyes just enough to squint through them. They opened wider when he saw a young man bent over him. He had never seen the man before. This was not Wallace. This man looked exactly like the one that Cooper had described as the accomplice, right down to the blue eyes and glasses.

"Thank god," the man whispered before he looked frantically back at the door then back at Mason. "Are you Mason?"

Mason slowly nodded his head. "Who are you?"

"My name is Ben, Ben Glassine." He lifted Mason back up to sit against the wall.

"Can you untie me?" Mason asked, nearly pleading.

Ben shook his head. "I'm sorry. I wish I could, but he'll kill me if I do. If he catches me in here I'm done for anyway."

"Please, untie me. We can get away together," Mason said as he held his tied hands out to Ben.

"There's no getting away from him. I've been trying for nearly four months now. He always finds me and brings me back. And then it gets worse."

"Worse?" Mason choked out. "Worse how?" Mason had a pretty good idea how it could get worse. He could see it on Ben's bruised face. His face was nearly as bruised and swollen as Cooper's, except many of the bruises had faded to yellow, telling Mason that they were old injuries.

Ben shook his head sadly. "Just—just don't fight him when he comes in. It will hurt a lot less that way. If you agree with what he does, he won't hurt you as much. Although, he's pretty pissed at you, so I don't know."

"Why me? I don't even know him," Mason replied.

"Who knows? I'd never met him before he took me. There have been a couple of others since then, but they didn't last long before he took them away. I don't know what happened to them or why he decided to keep me. I wish he hadn't."

"Jack will find me; I know he will," Mason said with determination.

"Oh man, whatever you do, don't mention Jack's name around him," Ben said vehemently. "The first night you spent at Jack's house, he ranted and raved for hours. He really hates Jack. Whatever you do, don't say Jack's name. He'll just hurt you worse."

"Were you there when he took Cooper?"

"Cooper? Was that the guy that he took to your apartment?" Ben asked curiously.

"Yeah. How do you know so much about it? How did you know it was my apartment?" Mason had thought that maybe

Ben was one of Wallace's victims, but how could he be sure? Could Ben be in on the whole thing?

"Are you serious? When Cooper wouldn't give him what he wanted, he took it out on me. I mean, I'm glad Cooper got away and all, but it didn't go so well for me after that," Ben replied with a small, bitter laugh.

"Jack will come for me, for us. I know he will," Mason stated again.

"Mason, you've got to give that up. Jack will never find you. Wallace is too good at hiding. He's too good at what he does. He's been doing this for years and no one has caught him yet. I doubt they ever will."

"You don't know my Jack," Mason assured him with a smile. "He won't give up until he finds me. He loves me."

"Maybe now he does, but will he love you when Wallace is done with you?" Ben asked. Mason watched Ben's face redden with humiliation, his eyes drop down to the floor as he rubbed a small cut on the side of his face.

"Yes," Mason replied without hesitation. "Jack will love me no matter what happens to me."

"Really?" Ben looked doubtful as he glanced back up at Mason. "You really think he will want you after Wallace is through with you? After he does the sick things he does?"

Mason looked Ben right in the eye and answered with what he knew in his heart. "Yes."

Ben gazed at Mason for several moments, and then his head fell forward onto his chest. He took several long breaths before he looked back up at Mason. "Okay, look, I'm not

making any promises here, but tell me about Jack. If I wanted to get in touch with him, how would I do it?"

Mason gave Ben Jack's cell phone number and address. He also told Ben what room Cooper was in at the hospital, just in case. "Tell him—tell him he made me a promise, and he needs to keep it. He'll know it's from me."

Ben looked up when he heard a noise from the outer room. Mason watched as his face paled and his hands began to shake. He quickly jumped to his feet and headed for the door. He cautiously opened it up and peered out, then back at Mason.

"You'll take me with you?" Ben asked.

Mason nodded. "Yes, Jack will get us both out of here. Just tell him where we are, and he'll take care of the rest. And don't forget to tell him what I told you."

"I'll do what I can, but you have got to do what Wallace says or he'll hurt you even more."

Mason watched as Ben slipped out of the room and quietly closed the door behind him. Mason strained to hear what was beyond the door, frightened even more when he heard someone yell and the sounds of flesh hitting flesh.

Shit! Mason flinched when the door was flung open and banged against the wall. Wallace stood there, a large, leather case in his hand.

"Hello, sweetheart. Did you miss me?"

\* \* \* \*

Jack paced the floor beside Cooper's bed. He clenched and unclenched his hands. His mind raced as he tried to not think

about what was happening to Mason at the hands of a deranged maniac, but it was nearly impossible. Every horrible little thing he could think of went through his head.

He couldn't believe that Mason had been kidnapped so brazenly, right in a hospital hallway, not twenty feet from him. He knew he shouldn't have let Mason go alone. He just knew it. But he had underestimated Wallace's desire to get to Mason.

Well, Jack wouldn't underestimate Wallace again. If he got his hands on Wallace, he was going to take a piece out of the man. If Wallace hurt a hair on Mason's head, there would be no one that would keep him from getting to Wallace.

"JACK!" Cooper yelled for the third time. "Knock it off, man. We'll find Mason."

"Before or after Wallace hurts him?" Jack's hand trembled as he ran it through his hair. "You more than most know what that man is capable of, Coop. You know what he's going to do to Mason."

"Mason is smart. He knows we're coming for him. He'll figure out something to keep himself safe until we get to him," Cooper assured Jack.

"How can he fight someone like Wallace? Mason doesn't have a mean bone in his body. He's—"

"Jack, Mason will be okay. You have to believe that or you're not going to be any good to any of us. Mason needs you to use your head right now, not your emotions. I know it's hard, but Mason needs you. You have to get it together."

Jack nodded. "Yeah, I hear you. I just can't help but think what he's doing to my baby right now, Coop. I just—"

"Hey, Jack, your cell phone is going off," Sam said as he walked into the room, Jack's cell phone held in his hands. He had barely taken two steps before Jack leaped across the room and grabbed it out of his hands and flipped it open.

"Mason?"

"No, this is Ben," a soft quiet voice replied.

"Oh, is there something I can do for you?" Something inside of Jack told him to go easy on the tentative voice on the other end.

"Uh—"

"Do I know you, Ben?"

Cooper waving his arms frantically had Jack looking up at him. Cooper mouthed the word accomplice to him, making Jack's heart freeze in his chest. This was Wallace's accomplice.

"No, but I know you. Look, Mason said—"

"Do you know where Mason is, Ben?"

Jack's fingers gripped the phone so hard as he waited for Ben's reply that they turned white.

"Ben?"

"He said—he said you could get us both away from Wallace if I told you where he is."

"Ben, do you know where Mason is?" Jack tried again.

"Yes," Ben whispered. "But you have to get us both. Mason said you would. He told me to tell you that you made him a promise and you need to keep it. He said you would understand and know the message was from him."

Jack's eyes closed as his anguish became too much to handle. He took several deep breaths before he was able to

answer Ben. "Yeah, Ben, I'll come for both of you, but you have to tell me where you are."

"Promise?" the small voice asked.

"Yes, Ben, I promise. Just tell me where you are." Jack watched as Cooper got out of the hospital bed and started to dress. He just shook his head. He knew telling Cooper to stay here would be pointless.

"Wallace has a warehouse downtown by the railroad tracks on First Street. It's an old, gray building with an antique sign on the side. There's a bar called Billy Bob's two buildings down."

"I know it. Can you give me the address?" He watched Sam quickly dial his cell phone and talk into it. Seconds later, the door opened, and Alec walked in followed by Jordan and Mitch.

"I don't know it. There's no address on the side of the building. But look, you need to hurry. Wallace is back, and I'm afraid of what he will do to Mason if you don't hurry."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the phone booth on the corner by the bar."

"Okay. I'm on my way. I want you to stay on the phone with me. Don't go back into the warehouse, Ben. I'll be there in just a few minutes."

"Kay," came Ben's frightened reply.

Jack waited until Cooper had his shoes on then headed out the door. He knew everyone was behind him as he hurried down the hallway to the elevators. He knew it was mere seconds, but it seemed like forever for the elevator to reach their floor.

"Ben? Can you tell me your full name?" he had to do something to keep Ben talking and take his mind off his own fear while he waited for the elevator to reach ground level.

"Benjamin Alexander Glassine."

"Benjamin Alexander Glassine. That's a good name. How old are you, Ben?" Out of the corner of his eye Jack saw Jordan writing down everything he said.

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty two? You're not much younger than Mason is. How long have you been with Wallace, Ben?"

"He took me four months ago. I couldn't get away. I tried, I swear I did, but he found me every time. I even tried to go to the police, but he always caught me before I could get to them. After a while it was just easier to stay. He doesn't hurt me as much when I do what he wants. I thought that maybe the guy he took to Mason's apartment could help, but he—"

"You mean Cooper?"

"Yeah, him. He was just so—I don't know. He wouldn't do what Wallace wanted, tell him what he wanted, no matter how much Wallace hurt him. Then Wallace got Mason. I thought that maybe his friend, Cooper, could help me since he got away. I just want to go home."

Jack looked back at Cooper, who sat in the back seat. "I'm sure Cooper would be more than happy to help you out any way that he can. He's very good at helping people. He helped Mason and I get together, in fact."

"Wow! That must be why Wallace hates Cooper so much. Not as much as he hates you, but—"



"Why does Wallace hate me?" Jack asked curiously. "I've never even seen the man, let alone met him."

"You took Mason away from him."

"Mason never belonged to him," Jack growled through clenched teeth.

"Try telling Wallace that. He thinks Mason is his, and he doesn't take no for an answer, believe me. Telling him no just gets you hurt more," Ben said quietly. "That's what happened to all the other guys Wallace has brought here."

Jack's heart started to pound rapidly in his chest at the implications of Ben's words. He looked back at Cooper, an eyebrow lifted. Mason wasn't the first? "Ben, just how many guys has Wallace had since you've been there?"

"Three—no, four. There was a guy here when he took me. Wallace got rid of him a couple of days after I got here. Since then there have only been three guys. I guess about one a month. They all go away after a few days, but for some reason he keeps me around."

"How did you get away this time?" Jack asked.

Ben was silent. Jack knew before he answered what he was going to say. "He forgot about me when he came back for Mason."

\* \* \* \*

Mason's heart beat frantically in his chest as Wallace stepped into the room. The large grin on Wallace's face scared Mason. He knew this was bad, very bad. Wallace was much bigger than he was, nearly as big as Alec or Sam.

Mason didn't think he would have a chance at fighting Wallace off, not that he wouldn't try, though.

"Did you miss me?" Wallace asked as he rubbed his hand over his unshaven chin. His gaze was intent as he looked down at Mason. "I sure missed you, sweetness. But now we're together, just like I said we would be."

Mason watched nervously as Wallace set the leather case down on the gray, concrete floor and opened it up. Mason couldn't see what was inside, but his eyes zoomed in on the long, black leather whip Wallace pulled out of it.

"You know I'm going to have to punish you for involving Jack, don't you? You were meant for me. You had no right to give away what was mine. You need to learn who is the master here, and it's not you, sweetheart."

Mason scrambled back against the wall as Wallace grabbed at his tied hands, but Wallace pulled him across the floor to the middle of the room anyway. He dug his feet in as he fought frantically to get away. Wallace just reached over and backhanded him.

Mason's head rang as he spit out the blood he tasted in his mouth. He lifted his head just as Wallace placed his hands over a large hook hanging from the ceiling. As Wallace walked back across the room, Mason pushed up with his feet and tried to lift his hands off the hook.

Wallace was faster. He had his hands on a rope and raised Mason up into the air until Mason's feet dangled inches above the ground. Mason could feel the rope on his wrists dig painfully into his skin as he swung above the floor.

Mason felt tears pool in his eyes as Wallace turned him around. He leaned his head back as far as he could when Wallace reached over to run a hand down his cheek.

"Now, see, sweetness, isn't this much better?"

Mason did the only thing he could think of. "Fuck you!" Mason yelled at Wallace, then spit into his face. Okay, not the smartest move he could have made considering his situation, but he was not going to let Wallace win.

Wallace slowly wiped the spit off of his face; his eyes glared at Mason. "Now, that wasn't very nice, sweetness. You're already in enough trouble for fucking Jack without my permission. Especially after you knew you were mine. I thought I had been very clear about that."

"I do not belong to you. I belong to Jack. I will always belong to Jack, and there is nothing you can do about it." Moments later Mason wished he had kept his big mouth shut as Wallace unfurled the long leather whip in his hand and snapped it several times.

"You will learn not to be disrespectful to your master, boy." Wallace yelled as he took a swing at Mason with the whip. It was everything Mason could do not to cry out as the leather bit into the soft flesh of his back.

"I am your master now, boy." With each word he said he whipped at Mason, again and again. "I am your life now. You will forget Jack."

"No!" Mason screamed. The pain become so intense he thought he might pass out. He knew he was bleeding. He could feel the drops of blood drip down his aching back and sides. His shirt had to be in shreds by now.

Lost in a fog of pain, Mason didn't realize that Wallace had stopped whipping him until he was grabbed by his chin. Wallace forced Mason's face to his. Mason opened his eyes to look at Wallace. He shivered when he saw the frenzied lust on Wallace's face.

"Have I made myself perfectly clear, boy?"

Mason used the last of his strength to raise his head and look at Wallace. He knew he was probably about to get himself killed, or worse, but he would not let Wallace win. He was determined to not give in to anything Wallace wanted.

"Fuck you!" Mason croaked out before he spit into Wallace's face again. "I will never forget Jack."

Wallace's eyes blazed with fury as he wiped the bloody spit from his face again. "You just don't learn, do you, boy."

Mason knew what was coming even before Wallace raised his fist. Mason welcomed the darkness that it brought. The last thing he saw before blackness claimed him was Wallace pulling out a large knife, a gleeful grin on Wallace's face.

\* \* \* \*

Jack watched intently out the front window as building after building passed by. Sam drove just as fast as he could. Mitch and Jordan were in the car behind them. Detectives Curtis and Brown were supposed to be meeting them at Billy Bob's Bar.

Hold on, baby. The cavalry is coming, Jack just hoped they got there in time. There was no telling what Wallace could do to Mason in just the small amount of time he had had him.

"There," Jack exclaimed as he spotted a small, brown haired man standing next to a phone booth. "That's got to be Ben. Quick, pull over here, Sam."

Jack had his seatbelt off and door open even before Sam brought the car to a halt. He jumped out of the car and ran up to the phone booth to grab the frightened young man by the arm. "Ben?"

"Y ... e ... s?" He turned his frightened eyes up to Jack's, cowering back.

"It's okay. I'm Jack." Jack could see the almost instant relief come over Ben's bruised and swollen features as he realized who had a hold of him. Then he saw the others; the fear filled him again.

Who—where's Mason's friend?" he asked as he looked at everyone as they ran up. Jack watched curiously as the fear in Ben receded the moment he laid eyes on Cooper. That was interesting.

"Cooper, since you're not quite up to par right now, would you mind staying here with Ben? Maybe he can tell you more about the other men that Wallace has been taking. We also need someone here to direct Curtis and Brown to our location," Jack said as he turned to look at Cooper.

He knew that Cooper wanted desperately to go in with them and rescue Mason, but Jack also knew that in Cooper's current condition Cooper would be more of a hindrance than anything.

Cooper nodded his understanding and reached out to grab a hold of Ben's arm.

"Where is Mason, Ben? Which building?" Jack asked as he looked around the rundown, desolate neighborhood.

Ben pointed to an old, three story, gray brick building that looked like it hadn't been used in years. The sign across the front of the building read, "Smithson Textiles.."

"Okay, Ben, you stay here with Cooper. The rest of us are going to go in and get Mason. If we're not out in fifteen minutes, get the hell out of here," Jack said.

"What floor is he on, Ben?" Alec asked.

Jack nearly smacked himself in the head. He hadn't even thought to ask that. He knew he was anxious to find Mason, but he really needed to start using his head before he lost it.

"He's on the third floor in the right back corner. Wallace has him in a locked room back there. But be careful when you go in. Wallace has that place set up with stuff all over the place. It's real easy to get lost in there."

"Okay, let's go, guys. Mason's waiting for us to come rescue him."

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## Chapter Sixteen

Jack tried to even out his rapid breathing as he followed Jordan and Sam into the front of the building. Alec and Mitch were coming in the back. The plan was for each of them to work their way up to the third floor and meet at the back right corner of the building where Wallace held Mason.

Jack and Jordan were going to get Mason out to safety, and hopefully a waiting ambulance, while Alec, Sam, and Mitch went after Wallace. Jack wanted to go after Wallace himself, but getting Mason to safety was more important.

The closer they got to the third floor, the faster Jack's heart beat in his chest. He knew Mason was just a little ways away. He just didn't know what kind of condition they would find Mason in.

"Damn it, Jack, you sound like a herd of buffalo. Wallace is going to hear us," Sam whispered.

"I'm good at tip toeing around courtrooms, not deserted buildings," he replied with a shrug.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Okay, but try to be a little quieter. We don't want to broadcast our arrival."

"Sorry."

Jack tried to be quieter, but he knew from the way that Sam glared at him he wasn't doing a very good job at it. All he could hope was that Wallace didn't hear them until it was too late.

They finally reached the third floor and met up with Alec and Mitch. Alec held his finger to his lips and pointed to a

closed door between them. They could hear the muffled sound of someone speaking as they walked around the room.

Alec stepped close to the door and listened intently for several moments. When he nodded, everyone except Jack pulled out their guns as they all got ready for what they might find in the room.

Alec held up three fingers and began to count down. When he hit zero, he kicked in the door and rushed in, Sam, Mitch, and Jordan right behind him. Jack brought up the rear.

What they found shocked Jack. Wallace stood in the middle of the room. He held a large knife in his hand. Mason, his hands tied over his head, swung from a hook in the ceiling. From the way Mason's face hung forward it didn't look like he was conscious.

"Drop the knife, Wallace," Alec shouted as he pointed his gun at Wallace.

"Get down on the floor," Sam added as he watched Wallace. "Jordan, Jack, get Mason down."

Wallace took one look at Jack and lunged with his knife to stab at Mason's body. "No, he's mine!" Wallace screamed.

Alec and Sam both took aim with their guns and pulled the triggers. Both bullets hit Wallace in the chest. Wallace dropped the knife and fell to the floor. He clutched at his wounded chest as he glared at them all with hatred in his eyes before he fell into unconsciousness.

"Mitch, the rope," Jack yelled as he tried to lift Mason off the hook in the ceiling. Mitch quickly reached over and untied the rope and slowly lowered Mason to the floor.



Jack knelt down on the floor and cradled Mason in his arms. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sam and Alec handcuff Wallace and put pressure on Wallace's wounds. They were not about to let Wallace die before he got his just desserts.

Jack smoothed Mason's hair back from his face. "Mason? Baby? Open your eyes for me, baby. Come on," Jack whispered desperately as he gently caressed the side of Mason's bruised and swollen face.

Jordan pulled off his jacket and laid it over Mason's naked body then reached for his cell phone and called for two ambulances, one for Mason and one for Wallace.

Jack lifted his hands then looked up at Jordan, anguish evident in the tears on his face. "God, Jordan, there's so much blood. What did he do to my baby?"

Jordan shook his head, kneeling down next to Jack. "I don't know, Jack, but he's alive. As long as he's alive we can get through this. Just hold on to him and let him know you're here. That's what he needs right now."

Jack lifted Mason into his lap and wrapped his arms around Mason. He laid his head down against Mason's as he murmured softly. He rocked Mason back and forth as he prayed the paramedics would hurry.

"Mason, I'm here now. Everything's going to be okay. He can't hurt you anymore, baby. I promise," Jack whispered against Mason's head. Tears fell down Jack's cheeks as he slowly rocked Mason.

"Come on, baby, open your eyes for me. I need to see those beautiful, blue eyes of yours. Please, Mason," Jack whispered desperately.

"Jack," Jordan whispered, "Jack, look, he's coming around."

Jack opened his eyes and tilted Mason back in his arms. He looked anxiously down at Mason's face. "Mason? Baby? Come on, wake up. Open your beautiful eyes for me, baby."

Mason didn't open his eyes, but his lips did move as he whispered something. Jack had to lean in to hear him. A moment later he lifted his head, tears still streaming down his face as he gazed at the anxious faces watching them.

"He wants to know what took us so long."

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## **Epilogue**

"Jack? Have you seen my swimming trunks? You know, the ones that Mom bought me for the pool party?" Mason yelled down the hallway of their new house. He looked down the hallway a moment later as he wondered why Jack hadn't answered him.

"Jack?"

There was still no answer from Jack. Mason started to get a little nervous. It had been six months since he had been rescued from the clutches of Daryl Carl Wallace, but he still got apprehensive sometimes.

He still had nightmares of his captivity and torture by Wallace, along with several scars to match those nightmares. Wallace had done quite a number on him. Most of the healing had taken place during the week he had spent in the hospital, but not all.

At Jack's suggestion, he started to see a counselor once a week. For the most part, it was helping. But there were still times when he felt that Wallace might be coming after him again.

Logically, that was crazy. After recovering from his injuries, Wallace had been locked up in a maximum-security jail to wait for his trial for the kidnapping and torture of Cooper, Ben, and Mason, as well as the murders of at least four other men.

Ben, who had been cleared of all involvement with Wallace after the police had determined that he was merely a victim,

had been reunited with his parents. He had promised to come back and testify to everything he knew, which Mason was grateful for. It would help put Wallace away for a long time.

Jordan and Cooper both thought that there were more victims, but they couldn't prove it, yet. Alec, Sam, and Mitch were using all of the resources of their security company to assist Cooper in his investigation.

Personally, Mason thought it was so Alec could stay close to Cooper and get to know him again. Cooper wasn't giving him the time of day in that area. He refused to have anything to do with Alec unless it involved the investigation. But, Mason had to give Alec credit. He refused to give up.

Mason walked into the living room of their new home. It was a beautiful home, one that he and Jack had picked out and moved into four months after he had been released from the hospital.

In the end, they had decided to buy a house instead of renting one. They wanted something that was theirs, something that they could decorate the way they wanted, inside and out.

While it had taken a little while to find, the house was just what they were looking for. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, an office that Jack and Mason shared, and a large, fenced in back yard. Just right for their future family.

Jack and Mason had both known the minute they saw the little English bungalow that it was perfect for them. It had taken weeks to choose just the right furniture, paint the walls, and decorate, but Mason was very proud of the finished product.

The entire inside of the house had been newly painted in rich earth tones, decorated with overstuffed couches and chairs in deep brown suede and light colored pictures on the walls. Mason particularly liked the contrast between the off white colored walls and the dark hardwood floors.

In a bid for compromise with Jack, Mason had purchased several tall bookshelves to house his many books and did his level best not to stack them on the floor. Jack had done a lot of compromising, too. He had learned to be just a little less ... organized.

"Jack!" Mason called again when he received no response. He knew his voice was tense, but he had started to get scared. Jack wasn't in the bedroom. Mason had just come from there. He also wasn't in any of the spare bedrooms, the office, the living room, or the kitchen. Mason was starting to get very worried.

"I'm in the backyard, baby," Jack yelled.

Mason put a hand to his chest as his heart started to beat again. He walked through the kitchen to the backyard, ready to rip into Jack for scaring him. But the moment he stepped out the door his lost his train of thought at the scene before him.

"Well, what do you think?" Jack asked as looked up at Mason from his sitting position on the grass. "Should we keep them?"

Mason couldn't help but laugh at the two small boxer puppies. One was chewing on Jack's fingers, the other tugging on the leg of his jeans. Mason felt his heart melt as Jack picked one up and held it out to him.

Both puppies were adorable. One was tan and white, the other black and white. "Where did these little guys come from?" Mason asked as he took the black and white puppy and sat down in the grass next to Jack.

"Well, there once was this mama dog who fell in love with a daddy dog—" Jack laughed.

"Very funny, smart ass. Now tell me, where did they come from?"

"Your brother has been keeping an eye out for me. I told him what I wanted, and he brought them over a little while ago. Aren't they cute?"

"They're adorable. Do we get to keep them?" Mason asked as he set the puppy down and reached for the other one.

"They're ours, baby, lock, stock, and puppy breath."

"Jack, what are we going to do with two puppies?"

"Same thing we would do with one puppy, I expect. Why? I thought you wanted a boxer puppy. Is one more a problem? They're brothers, and I thought it might be nice for them to have someone to play with. If you don't want them both—"

Mason leaned over to place a small kiss on Jack's lips, silencing him. "Two puppies is just fine." He reached over and slowly unbuttoned Jack's jeans, freeing Jack's hard cock. He had a wicked gleam in his eyes as he leaned over and ran his tongue along Jack's hard length. "I just wondered where we were going to put them while I thanked you for such a wonderful gift."

The End

A Promise Kept  
*by Stormy Glenn*

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