

DREAMING OF YOU

Ethan Day



Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

Dreaming of You Ethan Day

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by Loose Id LLC 870 Market St, Suite 1201 San Francisco CA 94102-2907 www.loose-id.com

Copyright © May 2009 by Ethan Day

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

ISBN 978-1-59632-922-5 Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Judith David

Cover Artist: April Martinez

Chapter One

Ever sit back and wonder how it is you'd gotten to a certain place in your life? I do that all the time. I'm never quite sure what the point of doing it is, but I can't seem to stop myself. I'm what my mother liked to call a muller, always chewing over something in my mind. When she wasn't getting onto me for mulling, she was usually after me for daydreaming. It seemed my family wasn't much in the way of imagination. I'd either hogged up every bit of it that had been allotted us when I was born, or I'd been adopted...perhaps switched at birth in the hospital?

* * * * *

The limousine began to pull away from my little English Tudor-style house, and I caught my reflection staring back at me through the tinted window. I cringed a bit, wishing my features were a little less delicate and a little more butch. My thin nose and high cheekbones would look more masculine with a stronger jawline. If it wouldn't come in so patchy, I'd have tried letting some stubble grow in.

I jumped at hearing a *pop* as the cork flew out of the bottle of Dom Perignon Nathan had pulled out of a small refrigerated compartment. Finn squealed, and we held out our glasses as the champagne began to bubble up out of the bottle. We all laughed as Nathan filled the flutes and placed the bottle back down.

"You guys didn't have to do all this." I couldn't help but admire my two very best friends.

Finn was absolutely stunning in a vintage floor-length black velvet spaghetti strap dress that made an X across the low scoop back showing off her soft white skin. She had tiny silver clips in her blonde hair, which opened up her face and brought her eyes into focus. Nathan was incredibly handsome in his black tux with his pale white skin and dark black hair.

"A toast." Nathan held up his glass as Finn and I followed suit. "To my best friend and the best business partner a man could ask for. May you achieve the bliss you so deserve as you embark upon your new adventure."

"Thank you, Nathan." I shook my head and began to take a drink.

"Wait!" Finn screamed, placing her hand on my arm. "I would like to add to those exquisite words." Nathan and I watched as she scooted up in her seat and cleared her throat. "Up your butts, boys!" Finn raised her glass before taking a sip.

Nathan and I looked at one another and smiled. I leaned over and gave Finn a peck on the cheek. "I'm going to miss you most of all, scarecrow."

"Uh-huh. How about kissing this one?" she asked, leaning to one side and rubbing her ass.

"And when you're done with hers..." Nathan added, doing the same.

"Yeah, sure... You can both do me a favor and hold your breath till it happens." We all reached out, clinking our glasses before sucking down the champagne.

I leaned back into the seat and smiled, watching the two of them swap naughty toasts. It was weird to imagine my life without the two of them in it. For so long, I'd spent almost all my time with one or the other, or both. It really wasn't all that long ago when my life, which up until that point had been very simple and extremely predictable, became a bit more complicated.

* * * * *

Nathan and I had decided to take a week off for the first time in the three and a half years since we opened our restaurant. There was a large service industry and trade convention in Atlanta, which we used to justify our taking a "vacation." The kitchen pretty much ran itself by this point, leaving Nathan to play, as he called it, with new dishes. Finn, who'd worked for us while she'd been going to college was now working for an interior design firm and had reluctantly agreed to come in at night to make sure the customers were, as she put it, "sucked up to sufficiently."

Our hotel was located next to the conference center, and I was looking forward to having a week where people were going to wait on me for a change. As we walked up to the front desk, there were two other couples in front of us registering for their rooms.

"I still don't understand why we can't share a damn room," I said. "All of a sudden you think you're a fucking Hilton."

"Aden, I'd rather have the skin flayed off my body than share a room with your chipper-morning-person ass."

I scowled at him. "Well, excuse me, Crabetha."

One of the couples finished its business and took off for the elevators. We walked up to the smiling girl behind the desk.

"Reservations, please," she said in her Southern-belle accent. She was smiling, showing off her white horselike teeth.

Nathan smiled back as he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. "Somers and Ingle."

I opened my leather briefcase and fumbled for my wallet. "I think you're just hoping to pick yourself up some hot Atlanta boys to drag back up to your room."

The girl behind the counter looked as though she was trying not to grin as she tapped on the keys of her computer. Nathan's face turned a bright shade of red, which always looked worse taking into account how pale his skin was.

"Considering how long it's been since I've been laid," he said under his breath, turning to his left to see if the people next to us heard, "I am certainly hoping for more than a release from work while I'm here."

The girl took our credit cards to run them through for authorization, and the man and woman to our left started to leave. As they walked behind us, the man, who was about six feet tall with a football player's build, dark hair, and a dark complexion, stopped and handed Nathan a business card.

"I would certainly love to help you with any type of release you had in mind." He fired off a wink and then turned to make his way to the elevators.

My mouth fell open with surprise and disgust, and I noticed Nathan was smiling from ear to ear. "Well, I hope you take into consideration that someone like that has probably screwed half the free world, being that forward." I placed my elbows on the cold marble of the desk.

"Then he should probably be really good at it by now, huh?" Nathan smiled and shoved the card into the pocket of his jeans. "You're just jealous that he didn't give that card to you."

"Ew," I said, taking the key and credit card back from the girl. As if I'd be jealous of that big, beefy wall of muscles...ripping my clothes off...forcefully grabbing my wrists...twisting me around...bending me over and feeling the head of his cock pressing against my...

"Are you coming?" Nathan asked.

I stopped chewing on my lower lip and reluctantly moved toward the elevator, maneuvering my briefcase in front of my crotch to hide the hard-on that had sprung up.

I met Nathan when I was in college. I was a Hotel-Restaurant Administration major and had gotten a job as a server in a fine-dining restaurant. Nathan was fresh out of culinary school and had just started as one of the sous chefs.

We clicked instantly and flirted shamelessly. He looked so hot in those black-and-white-checked chef pants, and I loved the contrast of his inky black hair and pale skin. His cheeks would turn a light shade of pink from the heat in the kitchen, which always reminded me of the way a tight ass looked right after you spanked it.

4 Ethan Day

It took about a week and a half before we wound up at his apartment after work, unable to get one another out of our clothes fast enough. For a month and a half we couldn't get enough of each other. It ended amicably, and while we made a shitty couple in a relationship sense, when it came to business, we were a perfect fit.

With a killer business plan and some financial help from our parents, we got a loan to open our restaurant. Nathan was never really interested in the business and public aspect of restaurants; his passion was in the kitchen. He loved creating the food. My infatuation was for the front of the house. I loved working with the waitstaff, dealing with the bar and wine list, and schmoozing the clientele. It was pretty much a perfect situation, and we both knew it.

After getting settled into our rooms, we went down to the bar in the hotel and made out a plan for the next day. He wanted to hit the trade floors to see the latest in kitchen design and cooking innovations, and I wanted to check out a few of the seminars. We made out a list of restaurants we wanted to check out while in Atlanta, hoping to see some new ideas we could steal and take back home and use for ourselves. We settled on one for that evening, and I'd asked the front desk to make us reservations.

Sufficiently cocktailed from the hotel bar, we climbed into a cab and headed off for the restaurant, taking in the sights of Atlanta from the cab. Once in the restaurant, we followed the hostess to our table, giggling from the effects of our cocktails. We took our seats and looked around, discussing the interior of the restaurant. The tobacco-colored walls created a warm atmosphere, and a horseshoe-shaped copper bar, separating the kitchen from the dining room, was centered in the back of the restaurant against the wall. There was a door on each side of the bar with waiters going in one and out the other. One large wall was painted with an antiqued plantation-style mural of people in tuxedos and evening gowns. The tables and floors were wood, and the table settings were immaculate with oversize, almost clunky, heavy pieces of silverware. The lighting was kept warm and intimate, which gave me a cozy, fuzzy feeling.

Nathan began assessing the menu, and I started perusing the wine list. A somewhat round and rather flamboyant waiter came to the table to greet us. He had that sort of coarse fluffy-looking red hair, which was brushed back and stood several inches off the top of his head. His face was peppered with freckles. He rattled off the specials, and I ordered a bottle of wine for the two of us. He smiled sweetly and took off toward the bar.

"He was a bit of a nell." Nathan had that mischievous little grin that always seemed to follow two or three Maker's Marks on the rocks.

"Shh!" I attempted a disapproving look but was unable to suppress a laugh. "He might hear you."

"He's a good twenty feet away, Aden. You're drunk," he added accusingly. "You always get supersensitive about hurting people's feelings after a couple martinis."

"I can't help it." I was continually flipping my knife over as he stared back at me with those big brown eyes.

"I know." He took a sip of water. "You're such a mommy."

The waiter came back with the bottle of wine and proceeded to open it while Nathan asked questions about particular items on the menu. The waiter poured me a taste. I took a sip and waved my hand to signal it was good to go. As Nathan ordered for the two of us, something he could do knowing my likes and dislikes when it came to all that was culinary, I looked around the dining room. My gaze settled on a man sitting a couple of tables behind Nathan. He was looking at me, and a little smile spread across his face, showing off his dimples. With his dirty blond hair, unkempt in that on-purpose way, he looked like a modern-day, beefed-up version of Tab Hunter. I guessed him to be in his mid to late twenties. He had one elbow on the edge of the table with a large hand folded into a fist underneath his well-defined jawline. I smiled back, a little too widely, unable to stop myself after the martinis. He'd do in a pinch. When I turned to look back at Nathan, too embarrassed to maintain eye contact with the man, Nathan gave me a suspicious look.

"What are you grinning about?" he asked as he set down his wineglass.

"Don't turn around and look, but I think the guy sitting a couple of tables back is cruising me."

"That doesn't surprise me one bit; you're one of the most stunning-looking men I've ever laid eyes on."

I felt my face burn, surely turning as red as the pinot noir in my wineglass. "Damn, that's one of the nicest compliments anyone's ever given me."

"It's true." Nathan leaned back into his chair. "I'm getting a hard-on just looking at you."

I busted out laughing and grabbed ahold of the table to steady myself. "You are such a pervert."

"Getting hard over a hot man does not make me pervy. To be perfectly honest, that's one of the reasons I didn't want to stay in the same room with you. I knew we'd be drinking and having a good time; I didn't want anything to happen that we might come to regret later."

I raised my eyebrows at him, surprised by his candor.

"Just because we aren't together anymore doesn't mean I still don't look at you from time to time and want to bend you over a prep table in the kitchen." Nathan picked up his wineglass and locked eyes with me. "We had some of the hottest sex I've ever had. There was a time when I couldn't get enough of your body. I craved you."

I gave him a little wink and felt the tiniest bit of melancholy take me. "Well, in case you didn't know, the feeling is completely mutual."

"The bedroom was never where we had any of our problems," he said with a smirk. "Our relationship is so much different now than it was then. We depend on one

another for our livelihood, and I would certainly never want to do anything to jeopardize that. It doesn't mean that I no longer care for you or desire you."

I let out a little sigh. "I know; it still makes me a little sad sometimes."

"Me too, but it's not like I'm that guy you dream about," he added with a teasing expression.

"Okay, I am officially declaring it 'unacceptable to make fun of Aden week."

"I'll do what I can," he said with a sigh.

The waiter brought us our salads, and we spent the rest of the meal discussing the business of our restaurant, congratulating one another for the things we had accomplished, and talking about the things we still wanted to achieve. My gaze periodically made their way back to Mr. Chiseled Jaw sitting alone at his table, being careful to not get caught by either him or Nathan.

After dinner, Nathan and I returned to the hotel. As we rode the elevator to our floor, I turned and looked at him. He had those sexy, sleepy, half-closed eyes from the wine, and his body was relaxed and at ease. Once on our floor, we arrived at my door first. He stopped as I slid my key card into the door. After it popped open, I turned to say good night, half wishing he would come inside and make love to me. He leaned forward and placed his lips on mine for a few seconds longer than normal. An electricity shot through my body with a force that made me realize exactly how long it had been since I'd had sex. He pulled away, saying good night, and turned to head for his room. I watched him saunter away to the next door. I went inside my room, shutting the door to prevent myself from doing anything to convince him to come back.

The room was dark, but the view was nice, with all the twinkly lights of Atlanta stretching out before me. Too nice to not be able to share. I began to pull off my clothes as I walked across the empty hotel room. It was too damn quiet. I noticed my iPod on the dresser, but that wasn't exactly what I needed to fill up the sudden loneliness that crept over me.

I thought about the man from my dreams...literally. It wasn't so odd that Nathan had mentioned him during dinner. Nathan loved to poke fun at what he perceived to be my more "out there" personality quirks. I really hadn't seen that much of Dreamy lately. I mean, he was still there. Hell, it felt as if he'd always been with me, more so during the times when I was at my loneliest, but also around for the good times, showing up to check on me, I supposed.

My dream man began visiting me when I was about fourteen years old. As a teenager, I'd been a real loner. I'm pretty sure that at the time I knew he was just some type of romantic archetype I'd invented to keep myself from feeling so alone.

Over the years though, Dreamy continued to return to me at night, and our relationship grew—taking on many forms and going down many roads—sometimes more than once. That's the beauty of having a man from your dreams as a boyfriend: do-overs. We met anew many times and many ways over the years...at spring breaks, at grocery stores, at bars, at gyms, at work. He always came on to me, and I always

resisted, to differing degrees, before falling under his spell. We'd been married several times, gone on multiple honeymoons, and had multiple orgasms.

My dream man had several different occupations as a doctor, cowboy, fireman, veterinarian. He never had a name, though. I always called him honey, sweetie, babe, or love. We even had a kid for a while. Her name was Sarah, and she appeared much the same way Buffy's sister, Dawn, did in season five of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer...*just there all of a sudden. She hung around awhile, but like a character in a David E. Kelley television show, she vanished at some point with no explanation—as if she'd never even existed.

While he didn't visit my dreams every night, he always came back to me eventually, like a long-running TV series. He sometimes went on hiatus but never seemed to get canceled.

It was the man from my dreams who I'd always secretly believed it was my destiny to meet and spend the rest of my life with. Six months away from my thirtieth birthday, and I'd spent my entire adult life looking for him in every crowd.

When I was in high school, I thought maybe he'd be a foreign exchange student. I've always had a thing for accents. Maybe he'd be a substitute teacher, an extremely hot fantasy, if I do say so myself. In college, I thought possibly a dorm roommate or the person sitting next to me on the very first day of every class I'd ever taken.

While I always hoped and dreamed that he'd come into my life and turn it upside down and turn me inside out, I didn't necessarily sit around waiting for it to happen. My mother always told me, "Aden, don't go putting all your eggs in one basket." So I didn't. I'd always dated, and I'd even had a few long-term relationships. At least what's considered long-term in gay years. It never bothered me too much when my relationships didn't work out, because in the back of my mind I knew it wasn't meant to be. The man in my dreams was out there somewhere...waiting.

Chapter Two

"We're here, idiot," Finn said, shaking her head and taking the driver's hand to help her out of the limo.

"Huh?" I asked.

Nathan smiled and leaned over, giving me a peck on the lips. "Come on, Aden, this is your night. Let's go party, babe."

I followed him out of the limo and onto the sidewalk in front of our fine-dining restaurant, Harlow's. It was housed on the first floor of a renovated downtown building. The huge plate glass windows were one of my favorite things about the restaurant. I smiled, thinking about all the weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, and other special moments. Over the past few years, I'd had the opportunity to be a part of people's lives in a small way. I wondered how many rotten days we'd turned into good ones. That had to be good for the karma. I really couldn't think of a more rewarding way to spend my life.

Finn grabbed my hand, gave it a little squeeze. "Come on, babe, it's time to soak up the love."

Finn could be the reincarnation of Carole Lombard with her short blonde pixie hair and her voluptuous figure. In spite of her extraordinary looks, the kind of looks that so often provoke jealousy, she possessed a vulnerability that made it difficult for anyone to dislike her.

I squeezed her hand back as Nathan opened the door for us. I laughed to myself at the significance of the simple act. That was the kind of person Nathan was, always opening doors.

We walked into the restaurant and I looked around, reminiscing about the first time he and I had entered this space. The beautiful hardwood floors, the antique mahogany bar, the leather-and-damask-covered banquet, the marble-top tables with the intricate wrought iron table bases. We were both so excited. I'll never forget the fear and exhilaration of that time. I remembered coming to the realization that we were now adults, even though it still felt like we were just kids playing restaurant.

The interior walls were painted in a soft, multicolored clay faux finish that contrasted beautifully with the worn exposed brick. The ceilings were sixteen feet high throughout the dining room and bar, but my favorite things about the space were the six large antique art nouveau hanging light fixtures.

"The man of the hour," Nathan cheered, holding up a hand in my direction as everyone began clapping and yelling. I smiled, showing off every tooth in my mouth as I tried to act modest. The bar was filled with a few customers, ex-employees, our accountant, a few people from our bank, liquor and food distributors, and friends of mine, Nathan's, and Finn's.

When Nathan said he wanted to close the restaurant to have a going-away party for me, I told him it was silly and completely unnecessary, but standing there with all our friends and colleagues around me, I was really happy he did. It felt like getting a great big hug. Everyone should have a party like that at least once in their life. Well, I guess we all do; we're just usually dead when it happens.

We made our way up the stairs and into the mob of people, smiling and shaking hands. My mind wandered back to Atlanta, and the one person who wasn't there who really should've been. It was the morning after Nathan and I had almost slipped back into some old ways.

* * * * *

Opening my eyes, I rolled over in my bed onto my back. Lifting my arms over my head, I stretched until my body twitched and I let out a little moan. Sunlight filtered in through the window as I listened to whistling coming from down the hall outside my bedroom. I smiled and rolled back onto my side, grabbing up a wad of blankets and sheets, scrunching them up between my arms and legs.

He popped his head into the open doorway and smiled. "Good morning, beautiful." He had a devious grin.

"Morning, babe."

"I have a surprise for you," he added with a wink.

"Do you, now?" I felt a toothy smile spread over my face.

"Yep." He was still hiding behind the wall in the hallway. "But you're gonna have to earn it."

"Oh really." I started to laugh.

"Mmm hmm." He raised his eyebrows at me.

"What are you hiding out there?"

"Patience, beautiful...all in good time."

I rolled onto my back and propped up my upper body with my elbows.

"In order to get your surprise, you have to do something for me."

"Okay," I said suspiciously.

"I want you to slide those blankets off so I can get a nice long look at you."

Never breaking our gaze, I used my feet to slowly pull the blankets down my body, revealing the naked flesh underneath. "How do I know this surprise is worth my trouble?"

"Oh baby, it's worth it. Mmmm," he moaned as the blanket slid down my abs, revealing the head of my morning-wood cock. "Keep going."

Continuously grabbing the blanket between my feet, it slid farther down over the shaft, clearing my hips, then past my balls and thighs. When I got the blanket to my knees, I lifted the remainder of my legs out from under the blanket and spread them, allowing each to fall in opposite directions, opening myself up, giving him a full view.

"You mean like this?" I asked innocently.

"Now it's a good morning." He disappeared behind the doorjamb.

He rounded the corner completely naked, holding a tray down, covering his privates. It was filled with pancakes, strawberries, orange juice, and bacon.

"No sausage?" I asked with a frown.

"Oh, I have plenty of sausage for you." He climbed onto the bed on his knees and shimmied closer to me. He set the tray down next to me, moving his tight, ripped body over mine, and leaned down. He placed his lips over mine, gently sliding his tongue into my mouth.

I reached up, running my fingers over his firm, sculpted chest, lightly taunting his hard nipples. Pulling away, he sat up, straddling my thighs, then settled down so his balls pressed into mine. His semihard cock levitated just over mine, which was throbbing as it pressed into my stomach.

"Fuck, you're hot, love," I managed to get out while biting my lower lip.

That devilish smile returned, and he took a pancake off the tray. He picked up a small pitcher of syrup, lightly drizzling the pancake and rolling it up in one hand like a cigarette. He handed it to me. "That's for you, sweets."

I took it from him and smiled as I took a bite out of it.

He lifted the pitcher and drizzled its contents over my cock. I gasped as the warm syrup hit my skin.

"This is for me." He shimmied down and took my cock into his hot mouth.

"Fuck," I said as he took me all the way down into the back of his throat. I closed my eyes as a deep moan escaped from him, vibrating my dick as he worked his way up and down the shaft. I tried to concentrate on the sensation as a beeping started to go off somewhere in the distance. I took another bite of the pancake and, with a mouth full of food, mumbled, "It's annoying...what is that noise?"

"I don't hear anything," he mumbled back, through a mouth full of my dick.

"How can you not hear that?" I asked, chewing the pancake as the pressure of his mouth on my cock got stronger. "It's getting louder."

"Ignore it," he said, sucking harder, rolling his tongue over the head as he expertly worked his mouth up and down.

I began moaning and breathing harder, thrashing my head back and forth over the pillow.

"Baby!" I screamed out, opening my eyes as I sat up in the bed.

My torso was glistening with sweat as I looked around the hotel room, trying to get my bearings. I turned to the side, glancing at the travel alarm clock sitting on the nightstand.

"Son of a bitch!" I reached over to shut off the alarm. "Your timing sucks ass," I added, shooting the clock a dirty look. I tossed the blanket off me and looked down at my hard-on. "Sorry, buddy...it was just a dream."

I flung my legs over the side of the bed and lifted myself up. Mildly irritated that the morning sex with my nocturnal husband had been interrupted, I walked into the bathroom and opened the shower door. I reached in, turned the faucet on, and stumbled over to the toilet. As the water spilled down onto the shower floor, I did my little pee-pee dance, waiting for my erection to subside.

* * * * *

I stepped out of the hotel shower and heard my cell phone ringing. I grabbed a towel, ran out of the bathroom, naked and dripping wet, and picked up the phone.

"Good morning, sexy," Finn said.

I met Finn when she came into the restaurant looking for a job. I hired her to wait tables, and while she was never what I would consider a great waitress in the technical sense, she had this way of bewitching people. She had these silent-movie-star eyes, large and full of whatever expression she chose to convey with them. Finn's the only person I'd ever met who could communicate completely without ever opening her mouth. She also had this uncanny ability to assess an individual and know exactly what she could get away with. It said a lot about our friendship that I'd never actually asked her to move in with me. At some point she'd just spent the night and never left.

"Did you get any dick last night?"

Almost, I thought. "No," I said, as if the suggestion was completely ridiculous. "I'm not down here to go whoring."

"Two birds with one stone, baby. If you don't stop ignoring little Aden, he'll just rot right off your body."

I laughed as I wedged the phone between my ear and shoulder and began drying myself off. "Spare me, you little nymph. How'd it go last night?"

"Alas, I went home alone as well. My first night alone with you out of town, and I got nothing."

"I meant with the restaurant, hoochie mama." I ran the fluffy white towel over my stomach and down between my legs. "Me-itis."

"Oh, it was fine, a good time was had by all, but you, you're at a convention. You should be having hot, nasty sex with strangers; that's the rule."

"I must have missed that in the brochure."

"Well, the next time I call, you better have some juicy details for me, damn it. The only fucking reason I agreed to work at the restaurant this week was so you'd go to Atlanta and get you a piece or two or three."

I sat down on the bed, drying off my legs and feet. "You are so vulgar, you nasty girl."

"Things worth doing are worth doing well." She seemed to pause for a moment, as if waiting for a retort, and then added, "Well, Prudella, I better get off here and go to work, but for God's sake, live a little, will ya?"

"I'll try. I'm putting it on my list right now. Be a slut."

"Bitch," she said; then I heard the line go dead.

Needless to say, the thing I loved best about Finn was, if she's your friend, she wouldn't ever bullshit you. She'd tell it like it was without the fluff and soft-core approach that I seemed unable to do. If I asked her a question, I got an answer, whether it was what I wanted to hear or not.

* * * * *

I walked out of my hotel room and hesitated a moment, wondering if I should knock on Nathan's door to see if he was up for breakfast. I then thought better of it since I was still feeling a little hinky about the night before. I went down to the lobby, made my way to the dining room, ordered a croissant and cup of yogurt to go, and walked across the street to the convention center. As I walked through the heavy glass doors, people were clustered about chattering like a bathroom full of teenage girls. I pulled out my brochure and ran my finger down the list of seminars until I came to the one titled 20 Ways to Get the Most From Your Service Staff. It started in twenty minutes. I checked the room number, made my way up two floors, and walked down the corridor.

I peered into the empty room, made a quick scan of the seats, and did as I had always done in college. I went straight to the seat closest to the door. While I'm not completely sure why I always did it, I assumed it was due to some deep-seated fear that the room might erupt in flames and I'd be that person who'd knock over women and children to get to the door. I never could stand the thought of intentionally being mean or selfish. It had always been my thing. I couldn't help myself. When people had described my personality to others, I heard one of two things: "He is the nicest person you will ever meet," or "He is so nice it's disgusting." I'm terrified one day I'll crack and release the serial killer that's been lurking inside me somewhere.

I took my seat, laid my leather briefcase flat on my lap, set my food on top of it, and began to inhale my croissant. I looked around, shook my head, and smiled, knowing that Finn would take one look at the room and scream, "Beige invasion!"

Everything in the room was some form of the color beige with the exception of the wood stage and a black curtain hanging behind the podium on the stage. I began imagining that I was in the audience of Bravo's *Inside the Actors Studio*, pretending that James Lipton was sitting on the stage across from Julia Roberts when I heard, "Excuse me," startling me out of my daydream. I turned to my left to see Mr. Chiseled Jaw from the restaurant the night before, standing beside me sporting an award-winning Jack Nicholson smile.

"H-hi," I fumbled out while scooting back in my chair. I shoved my legs under the seat, allowing him enough room to shimmy by. He slid by me with his perfectly formed ass, which was deliciously wrapped in jeans, right in line with my face. I felt a stir in my pants and thought, Hot damn...this is hands down the best fucking seminar ever!

Aside from me, the room was still empty, so when he took the seat right next to me I immediately felt my face flush and the moisture begin to collect under my arms. He placed his arm on the armrest of his chair, and chills ran up my arm as his brushed against mine. I looked down to see the soft blond hair on his arm tangling and intertwining with the dark hair on my arm. Feeling my cock begin to strain against the fabric of my jeans, I recrossed my legs, attempting to adjust myself. I peeked over at him to see that he was looking at me, and we both burst out laughing due to a mix of both nervousness and excitement.

"Logan Price." He offered his hand while making direct eye contact.

I reciprocated with my hand and name. His hands were large with long fingers, and I got an instant mental picture of how they'd look between my legs. I marveled at the way his smile gave me a feeling of warmth and anticipation. I found it was suddenly difficult to catch my breath. I felt a slight panic as I tried to remember the last time a man had made me feel like that. "Are you from Atlanta?" I asked.

"Originally, yes, but now I live in Los Angeles. I own a restaurant there, but I still come back here every year for the trade show. It's an excuse to see my family. You?"

"My partner and I own a restaurant in Missouri. I'm from Missouri; that's where I went to school...lived in the state all my life."

His smile faded slightly as he rubbed his hand over his leg. "Oh...that was your partner you were at dinner with last night?"

"Yeah, Nathan." I was ecstatic that he remembered me as well. "He's a fantastic chef."

"How long have the two of you been together?"

"Oh, oh," I said, eyes widening, "we aren't that kind of partners, just in business together."

He nodded with a smile. "Good to know."

He had the sexiest full lips, and I immediately began to think about the way they'd feel pressed against mine.

We spent the remaining ten minutes prior to the seminar talking about our restaurants, and his sounded unbelievable. Serving mainly Mediterranean food, it was set on a hill overlooking the ocean. He described it as intimate outdoor dining with several levels looking down on the other. There were a lot of little coves and nooks that gave it a very romantic "private" dining atmosphere. As other people began filing in the door, I started to feel slightly irritated, as if they were uninvited guests crashing our party for two.

"So"—I was nervously twisting the brass notch that closed the flap on my briefcase—"do, uh, do you have a partner?"

He turned to look at me. "No, in neither a business nor personal sense, but I'm always looking."

I picked up the spoon I'd used to eat my yogurt and began twisting it in my hands. "Good to know."

The speaker began testing his microphone, and I jumped slightly as the plastic spoon flipped out of my hands. It sailed through the air, landing about six feet down the aisle. I sank down in my seat a little as the blood rushed to my cheeks, thankful I hadn't hit anyone with it. I closed my eyes and prayed Logan hadn't seen that. I glanced over, and he had his hand in a fist over his mouth trying to keep himself from laughing out loud.

Closing my eyes again I heard a voice in my head scream, Loser!

The attendees began to settle down, ready to absorb what would hopefully be some new infinite wisdom that would make running their businesses a little easier. I placed my half-eaten croissant and empty yogurt container back into the paper bag and placed it on the floor next to my feet. I glanced over at Logan and caught him looking back at me, smiling. I wondered if my breath would stink by the end of the lecture as I heard that pesky voice nagging in the back of my mind.

You just had to stuff your face, didn't ya, little piggy!

I opened my briefcase, pulled out a yellow legal pad, and readied myself for the seminar. Logan did the same, and every couple of minutes one of us would be caught looking at the other, causing us both to laugh. The speaker began talking. I was trying to force myself to pay attention to what he was saying, but my brain continually ran amok with thoughts about the man sitting next to me. What was he like? Did he like me? What kind of a couple would we make? Was he interested in me, or just interested in fucking me? Then there would be the killjoy evil thoughts: Of course he only wants to fuck you. He lives in California, and you live in Missouri, you fucking idiot. Well, Mr. Ego, aren't you full of yourself? What in hell makes you think he's even attracted to you?

I was startled out of my inner ravings when Logan slid a folded piece of paper on top of my legal pad, which, after fifteen minutes of the lecture, was still blank. I looked at him. He winked at me, smiled, and nudged his head as if to say, read the damn thing already. I unfolded the piece of paper and looked down and read:

Will you spend the rest of the day with me? Circle Yes or No.

I smiled, feeling like a teenager again passing notes in church. I laughed at the sweet cheesiness of it, circled *Yes*, and folded the paper before passing it back to him. Without even opening the note, he looked at me and whispered, "Good."

My head began to swim with a druglike euphoria. My vision seemed keener as well as a little fuzzy, and it once again became more difficult to breathe. I tensed when he began to caress my hand with his pinky. An electric shock ran straight up my arm and worked its way through my body to my cock. Not wanting him to think I was uninterested, I hooked my pinky around his, hoping the lecture didn't end until my hard-on subsided.

Finally free of the lecture, we opted to head for the trade floors as opposed to wasting any more time in seminars, which wouldn't hold our attention. I felt slightly drunk and was hoping it was mutual. As we walked through the showrooms, Logan gave me personal demonstrations of kitchen equipment, something I'd never given two shits about in the past. I was now completely enthralled despite the fact that I had the culinary aptitude of a toddler. We talked about ourselves, unable to learn about the other fast enough. We asked each other questions and kept looking at one another and smiling.

Logan was thirty-two, which shocked the hell out of me because he looked no older than twenty-five. In retrospect, I should have realized the improbability of a

twenty-five-year-old owning and running a restaurant, but when your senses are running wild, you tend to not have much sense.

Logan seemed to be about six feet tall, I guessed, since he stood slightly over my five feet nine inches and had that beefy build that made my knees weak. He had on a short-sleeve button-up blue shirt that made his blue eyes pop. The top few buttons were undone, revealing a smooth chest, and the shirt was just tight enough to give me a mouthwatering visual image of what lay beneath.

Logan was from a rather well-to-do family in Atlanta. He'd spent several years in Europe, where he'd trained in a couple of culinary institutes. His father died several years ago, leaving both him and his younger sister a substantial amount of money. His mother still lived in Atlanta in the house he'd grown up in. He described her as being a sweet, gentle soul. His sister, whom he loved dearly, also lived in Atlanta and was a wild child. She always had to be the center of attention wherever she went, which sounded suspiciously close to the way I'd describe Finn.

Neither his mother nor his sister had flinched when he told them he was gay, and had both been very supportive. He didn't tell them until after his father had died. He felt a little sad about that, like he never gave his father the chance to know him completely as an individual, and often wondered how his father would have handled it.

He'd worked really hard while living in Europe to lose the Southern accent, which I told him was a shame, since I had a thing for accents.

He immediately looked at me. "Well, it's not completely gone; I'm able to kind of snap back and forth. If you're good," he added, raising one eyebrow and flashing a devilish little smile, "I might be inclined to dredge it up for you."

As goose pimples ran over my body, I smiled uncontrollably. I told Logan that I was from Cape Girardeau, the oldest of three, and the only boy. With the exception of my sisters, I had never told my family that I was gay. Where my parents were concerned, it was pretty much understood but completely ignored. Cape was a fairly small city where everyone sort of knew everyone else through either personal contact or acquaintances. My parents had wanted me to go to the university in Cape, but I refused. I wanted to get the hell out of there so I could feel free to be more open without having to worry about people talking about it. Logan and I were both raised Southern Baptist and could certainly relate to one another on the horrors of growing up gay in that mess. While he had pretty much become a Buddhist, into yoga, eastern philosophy, and all that stuff, I was what he called "riding the fence," referring to myself as agnostic.

He was envious of my partnership with Nathan and told me how nice it would be if he could spend all his time in the kitchen without having to worry about the front of the house. He'd been living in Los Angeles for about a year and a half, working in a couple of different restaurants out there before his father died. He was basically doing the "watch and learn" bit, picking up tips here and there about the business end of running a restaurant. He purchased his restaurant with the money his father had left him, and spent about eight months revamping the place, which had been there since the 1930s. It was kind of a landmark from old Hollywood. He'd been able to obtain a

historical grant that helped fund the restoration, which in turn garnered him substantial media attention and ended up being fantastic free advertising.

"I'm getting kind of hungry." Logan looked at his watch. "Good Lord, it's almost three thirty. We yapped our way right through lunch."

I stopped in my tracks, feeling completely wretched. "Oh my hell, I was supposed to meet Nathan for lunch at noon."

"Oops," he said, with a half-guilty, half-pleased expression. "Well, why don't you let me take the two of you to dinner tonight to make up for me depriving him of his lunch companion? I'd really love to see some more of you."

"Um, well..." I wondered how Nathan would feel after the sexual walk down memory lane we'd taken the night before. "That would probably be fine, but I should talk to him first." Hell, he may have other plans at this point... Wishful thinking, you big ho. That would make things entirely too easy. "Why don't you call me at the hotel later on, and I'll see what I can work out?"

"Great...I'll go ahead and make reservations for the three of us, just in case."

"Okay, that's great." I was wringing my hands, not wanting him to go. "Well, I guess we part here?"

"Until later then." Logan leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on my lips right there in front of God and everybody.

"Damn," I said in a soft whisper as he pulled away, causing my face to flush realizing I'd spoken aloud. *That's good, Aden, way to be subtle.* "I'll wait to hear from you then."

I smiled, waved good-bye, and hoped like hell he was watching me walk away. I'd been told on more than one occasion I have a great ass, and I'd been Vicky Vain about it ever since. When I glanced back to see him watching me leave, I smiled and waved, feeling a mild sense of gratification.

Chapter Three

As people began filing into the dining room, I nodded to Finn that I'd be right over as I stopped and spoke with Colleen, who was the very first employee I ever hired. She was now married with a new baby; seeing her instantly carried me back to the beginning when Nathan and I first opened Harlow's. I was really glad to see her there for the end, well, at least my end. Everywhere I looked, a smiling face was staring back.

Nathan had Finn plan out a seating arrangement with place cards for everyone. I rejoined Finn, who sat me in the center of the banquet along the west wall at a long table. Finn and Nathan sat down on either side of me, and our friends took their seats around us. Our servers began bringing out bread and butter for the tables and filling up wineglasses. The salads soon followed and I laughed, listening to the conversations going on around me.

"Are you having fun?" Nathan asked.

"Of course; I still can't believe you two actually worked together to set all this up."

"It wasn't easy," Finn chimed in. "But as soon as he accepted the fact that I was in charge, things began to fall into place."

I turned to look at Nathan, who was rolling his eyes.

I began patting him on the hand. "Have another drink; the more liquor you have, the less annoying she is."

"Now you tell me." Nathan picked up his glass.

Finn shot me a nasty look. "I totally heard that."

"Don't be a bitch," I scolded, taking a drink of water. "It isn't everyone that can love you as unconditionally as I do."

She gave me a worried look. "That's what scares me more than anything."

I smiled and put my arm around her. She leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder, and snatched the piece of bread I had buttered off my plate and ate it. I smiled at her, thinking back to Atlanta and the first meal I shared with Logan.

* * * * *

When I got back to the hotel, I knocked on Nathan's door to find that he wasn't back yet. I fished through my briefcase, looking for a pad of Post-its. Much to my dismay, there were none. I kept digging and came across a large paper clip. Pulling it out and ripping off a piece of paper from my legal pad, I scribbled a quick note telling him to come to my room when he returned. I untwisted the paper clip, wrapped one end around the doorknob, and made a little hook on the other end, which I used to pierce the note. I stood back to admire my work, patting myself on the back for being the kind of boy who's always prepared for anything. "I'm a fucking gay MacGyver."

I knew Nathan was a little miffed when he called from his room as opposed to coming to my room. I told him about Logan, how the day just ran away from us, and that I completely forgot about lunch. I could tell by his voice that he was somewhat relieved. He'd been worried that I was freaked out over our dinner conversation the night before and, knowing how I tend to deal with personal conflict, which is to avoid it, had just not shown up. He agreed to dinner with Logan, and I told him I'd call him back once Logan got back to me with the details.

Hanging up the phone, I stripped down to my boxer briefs, lay down, and tried to take a nap. My head was racing and refused to slow down long enough for me to relax. I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes and thought about the kiss he laid on me before we left one another. I felt the tingle between my legs and my cock began to stir. I flashed to the image of his ass as he slid by me in the conference room. I thought about the way it would feel naked beneath my hands. I moaned as my cock began to leak and make a wet spot in my boxer briefs trying to push itself out from underneath the material. I slid my hand down my stomach and slipped my fingers under the elastic band, wrapping my fingers around the wet, swollen head. I pictured him going down on his knees as I raised my hips and used my other hand to push down the briefs, releasing my hard-on. I imagined Logan's full lips opening as he slid his hot, wet mouth over my cock and I jerked my now-precum-soaked dick faster, pretending it was his mouth sliding me all the way to the back of his throat. I began to moan loudly, thrashing my head from side to side. I felt my balls clench up, and let out a final deep moan from the back of my throat as the hot fluid sprayed out over my fingers, shooting up my stomach and onto my chest.

I smiled and for a few perfect moments felt relaxed. Then I turned my head and looked at the time. It would be hours before I saw him again. It was no use; I was as nervous as a nellie queen in a biker bar. This man, whom I'd known for a total of eight hours, had me tied in knots, and he wasn't even my dream man. I tried to compare the two, which of course was impossible since my dream man was, well, stuck in my dreams. As far as looks went, it was like apples to oranges. I wouldn't kick either one of

them out of bed. I bounded off the bed and ran into the bathroom to wash the now-cold cum off my chest and abs. After I walked back into the room, I began to riffle through my clothes, trying to figure out what to wear. I had to look great, but at the same time I didn't want to look too obvious. I knew Nathan would take one look at me and know exactly what was going on.

As I stood in front of the mirror holding different shirts up, trying to decide what looked best against my skin, I kept reminding myself that under no circumstances was I to sleep with him tonight. "It's just so tacky to sleep with a guy on the first date," I told myself in the mirror. "Not if I ever expect it to be anything other than a one-nighter. Besides, if I were to sleep with him, it would be too cliché. I don't want him to be my vacation trick. I like him."

Who are you kidding? The voice shouted out in my head. What the fuck are you expecting from a man that lives in California? He probably sees you as a vacation trick.

"No, it doesn't feel like that. I'm not getting that vibe from him."

What if he does, though? Would it be leading him on to go to dinner with him and not fuck him?

"It wouldn't be fucking. It would be making love."

Please, you barely know him, and he doesn't know you. It would be fucking.

"Well, what's wrong with fucking? It's not like I'm out screwing a different guy every night. Give me a break; I've barely had sex with anyone but myself for almost a year."

Don't pretend like that is due to some type of high moral standard. You work fourteen-hour days, six days a week.

"What is your point?"

That you wanna fuck him three ways to Sunday.

"Bitch!"

Whore!

* * * *

While Nathan and I rode in the cab to the restaurant, I couldn't believe how nervous I was. Would I still feel like this after seeing him again? Would some of the magic have rubbed off since this morning? Why did *this* man affect me this way? What if he and Nathan didn't get along? Food...if it wasn't going well, get them talking about food.

Nathan reached over and placed his hand on top of mine to stop me from rubbing them together as if I had just put on lotion. "I take it you really like this guy?"

"It's silly, I know." I began to settle down as the heat from his hand radiated into the cool skin of mine. "I barely know him, but there's something there. I actually had trouble breathing today just being around him. I've never felt that before. I was beginning to think I wasn't capable of feeling this way. Like the romantic in me that dreamed of true love had been stoned to death long ago, leaving behind a dry, empty husk that runs a restaurant."

"You're so melodramatic." Nathan smiled and shook his head. "You have a whole other world inside that head of yours, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I watch you sometimes at the restaurant, sitting alone at a table staring off into space with the sexiest little half smile on your face. I always wondered where it was you went to. I figured wherever it was, it must've been good. I envy you for that."

"Well, don't, Nathan. That's part of my problem. I need to come out of that world. I need to find a life, as opposed to sitting back and daydreaming about what my life could be. Ten years ago, if you'd told me I'd be alone at twenty-nine, I would've laughed in your face. What the hell have I been doing with myself for the past ten years, and when did whatever that was become more important to me than falling in love and having a relationship?"

"You're too goddamn hard on yourself, Aden." He patted my knee. "You'd never allow someone else to treat you as badly as you treat yourself. You know...I hate to be the wet blanket here, but you did say he lived in California, didn't you? I hope you keep that in mind. I don't want you to expect more than you can possibly get out of this."

I took in a deep breath and exhaled, attempting to expel my anxiety. "I'm trying to leave expectations out of it. All I know is that this feels really good, and I refuse to sit down, overanalyze, and rationalize the situation until I kill all the warm gooeyness. I just want to have this and let it be whatever it's going to be."

He smiled, leaned over, gave me a little peck on the cheek. "Okay."

* * * * *

We walked through the heavy wooden doors of the restaurant greeted by a blast of cool air that blew over us, taking with it some of my anxiety. The place was kept dark and dimly lit with floor-to-ceiling dark wood panels running along the walls. There was a stage directly to our left with a grand piano, as well as an empty chair and microphone. There were candles twinkling on top of the tables, sending an ambercolored hazy light over the crisp white tablecloths. Ella Fitzgerald was playing in the background as we followed the maître d' to the table. The restaurant was long and narrow.

Cigarette smoke hung in the air like a ghost slowly moving and twisting. The bar was a small cube against the west wall. There were only about six bar stools around it, which were all full. Glasses hung upside down above the people's heads on glass racks, and the back bar was packed to the ceiling with wine racks filled with bottles. Heaven, I thought, looking at all the wine.

The place was crowded, and the bartender was furiously shaking a martini shaker in one hand and pouring a glass of wine with the other. Something I could never do. I was never one of those kids who'd been able to rub my head and stomach in opposite directions at the same time while chewing gum.

Along one wall was a row of booths that were actually old church pews that had been cut in half and pushed up against the wall. The booths were filled with throw pillows you could use for cushions. The back of the dining room was two upper levels with tables scattered about in no certain order.

I smiled and my chest filled with pressure as I saw Logan getting out of a booth to greet us. As I made the introductions, the maître d' politely excused himself and disappeared back to the front of the restaurant. Nathan slid into one side of the booth; Logan held out an arm signaling me to slip in and then followed by scooting in next to me.

"I know the place may seem like the kind of restaurant you take a date you don't want anyone to see you with." Logan looked between the two of us. "But they have the best French cuisine in the city."

"It's exactly that quality that makes it cool," Nathan stated as he surveyed the room. "You almost feel a little naughty when you walk in the door."

"You guys just missed the first set." Logan pointed to two women sitting at the bar. "Those two are amazing; they've been playing here for as long as I can remember."

The duo appeared to be in their mid to late forties. They were completely *Ab Fab*, with big bar hair, excessive makeup, and martini glasses in hand.

"I love them," I said.

"You haven't even heard them play yet," Nathan said.

"I don't care, they look crazy cool."

"So what have you done with your afternoon, mister?" Logan asked, picking up the bottle of French Bordeaux and pouring Nathan and me each a glass.

Masturbated, I thought, grinning. "Just sort of lounged around the hotel room." I was nonchalantly trying not to get excited as he pressed his leg against mine. "What about you?" I asked, picking up the wineglass to take a sip.

"Well, I went to my mother's and made the reservations. I then had a little afternoon cocktail with Mom and told her all about you."

My throat closed up on me, causing me to spew my wine, which left little red stains on the clean white tablecloth. Nathan and Logan both started laughing as I wiped my chin. "You did not!" I tried to swallow.

Logan smiled, lifting his wineglass up to his lips. "I most certainly did."

Oh my hell. What does that mean? Why would he tell his mother about me? "You're full of shit."

"Okay" – Logan sat his glass back down on the table – "have it your way. So, how many times have the two of you called to check up on the restaurant?"

Nathan and I looked at each other and busted out laughing. "I've called three times," I said.

"Four," Nathan added, shaking his head. "It's sick, I know. I can't shake the feeling that I'm a bad parent who's gone off and left the kids in the hands of the sixteen-year-old that lives next door."

"I don't get a chance to call." Logan broke off a piece off bread and smeared it with butter. "I had five messages on my cell after I left you this afternoon, all nonsense that could've been taken care of without bugging me."

Our waiter came over to the table and proceeded to tell us the specials. Logan and Nathan chose an order of escargot and smoked trout with a caper cream sauce for the table. Logan ordered the sea bass en papillote, and Nathan ordered blue cheese-encrusted French-cut lamb chops with a mint sauce for himself and for me. We decided to go ahead and order a second bottle of wine, and when the waiter began to collect the menus, I tried to act like I didn't see him.

He held out his hand, patiently waiting for me to notice him. "Your menu, sir."

"Oh...well, I... Well, okay." I cringed as I lifted the menu, as I'd been using it to cover up the wine stains on the tablecloth.

"Shall I bring you another napkin?" he asked, smiling.

"I'm so sorry." I could feel my face flush. "Maybe just one I could put over my mess. I choked," I explained, lifting my hand to my throat. "That's what happened. Sorry."

Schmuck.

"No problem," he said, turning to leave as Nathan and Logan began snickering.

"Only you would apologize to the waiter." Nathan smirked as he took another sip of wine. "This wine is incredible. Write down the name of this, we need to get this for the restaurant."

"Well, the waiter has to clean it up, and the restaurant will be charged a fee by their linen service if the stain doesn't come out." I reached over, twisted the bottle, and began reading the wine label. "You know, I can't just pick up the phone and order any old bottle of wine. Most of the good stuff isn't available in our area, and if we can get it, the distributors only get a limited amount. Since we don't have the proper storage to purchase multiple cases to keep lying around, our choices get even more limited."

"All righty." Nathan was wide-eyed. "No need to get huffy."

"That's certainly one good thing about LA," Logan stated. "You can pretty much get whatever you want. Most large cities are that way, though."

"Did that come off snappish?" I asked. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, darling." Nathan patted my hand. "I'm sure your karma will let a little thing like that go. You may as well know this now," he added, looking at Logan. "Aden here has a whole karma points system worked out where he keeps track of

anything mean or bad he does, and then subtracts them when something bad happens to him."

"Really," Logan said, a little too loudly. "I need to hear about this."

I smiled sweetly, wishing I could reach over the table and smack Nathan upside his head. Whenever people found out about this little tidbit they'd berate me for doing something so silly, which by the way is worth five karma points in the "bad things that happen to me" category.

"Explain it to me," Logan said excitedly in a half-teasing, half-flirty way.

I shot Nathan a dirty look and pulled my hand away from his. "Well, it's sort of like five points if you *think* something nasty about someone, ten points for *saying* something nasty about someone, twenty points if you say something nasty *to* someone." I closed my eyes and imagined myself shrinking down to the size of a mouse and scurrying away. I opened my eyes and continued. "And then two points if I stub my toe, fifteen points for a flat tire, twenty points if someone is mean to me."

"And at the end of the day you sit down and subtract one from the other to see where you are," Logan said, matter-of-factly.

I smiled at Logan, feeling completely ruined. "Yeah...that's pretty much it."

"Don't forget about the carrying over part." Nathan grinned, trying to hold back a laugh.

"Bad karma doesn't just go away at the end of the day." I was obviously defensive and beginning to wish Nathan would shut his pie hole. "I have a number for each day and a total lifetime number."

"Well, I think that's adorable." Logan reached down and squeezed my leg. Raising an eyebrow, he added, "I'm certainly interested in hearing an inventory of bad things you do."

I chuckled a little, feeling my face flush. I nervously chewed my lower lip, unable to take my eyes off him. I reached under the table and placed my hand on his, which was still sitting on my leg about halfway between my knee and crotch.

During the rest of the dinner we discussed mainly food, different cooking styles and such, of which I had a limited knowledge. I didn't mind, though. I was happy that Nathan seemed to like Logan and that Nathan was included in the conversation. The weirdest thing was that every now and then, Logan and I would look at one another, and I just somehow knew that he was making a conscious effort to keep Nathan included as well. It was like we were telepathic, reading one another's faces and body language as if we'd been together for fifty years.

After dinner, when we were ready to leave, Nathan decided to move up to the bar, saying he wanted to hang out and listen to the *Ab Fab* girls finish their last set. He told us he'd grab a cab and probably hit a couple of the bars before going back to the hotel. I knew he was trying to politely excuse himself, and I certainly didn't try to stop him.

Logan and I climbed into a cab, laughing like little kids. My head was swimming from the wine, and his eyes had that lacquered liquor look. Logan instructed the driver to go to my hotel, saying we might as well just climb into a booth in the hotel bar.

Once there, we ordered another bottle of wine. The cocktail waitress brought us the bottle and opened it.

I asked her not to pour any because we wanted it to breathe. I paid her, and after she was gone, I told Logan to grab the bottle as I picked up the glasses.

"Why are we moving?" he asked. "Is this some new bar game?"

"Just follow me," I replied, trying to whisper.

"What the hell was that voice?" he asked, laughing hysterically. "You sounded possessed."

When I looked back, I started laughing too, realizing that we were both walking hunched over, which was only bringing more attention to the two of us. I stood up straight and glanced over at the bar to see our waitress and another coworker watching us with "I know what you're up to" smiles on their faces. I put a finger up to my lips as we passed through the doorway into the lobby, hoping they weren't going to bust us. We slipped into an elevator and went up to my room.

I closed my hotel room door behind us. "There were just way too many people in that bar, we couldn't talk."

"It is hard to talk in a crowded room," he agreed, in a way that seemed to call attention to the flimsy excuse I'd come up with. We locked eyes and both started laughing again.

"Smart-ass." I held out the glasses, and Logan proceeded to fill each one.

He turned around, placed the bottle on the nightstand, and swung back around to take one of the glasses out of my hand.

Logan lifted his glass. "To us... Okay, that was a shitty toast."

"That's all right...probably just a little performance anxiety." I shot him my best "sexy wicked" look. He shook his head and chuckled, giving me the impression I still wasn't able to emote that particular expression. It always wound up looking more *American Pie* than *Nine 1/2 Weeks*.

I walked around him, over to the bureau. I reached down and started my iPod, which I had hooked up to two small speakers. I turned back around and faced Logan, forcing myself to not attempt another ill-fated shot at trying to come off sexy.

As the low music began to play, Logan grinned as he let his gaze run over me, like he could tell I was doing my best to not act like a freak. He went over and shut off the bedside lamp, leaving only the lights of the city pouring in through the windows.

"That's really nice." He danced toward me. He placed his wineglass down on the dresser and took the glass out of my hand and did the same. I beamed as he took me in his arms, and we started slow dancing. He pulled me close, and I let my cheek rest on his chest for a moment.

My mind was reeling as my inner ravings reached a fever pitch. I desperately wanted to be that perfect, sexually confident fantasy man we all dreamed of finding when we went on vacation. I met his gaze, knowing that the harder I tried the worse I'd come off.

Logan seemed to be examining my face as if trying to figure out the puzzle. "You have to be the sexiest, sweetest oddball I've ever met." He leaned down and lightly kissed my neck.

I breathed in his scent, which was lightly mixed with spicy-sweet cologne. The semi-hard-on I'd already been sporting immediately shot up, pressing firmly against the zipper of my jeans. I looked up at him, and he leaned in and kissed me. It was the perfect kiss, soft at first, mouths only partially open with just the tips of our tongues slightly touching. He slowly began lightly sucking on my bottom lip.

"You have the poutiest little lips," he said before maneuvering his tongue a little deeper into my mouth.

It dawned on me suddenly that he wasn't interested in that fantasy man; he actually seemed to be turned on by me...strange behavior and all. I could feel all the insecurities, hesitations, and annoying little voices in my head fade away. He brought one hand up behind my head, sliding his fingers into my hair, and the other began to slowly run down my spine, pausing momentarily at the small of my back before making its way to my ass. He began massaging and kneading with his hand while moving his tongue deeper into my mouth. Christ, I wanted this man with an intensity I'd never felt before.

I ran my hands over his chest and down across his stomach, feeling the hard muscles underneath his shirt. He pulled me tighter, and as he continued to explore my mouth, I ran my tongue around his, savoring the taste. He ran his hand down from the back of my head to my waist and he began to grind his hips, pressing his hard cock into mine through our jeans. I wrapped my arms around his waist trying to squeeze out any space between us, and he cupped his hand over my ass, pressing his fingers deeper over the fabric of my jeans. I whimpered slightly, feeling a dizziness in my head as my knees began to get weak.

I slid my hand over the front of his pants, and he pulled his mouth off mine, rolled his head back, and whispered, "Fuck."

My lips felt warm and swollen from the pressure of his mouth, and just as I began to be able to finally catch my breath, he reached up and placed both of his large hands on each side of my head, smothering my mouth with his. I began pulling the shirt up out of his waistband and fumbling with his belt and zipper. Finally got my hand down into his wet, hot briefs and wrapped my hand around his swollen cock. It felt long and thick. Still assaulting my mouth with his tongue, he reached down underneath my ass with both his hands and lifted me as I pulled my legs up and wrapped them around his waist. He turned us around and walked slowly until his legs hit the bed. I took my hand out of his pants, grabbed his shoulders, and released my legs as he set me down on my knees. He placed his hands back on each side of my head and pulled his mouth away

from mine. He looked directly into my eyes with a hazed look as we both panted, trying to catch our breath.

He ran his thumb over my raw bottom lip. "I'm going to know every inch of you."

"Logan," I managed to get out in a throaty moan as I began unbuttoning his shirt.

He took over with his buttons and I began to slide the shirt off his shoulders and down his thick, muscular arms as he undid the last button. My gaze ran over his smooth, chest and I leaned down, taking his hard nipple into my mouth. I flicked it lightly with my tongue before nibbling on it with my teeth. He moaned as I ran my hands over his ripped stomach to his waist, pushing his jeans and briefs over his hips to release that massive cock, allowing it to bounce freely in the air.

Lifting myself off my knees, I sat down, dangling my legs over the side of the bed. I bent over, pulling his jeans the rest of the way down his beautiful, legs covered with soft blond hair. He ran his large hands down my back, untucking my shirt. He slipped a hand into my jeans, working his fingers under the elastic waistband of my briefs, hitting the top of my crack. I helped him out of his shoes and socks and sat up. I licked the precum oozing from the slit of his perfect cock. It was only an inch or so longer than mine but substantially wider in girth. He moaned gruffly, lifting my arms and pulling my shirt off before tossing it to the floor.

I licked my lips before taking his cock in my mouth. I slowly slid all the way down the shaft, desperately trying to get it all the way down my throat.

"Christ, Aden," he moaned, placing his hands on my head, then moving me up and down his shaft, fucking my mouth.

I could taste his sweet-and-salty precum in the back of my throat before he pulled out of my mouth and pushed me onto my back. Tearing at my pants, he quickly released the belt and button. After unzipping my jeans and sliding them down my narrow hips, he tossed them to the side. I moved back onto the bed as he slid down on top of me, pressing his full weight on me. He covered my mouth with his, shoving his tongue deep into my throat, teasing and taunting me. He slid to the side and ran his hands down my chest and stomach, taking my cock in his hand. I quivered, tensing up my stomach as he rubbed his thumb over the smooth head, smearing the precum in a circular motion.

I felt as if my chest were going to explode as Logan moved his lips from my mouth over to my ear. Breathing heavily, he whispered, slipping back into a husky Southern accent, "I knew I had to have you the moment I set my eyes on you."

He lightly sucked and bit down on my neck, slowly licking his way to my nipple and taking it in his mouth, sucking and chewing lightly. Feeling as if a million tiny nibbles were running down my spine, my entire body felt like it would shatter into pieces at any moment. "I want you inside me...please, Logan."

He looked up at me and smiled, obviously pleased with himself for driving me to the point of begging. "Where are the condoms and lube?"

"Inside the drawer next to the bed," I said in a raspy voice, my head swimming, not even remotely ashamed for having begged.

He pulled himself up, reached over, and opened the drawer. I slid my hands down and massaged his cock with one and twisted his nipple with the other. He flipped open the cap on the lube and squeezed some out onto his fingers as he moved down between my legs. He rubbed his slicked fingers over my tight opening, lubing me up as I cried out. I lifted my head, feeling my eyes roll back as he worked my hole. When he felt me begin to meet his thrusts, he pulled his fingers out and reached for the condom. I sat up and took it out of his hand to rip it open. I slid it over his red, swollen head and rolled it down the shaft as he picked up the lube, squeezing more into his hand.

He pushed me back onto the bed as he worked the lube over his shaft. Tossing the tube to the side, he grabbed my legs and placed them over his shoulders. I felt the head of his cock begin to press into me. He let out a groan as he worked the head in, causing me to gasp as I reached down to my sides, fisting up wads of blanket. He watched my face intently as he slowly began to push farther in, instinctively stopping when he knew I needed him to. My eyes popped open when I felt his pelvis press against my ass, knowing he was all the way in. He spread my legs and leaned down, covering my mouth with his and sliding his tongue in slowly and deeply.

When he felt I was ready, he began to slowly slide his cock out. As he pushed back in and hit my spot, I arched my back. My hard cock lay on my stomach oozing as he began to increase his rhythm.

"You feel incredible," he said in a low voice.

"Fuck me, Logan," I moaned as I reached up, running my hand over his chest and twisting his hard nipple between my fingers.

He lifted himself back up, grabbed my legs behind my knees, forcing them back against my chest, and began pumping feverishly. I could feel his balls hitting me as he slammed his pelvis into my ass. I let out a loud moan as I reached up to the headboard and began to push myself down, meeting his thrusts.

A low moan came from him as I looked up, watching a long bead of sweat run down the center of his stomach, making its way toward his belly button. Feeling my balls tighten, I reached down, grabbed my soaking-wet cock in my hand, and began to pull. After two more thrusts I clenched and screamed as I shot out, hitting my chin, spraying my stomach and chest. He let out a deep moan as he quickly pulled out, slid off the condom, and jerked himself off. His body jerked a few times as the last bit spilled out over his fingers. He fell on top of me and I slid my arms under his, running my hands over his sweat-drenched back. He lifted his head, which was pressed into the pillow next to mine, and placed his mouth over mine, softly kissing me. He pulled his mouth off mine and looked at me. His eyes were glazed over, and he smiled, breathing heavily. "That was incredible."

I reached up and smoothed the damp hair off his forehead with my fingers. Still trying to catch my breath, I looked him in the eyes. "I'm a complete slut."

He let out a low rumble of a laugh, causing his stomach muscles to contract against my cock. He looked down and back up at me, raising an eyebrow. "Somebody's getting hard again." He began moving his torso from side to side, creating friction.

I felt the blood rush to my face as the heat flushed my cheeks. I placed my hand over my eyes and smiled, turning my head slightly away from his gaze. He laughed, obviously taking pleasure from the effect he knew he had on me. I peeked through my fingers and looked up at him, lightly biting my lower lip with a half smile.

"Oh shit," he groaned, lightly brushing his lips over mine. "I'm in soooo much trouble."

He pressed his lips back into mine as a little moan rumbled in the back of my throat. Logan was a like a drug created solely to cure what ailed me, and cure me he did.

Chapter Four

I looked around the restaurant as our servers moved about the room placing dinner plates onto the tables. I turned to Nathan, who was obviously feeling the effects of the alcohol. He was flirting with one of our liquor reps. I started laughing, wondering if he knew the man was straight.

"That boy seriously needs to get laid," Finn said.

"Who?" Nathan asked, swinging his head around, having heard her comment.

"You, dipshit," she answered, laughing at him.

"Oh." He spun back around and continued to flirt with Mr. Hetero.

"Pretty soon he'll be humping doorjambs like a little dog." She sighed, shaking her head.

"Well, it'll be your job to hook him up from time to time to make sure that doesn't happen." I ran my fingertips lightly over the rim of my wineglass.

"I'm nobody's pimp."

"But you'd be so good at it."

"This is true." She nodded. "Right now, though, I need to start looking for *my* next conquest, not his."

She began to survey the room, and I laughed, watching her begin to sex herself up.

"You're worse than any gay man I've ever known."

"Have vagina...will travel."

I couldn't really say a whole lot, thinking about Logan, and the fact that I jumped his bones, or boner, within the first twenty-four hours of meeting him. I watched Finn and laughed, remembering waking up the morning after with Logan.

* * * * *

I sat my toothbrush back in its holder and reached down to turn on the faucet. I listened to him whistling as I rinsed out my mouth and spit into the sink. The small black-and-white interlocking ceramic tiles in my bathroom felt cool under my bare feet. The double sink vanity had the same white glossy subway tiles that ran halfway up the walls all the way around the room. I glanced up, admiring the antique frosted glass and chrome art deco wall sconces on either side of the mirror. I turned around hearing the shower cut off, and watched my love step out of it. He looked magnificent all wet as he winked at me and smiled. All the ridges and sculpted muscles in his body glistened in the light. I sighed and turned back around.

He grabbed a towel and began drying himself off. "I wish we didn't have to go to this thing tonight."

"It'll be fun." I opened up a drawer and took out a small tube. I watched him wrap the towel around his waist in the mirror. "Getting all dressed up and going out for a change."

"Damn, you're beautiful." He was watching me rub moisturizer over my face. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I scrunched up my lips as he placed his chin on my shoulder.

"Don't give me that look." He squeezed me tighter.

"Beautiful, huh?" I looked at my reflection, wishing someone else were staring back. "Pretty boy is what you mean."

"I'll never understand your hang-up about the way you look." He rolled his eyes.

"I don't want to be pretty... I wanna be smokin' molten-lava hot and sexy."

His lips curled up as he tried to hold back a laugh. "Well, I love you just the way you are; I wouldn't change a thing."

"Thank you, baby."

He ran his fingers under the elastic waistband of my boxer briefs. "Plus you're so bendy." He slid his hand farther down my briefs toward my cock.

I twisted away from him and yanked off his towel. An excited smile spread across his face, and I smacked his bare ass with the palm of my hand.

"Nice try, but we're going." I walked out of the bathroom into my bedroom.

He followed me. "You just want to get me into that tux so you can size me up as you plot your evil scheme to get me down the aisle."

"Oh please" —I tossed a pair of underwear at his face—"like I'd marry you."

"Mmm hmm." He watched me slide on my pants. "You'd shackle me down in a heartbeat."

"Shackles, indeed," I said as he slid on his undies. "You'd enjoy that way too much, you little pervert."

He laughed as I sat onto the bed and grabbed my socks.

He began prancing around the room like Travolta at the beginning of *Saturday Night Fever*. "I'm like a wild mustang, baby, born to run free."

I burst out laughing as I got up off the bed. "More like an old nag ready for the glue factory."

"You little fucker." He lunged at me, tackling me onto the bed. Pinning me down, he began tickling me as I squirmed under him.

I rolled around, desperately trying to break free of him.

"Take it back," he commanded, continuing to torture me with his fingers.

"No, naggy!" I tried to swat away his hands.

"Tell me I'm the sexiest guy you've ever seen."

"No!"

"Tell me and I'll stop," he said.

"Okay, okay."

He stopped the torture, grabbed my arms, and pinned them down to the bed.

"You're so sexy, honey. The hottest hunk of a man I've ever laid eyes on."

"Good." He leaned down, placing his face just over mine. "Now tell me how much you crave my big, hard cock."

"I do, baby," I said, laughing again. "I crave it!"

"Well, then"—he released my arms and pulled his dick out of his boxer briefs—"since you want it that bad..."

"Not a chance." I pushed him off me and leaped off the bed. "We are going to this party. Nice try, though."

"Damn it." A sour expression came over his face.

I began pulling on my shirt. "Get dressed, you little fucker."

"But I'm horny," he whined, lifting himself begrudgingly off the bed.

"You're always horny." I tossed his pants at him. "But you're not getting out of going."

"Evil tyrant," he said with a grin, yanking on his pants.

"We're going to be late as it is, and we're supposed to meet Finn and Nathan there."

"I don't think she's really ever cared for me that much." He tucked his shirt into his pants.

"Well, sweetie," I said, looking in the mirror and tweaking my bow tie, trying to get it perfect, "Finn just doesn't really understand us. You shouldn't take it personally."

"I don't; it's not like I can really do anything about it."

I walked up to him and looked into his eyes. They seemed a little sad as I leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. I felt his body relax a little as I pulled away.

"Do me?" he asked, holding up his tie.

I laughed, taking it from him as my cell phone started to ring. "That's probably Finn wondering where we are." I turned to head for the nightstand.

"Don't answer it." He grabbed my arm.

"Why not?" I asked, looking at him funny.

"You'll go away again."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not ready to leave yet," he said, with pleading eyes.

I opened my eyes to see the bright Atlanta sunlight pouring in the windows. I looked over at the nightstand as my cell phone rang again. I reached over to pick it up and felt the resistance of Logan's arm across my chest. A whimper escaped from his lips, and I smiled at him. I pressed Talk on my cell and heard, "Good morning, sunshine."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"I don't know, nineish," Finn said.

I sank back into the bed. "Early, me...vacation."

"I thought this was supposed to be a working vacation. Get your ass out of bed, pronto."

"Too tired, go away."

"Too tired?" she asked. "I've known you for how long? Never have I ever seen you not pop right out of bed in the morning. What's going on, honey? Why are you so tired? Did you pick yourself up a little man-zy last night?"

"Bingo!"

"What!"

"I said, bingo, as in I'm not alone."

"Wha...wha...what are you saying?"

"Well, Finn." I looked at Logan as he smiled and popped one eye open. "I took your advice from yesterday morning; I'm not alone."

"You're actually in bed...naked, with another man?"

"Yep." I pulled the phone away from my ear and held it up to Logan's. "Say hi to Finn."

"Hi, Finn," Logan said, and I pulled the phone away from him just before Finn began squealing and giggling hysterically.

Both of Logan's eyes popped open as he stared at the phone. I laughed and brought the phone back to my ear, just in time to listen to Finn, "You are such a slut!"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, slut." Laughing. "Whore!" Laughing. "Tramp...floozy." More laughing. "I am disgusted, simply disgusted."

I started laughing again. "Good-bye, psycho."

"Wait!" she said. "Don't hang up. I'll just call right back."

"What?"

"How was he?" Finn asked. "Is it big?"

"I'm so hanging up now."

"No!" she screamed as I pressed the End button, holding it down. I thought it best to turn my cell off, not taking her threat of calling right back lightly.

I settled back under the covers as Logan pulled up behind me and spooned me. "Good morning."

"So." Logan nibbled on my ear. "How was I, and how big would you say it is?"

"Jesus...you heard that." I felt my face flush. "I'm sorry. Finn is really...wrong and low."

Logan nuzzled his nose in the back of my neck. "I don't think that was an answer to the question."

"Incredible, and big enough, you big stud." I felt tingles run down my spine from his warm breath on my skin.

He slid his hand down my chest and in between my legs. "Well, well, look who's up and ready for action."

"How about we take the action to the shower? I'm starving."

"All in good time." He rolled me onto my back and straddled me. "I'm not done with you here yet."

* * * * *

After we were showered and all shiny and clean, Logan told me he'd already made lunch plans for us. When I asked him where we were going, he told me it was a surprise. We ran by his hotel so he could change clothes, then climbed in yet another cab, and I listened to him give an address to the cabdriver. I resisted the urge to whine until he told me where we were going, and instead, settled into the seat with him. I smiled when he put his arm around me.

"I could *really* get used to this," I said teasingly.

He chuckled and pulled me closer to him. "Me too."

After a twenty-minute ride, the cab pulled up in front of a large three-story house with two-story giant columns. The yard was impeccably manicured, and there were black door-length shutters and French doors along the first and second stories, which opened up onto a two-story porch.

"Um...where are we, Logan?"

"My mother's house," he said matter-of-factly, as if telling someone the weather.

"I thought we were going to lunch?" I asked, trying to keep myself from panicking.

"We are, silly boy; we're having lunch with my mother."

"Yeah, hi... I'm thinking no!" I started squirming in my seat. "I can't meet your mother... I mean... Jesus, Logan, I had your dick in my mouth a few hours ago!"

"Okay." His eyes widened as he tossed some money over the seat for the driver. "How about we get out of the car and talk?" He grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the cab. I felt the inevitability of what was happening to me sink in. Shutting the cab door, he looked at me and smiled. "Aden, it's going to be fine. My mother doesn't know you had my dick in your mouth last night."

"Last night, try this morning." I watched the cab drive off, leaving me no escape. "Jesus, I know it. She'll be able to tell. Mothers know things like this."

"Aden" – Logan grabbed my already sweaty palm and led me up the driveway – "if it makes you feel any better, she asked me to bring you to lunch yesterday when I was talking about you. That was before we had sex."

"Okay, you have a point." I was walking next to him and said, lowering my voice, "An idiotic one, but a point just the same. Why didn't you tell me about this beforehand?"

"Because you would have said no," he said with a slightly ornery laugh.

"Um...yeah!" Shit, I'd met parents before, but never on the second day. "Sure...we'll just waltz in and you can say...'Hey Mom, here's the ho I fucked last night."

He stopped walking and started laughing. "That would be funny." He turned and placed his hands on my shoulders. "It's going to be fine...you'll love her." He leaned in and started to kiss me.

"Are you nuts!" I twisted away from him. "I'm not gonna mack on you on her porch!"

The most adorable smile spread over his face. "Damn, if you aren't the cutest thing I think I've ever seen. Come on," he added, grabbing my hand, "and stop fidgeting."

Easy for you to say, I thought as he opened the front door, allowing me to go first. Lamb to the slaughter! Lamb to the slaughter!

"We're here, Momma," he called out.

I jumped when the door closed behind us. We were standing in an oversize entryway with large rooms on the right and left. A massive central stairway led up to the second floor with two separate hallways on either side running to the back of the house. I looked up to see an enormous crystal chandelier hanging above our heads. You could almost see your refection in the marble floors, they were so polished and shiny. I felt uncomfortable standing on them with my shoes on.

The room on our left was very bright with a lot of floral and soft pastel colors in the fabrics and on the walls. The one on the right was more masculine with leather chairs, richer colors, and textured fabrics. Obviously both living areas, I assumed one was for the morning, and the other the afternoon and evening.

"Well, there's my baby," a soft Southern voice called out coming down the stairs.

I looked up to see an extremely beautiful woman with black hair pulled back into a flawlessly groomed ponytail. She was dressed casually in khakis and a white button-down shirt. She didn't look old enough to be Logan's mommy, but then Logan looked younger than his years himself. She was sort of how I'd picture Scarlett O'Hara if she were alive today, and in her fifties or sixties.

"Hi, Momma," Logan beamed, slipping back into a little bit of southern accent. They hugged one another, and I stood back smiling as she gave me a once-over. She was smiling the entire time, finally giving me a wink, which made her look exactly the way Logan did when he winked at me.

"So this must be Aden." She pulled away from Logan and extended a hand toward me. "Emiline Price. Logan talked my ear off for a good hour about you yesterday, and so I just told him he simply had to bring you on around for lunch today so I could get myself a look at the man that bewitched my son in a mere morning."

"Oh, I-I..." I stammered, shaking her hand and looking back and forth between the two of them. Wow, it's the eyes. They have the exact same eyes. Logan grabbed both our hands to stop me from continually shaking hers. "He's a little nervous, Momma. I may have forgotten to mention we were having lunch with you."

"I... Well, not nervous... I... Unprepared perhaps," I said with a look of desperation.

"He didn't ask you before bringing you here for lunch?"

"No...ma'am, but thank you for apparently inviting me."

"Well, you're most welcome, Aden." Emiline turned to lead us into the prissy floral room. "Logan, you are a very naughty boy. I know I raised you with better manners than that."

"You always say that." He folded his arms as we sat across from her on one of the two facing loveseats. "But if that's true, then how do you explain Sadie?"

"You leave your sister out of it. Sadie is...well, Sadie. She's just like her grandmother, a woman who speaks her mind."

"Is she coming to lunch?" he asked.

"No, I thought it best not to subject your new friend to her on his first visit."

Okay, she said first visit. Not only visit. That's promising.

"That's probably smart," Logan said with a sexy, deep laugh, placing his hand on my leg.

I looked over at Emiline, who was looking at Logan's hand on my leg. I immediately started sweating again. "Well, Mrs. Price, if she takes after her mother, she must be exquisite."

She smiled at me in an unreadable way. "You are a charmer, and please, call me Emiline."

Okay, Aden, stop blowing smoke up her ass.

Logan squeezed my leg and gave me a wink. "I told you he was nice."

"Yes." Emiline looked down at the tray of beverages on the coffee table. "So, Aden, would you like coffee or juice?"

"Juice would be fine." I smiled weakly.

"So what do you think of my boy?" she asked, reaching down and pouring some orange juice from a carafe.

"He's...super." I answered. Super! What the hell, Aden, you aren't a member of the Brady Bunch.

She reached out, handing me the orange juice. I took the glass from her with both hands, terrified I'd have a freak spasm and spill it all over her immaculately puttogether room.

"What do the two you have planned for today?"

"Well"—Logan took a glass of juice as well, obviously trying not to laugh—"I thought I might borrow one of the cars and show Aden around Atlanta."

"That sounds lovely." She poured herself a cup of coffee. "Of course you can use one of the cars, whichever one you want."

Jesus, how many fucking cars does she have?

"Aden, how long are you in town?"

She hates me. She's already asking when I'll be leaving. "Just for the week, I'm afraid. Atlanta is beautiful, though. It's great visiting a large city."

"Oh," she said, "just visiting. You wouldn't enjoy living in a larger city?"

"Oh, well...no... I mean, yes... What do I mean?" I asked, laughing nervously. "I don't know, exactly. I never lived in a big city."

Logan let out a low rumble of a laugh and grabbed my hand, squeezing it gently. *Again with the touching!*

"At least the two of you will have the week to get to know one another a little."

"And I don't intend on letting him out of my sight for one minute of it," Logan declared.

"Really," Emiline said with a raised eyebrow.

Um, hi...why not just come out and say you plan on fucking me all goddamn week? "Yeah, that's very sweet. I'm sure he didn't mean every single minute." I took a sip of juice.

Logan looked at me and smiled. "That's exactly what I meant."

"Well, yeah"—I could feel my face turn beet red—"but he of course means like every waking minute." Stop talking! Stop talking!

"Of course," he clarified in a deep Southern accent and with a sly smile, showing off his dimples. "I most certainly did not intend on compromising your virtue when I spoke before."

Emiline looked me directly in the eye. "It's so nice to meet young people these days with old-fashioned values."

Laughing nervously, I replied, "Well, that's me." He is so not getting any tonight, and she is totally not buying this. "This is a beautiful old home, Emiline."

"Thank you," she said, looking around the room. "If you like, after lunch, I'll give you a little tour."

"That would be great."

"Well," Logan said, "would you both excuse me for a minute? I need to use the little boys' room."

Yeah, I mind, fucker. I will kill your ass if you leave me alone with her.

"Of course we don't mind," Emiline said. "I'm sure the two of us can amuse one another in your absence."

He got up and grabbed my shoulder, giving it a little squeeze. "I'll be right back then."

"'Kay," I said. Here it comes. Now is when she tells me there are several pig farms in the area where she can have my cold dead corpse dropped off if I don't leave her son alone.

"My son seems to be very taken with you, Aden." She set her cup and saucer on the coffee table. "I don't think I've ever seen him so excited."

"Really?" I asked excitedly, then caught myself. "Well, the feeling is mutual."

"Is it? You seem as nervous as a pack of mothers watching their toddlers play on the jungle gym. Are you always this jittery, or is it just me?"

I sat there for a second, wide-eyed, wondering how the fuck I was supposed to respond to that. "Okay, well...I'm going to take a leap here and just lay it on the line."

"How refreshing." She scooted up in the loveseat. "I'm on pins and needles."

"I don't have a clue as to what's going on between your son and me. I know I like him, a hell of a lot more than I should, considering I barely know him. I'm trying desperately not to allow myself to get carried away, because I know in a few days, we're each going to get on separate planes and fly away from one another. But...I can't seem to stop myself, and I think he feels the same. At least I want to believe he does. I mean"—I shook my head—"if you have a crystal ball lying around, I'd love to know where this is all leading."

"Well, I'm no expert, and I'm certainly not asking for any details, but I think we both know where it's leading, if it hasn't already." She leaned back into the loveseat.

Jesus, Mary!

"But where it goes beyond that is up to the two of you. No fortune-teller can predict life, with all its little twists and turns. I like you much better this way," she added with a smile. "Old ladies don't like to be pulled by the tail."

"I apologize; I have this thing about needing to be liked. It sometimes gets in the way of that actually happening."

"Well, as long you don't hurt my boy, I promise to love you to pieces."

"Okay," I said, smiling. "I'm actually glad he brought me here. It's good to know he feels something too."

"I raised my children to be compassionate with others. Logan was a success. Sadie, on the other hand... Well, let's just say I should have beaten her more as a child."

"Beaten who?" Logan asked, coming around the corner.

"Never you mind." Emiline got up out of her seat. "Well, shall we have lunch?"

We moved into the dining room and ate cucumber sandwiches, some type of cold dill-potato soup, and iced tea. I hate cucumbers, but I ate the whole sandwich, smiling my way through it. Emiline asked a lot of questions about my family, and Nathan's and my restaurant, my life at home. She also talked a little about Logan's father, whose name was Jackson. She didn't say so, but I kind of assumed Jackson Price had been from old money. She referred to him as Jacks, as if plain old Jack wasn't special enough.

After lunch, she took me on the tour as promised, while Logan went to get one of the cars out. Emiline and I met back up with him on the front porch. There was a red MGB convertible sitting in the driveway.

"Oh my God." My mouth fell open looking at it. "I loved these when I was little. It was my dream car. We used to play that game where you folded up the piece of paper and wrote names of cars and girls and the number of kids you would have. You know, your fingers slid under the paper, and you opened them up, revealing whom, what, and where. How your life would turn out."

"How sweet," Emiline said.

"I always ended up with the MG."

"You're so weird." Logan gave me his "you're quite the nut" look.

"Guess you had to be there."

"Thank you, Momma." Logan leaned over and gave Emiline a sweet peck on the cheek.

"It was very nice meeting you," I called out as Logan began to yank me down the steps. "Maybe I could take the two of you out to dinner sometime this week?"

"I look forward to it, I must say. My son has excellent taste."

I smiled at her as Logan opened the car door for me. I slid into the seat and felt like a little kid in the tiny car. My dad had an MGB when I was very young, although I couldn't seem to remember what had happened to it. I pulled on my seat belt and watched as he got in and started the engine. It was so bizarre to me how open Logan was about all aspects of his life with his mother. I couldn't imagine bringing a man home with me to meet my parents.

"Careful now!" She waved from the porch as we pulled out of the driveway onto the street.

Logan turned a corner and looked over at me as I cleaned the spots off my sunglasses with my shirt. "She likes you."

"Well." I placed the glasses on with a smirk. "I should be mad as hell at you for ambushing me that way."

"Hmmm." He slowed, coming to a stop sign. "You can spank me later if you want to; I deserve it."

"You wish," I said, laughing. "You'll be lucky to get so much as a kiss later, let alone a spanking."

"Big talker, huh?" He reached over and slowly ran a finger up my leg. "Something tells me I'll get much more than a kiss tonight."

Cocky little bastard. I wish I could say he wasn't right, but damned if he was. I couldn't wait to feel his hands on my body, his mouth covering mine. As we drove through the residential neighborhoods, passing the large plantation-like houses, I wondered momentarily where he was taking me. I realized I didn't give a damn where we were going. I was content merely to be with him. It both elated and frightened the

hell out of me at the same time. I looked over at him, watched his face until a smile spread across it.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, I'm just lookin' at ya."

He spun the steering wheel, whipped around a corner. "Well, that's not fair. I'm not allowed the same luxury."

"You can check yourself out in the rearview." I reached over, rested my elbow on his shoulder, and played with his hair.

"I meant you, silly. I don't get to sit and look at you."

"Oh well, sucks to be you."

A seriousness suddenly seemed to come over him. "Explain something to me."

"Okay...if I can."

"How is it that I feel so completely at home sitting here with you, like I've been doing it all my life? Am I crazy?"

"Well, I can't speak to your mental capacity, but...it's fucking scary isn't it?"

"So I'm not alone, feeling like this?" he asked, flipping on the turn signal.

"No." I let my head fall back into the seat, feeling the warm sunlight on my face. "I feel like I woke up this morning in someone else's life, and I have to say...I'm likin' it a hell of a lot better than my own."

"Aden, I'm not the kind of guy that really spends very much time catering to my own individual wants and needs. Yeah, the restaurant is mine, so the work I put into it benefits me, but outside of that, I don't really take very good care of myself."

"I understand that, Logan." Here it comes. I like you, and if you lived in LA, I'd pursue it. But I just don't have the time.

"I would really like to change that," he said, looking at me.

I suppressed the urge to ask him exactly what he meant by that. Instead, I smiled at him. "I think that sounds nice." He reached over and ran the back of his hand over my cheek. I shut my eyes and tried to concentrate on the sensation so that when this was all over, I'd be able to remember the way it felt.

* * * * *

I ended up spending the rest of the week with Logan. We pretty much ditched the convention, and he took me all over Atlanta, showing me all his old haunts. One night he took me to his old high school, where we broke into the football stadium and walked across the football field holding hands and talking. It was there he made one of my fantasies come true when I sucked him off under the bleachers. Between the meals, which included Nathan plus one more with Logan's mother, and sightseeing, we had sex, lots and lots of sex. I was making up for lost time, and he seemed more than happy to oblige. By the end of the week, the feelings I'd developed for him, whether real or

something I was inventing to make what I was doing okay in my own mind, were pretty strong. I felt as if I were floating several inches off the ground when I was with him. The whole week took on a kind of romantic-movielike atmosphere. It was really only Nathan's presence that made me realize it was actually happening and not some type of psychosomatic delusion.

At the end of the week, Logan took Nathan and me to the airport. As I was beginning to head for the metal detectors, he yanked me back and gave me the softest, sexiest kiss. He pulled away, looked me directly in the eyes, and told me, "This isn't over, you know. We aren't done. This week was only a beginning." I wanted to believe him, but that annoying little voice in the back of my head was saying, Don't count on it, honey.

Chapter Five

Carrie took the dinner plate out of my way, cleared all the extra stuff, silverware and bread plate, then pulled out her crumber and scraped it along the tablecloth, scooping up my mess. Feeling stuffed to the point of being sick, I leaned back into the seat. Carrie sat a brandy snifter of B & B in front of me. I looked up at her, and she pointed to Nathan, who looked at me, smiled, and gave me a wink.

"Thanks, Nathan." I was laughing at his now-obvious intoxication. His cheeks always got a little flushed when he was drunk.

"You're welcome, gorgeous," he said.

"You two are going to make me puke"—Finn ran her hand over her tummy—"which at this point wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. I feel like I'm going to pop right out of this dress."

"I know." I took a sip of B & B. "Bring on the pajamas."

"Um, yeah, hi." Finn pointed at Nathan. "No such luck. It's so not over yet."

Nathan started tapping his spoon against his wineglass. "Attention, could I have everyone's attention?" He clumsily got up out of his seat as the room began to settle down. "Okay, as you all know, this is probably going to be your very last chance... So if anyone would like to share a little Aden story with us, we would love to hear it. For those of you who've been waiting for just the right time to tell his ass off...well, we'd really like to hear that. We want to hear the good, the bad, and especially the ugly."

There was some laughing and clapping and a few raising their glasses, making whooping noises.

"Um, yeah...hello" —I raised my hand—"just remember before you all open your fat mouths, my memory is long...very long."

Finn scoffed. "Like that's a real threat. Bambi is more intimidating than you."

Everyone laughed as I shook my head. What followed were stories of all the fucked-up moments we'd had in the restaurant, sort of a verbal bloopers montage. Finn recalled the night she was waiting on two very large rednecks. She'd placed their dinner plates in front of them; one of the guys looked down at his twenty-two-ounce rib eye and back up at Finn and said, "Damn, I haven't seen a piece of meat this big since I got out of the shower this morning."

I happened to have been walking by with a pitcher of water, and my mouth fell open in disgust. Finn looked at him without so much as flinching and replied, "Really? Who was in there with you?"

When the guy came to me pissed, I explained that I didn't appreciate him coming into my restaurant and sexually harassing my waitstaff, and that maybe in the future he should stick to Hooters.

Several people got up to say how we'd made some special event in their life unique and memorable. Colleen talked about the night she came in for a blind date. In case the guy turned out to be an asshole, she and I had come up with a story about how the police had called and her apartment had been broken into. The guy of course was now her husband. She went on about how much Harlow's, along with Nathan and me, meant to them, since it was where they first met.

I knew from the minute they walked into the restaurant that night she was hooked. I sat back in my seat listening to her talk, thinking about flying out of Atlanta that day, and all the feelings of anxiety and anticipation that rose up with me into the air. I smiled, remembering how unsure I was at the time about what had happened to me that week. It had been midsummer when I met Logan. It was almost four months later when things shifted and I began to realize my life as I had known it up to that point was over.

* * * * *

"Honey, I really love this one." I ran my hand over the plush fabric of the chocolate brown sofa with game-show-host flair. Wide-eyed and pleading, I looked up at him.

He snarled up his nose and looked around the furniture showroom, surveying the terrain. Sunlight poured through the two-story plate glass windows located at the front of the store. There were groupings of furniture set up in clusters throughout the room with customers and salespeople weaving in and around them like an obstacle course.

"It's too poufy." He cocked his head to one side.

"All the better to cuddle up into." I sat down, sinking into the cushions. I sighed with a smile and looked up at him, patting my hand on the cushion next to me, trying to tempt him to try it out. "This sofa leaves me feeling...flaccid," he said, green eyes twinkling. His sandy brown hair glistened in the sunlight and a mischievous half smile appeared on his face.

"Really." I rolled my eyes. "Well, I have two words for you, love... Viva Viagra."

A laugh slipped out from between his lips as he shook his head. "I can't, Aden, it's too hideous." He held out his hands for me to take. "Come with me...let me take you on a tour of the living room for our new home."

I let out a frustrated sigh and took his hand as he pulled me to my feet. He dragged me through several groups of furniture until we came across a deep brown leather sofa.

"Now I was initially thinking black, but since you liked the brown fabric of the other one, I can compromise with this."

"Babe, it's leather." I pointed at it. "It will be so hot to sit on in the summer."

He moved up behind me, pressing his body into mine. He placed one hand on my waist and pointed toward the sofa with the other. Bringing his lips to my ear, he whispered, "When I look at this sofa, I picture you naked and stretched out across it. Your legs spread, one hand above your head, and the other stroking your beautiful hard cock. I climb between your legs, lifting them up over my shoulders, and slide my thick, hard nine-inch dick inside you."

I cleared my throat and licked my lips as he grabbed my hips and turned me to the right, pointing at the matching chaise longue a few feet away.

"Then I'd lay you facedown straddling this chaise and I'd slow-f-fuck you from behind, working that tight, hot hole until I had you dripping wet."

I let out a low, almost inaudible moan as he pointed to the sleek dark wood square coffee table in front of us. "I'd then lay across the table on my back while you impale yourself on my dick and ride me like a wild mustang. Finally," he added, turning us back, pointing to a matching sofa table, "I'd bend you over that and power fuck you till you scream with ecstasy, shooting your wad as I come all over your back."

"Holy Christ!" I attempted to adjust the hard-on in my jeans so it wasn't as noticeable as I knew it had to be. I faced him and said, "Sold!"

"Sold?" I heard Finn say as my eyes popped open.

"What?" I asked, looking around my bedroom until my gaze landed on Finn standing in the doorway with a curious smile.

She was wearing a formfitting black pencil skirt with a vanilla-colored cotton button-up blouse and a pair of black strappy pumps. Standing in my doorway holding blueberry Pop-Tarts wrapped in a paper towel, she looked funny made up to perfection and ready for work

I began rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. "Now that's a gourmet breakfast."

"I'm getting ready to leave," she declared with a dirty look. "Figured I'd better wake you up since I hadn't heard your alarm go off. Don't you have to be somewhere in a couple of hours?"

I looked at the clock next to my bed. "Fuck me...this stupid thing must be broken."

"You definitely don't want to be late, and you might want to do something about that." She smiled deviously, pointing to the bulge making a tent under my blankets.

"Get out," I yelled, sitting up and covering it with my hands, feeling my face flush.

She turned and walked down the hall laughing as her heels made clicking noises on the hardwood floors. I lay back down and smiled, unable to believe this day was finally here.

When I'd left Logan at the airport in Atlanta, we'd exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses. We'd both promised to call and write. I'd figured, even if we did keep in contact, our relationship would naturally progress into friendship, and that would be the extent of it.

I was way wrong. Over the last few months, we spoke on the phone at least once a day. Even with the e-mails flying back and forth, my phone bills began to shoot through the roof. When the phone sex began to get out of hand, he'd decided to visit me for a week.

* * * * *

Sitting on the edge of a fountain in the airport, I was unable to take my eyes off the gate, which all passengers had to come through. It had been so long since I had physically laid eyes on him. I was afraid upon seeing his face I might shoot in my pants. The mist from the fountain settled lightly onto my skin. I closed my eyes, remembering what it felt like to have his hands on me. Feeling myself begin to get hard, I immediately started going over the grocery list I had stored in my head.

A group of passengers began to round the corner heading toward the gate. A family of four: the parents looking particularly exhausted, was first. The boy was poking his sister in the arm as she tried to whack his hand away while complaining to her parents. Two ladies, one of whom had very bright red hair, were chattering away,

an older couple following behind them, and rounding the corner, as if in slow motion, Logan was making his way toward the gate. He was wearing a pair of jeans that hugged his body in all the right places, some type of black boots, and a solid black formfitting T-shirt. His blond hair, which looked slightly tousled in that sort of manufactured way, was just as I remembered it. He began looking around to see if he could spot me, and as our eyes met, that sexy megawatt smile spread across his face.

A little groan escaped between my lips, and my heart began pounding as a slight fever ran over my skin. I stood up as he passed through the gate. I walked toward him, all but falling into his arms.

He squeezed me tightly. "My God, it's fucking great to see you."

"I missed you too," I said as I shoved my face into his chest, breathing in his scent.

We finally separated and looked at one another for a long moment before turning to walk down the corridor that led to baggage claim. We continued glancing over at one another and grinning. We didn't speak, just sort of took one another in. His arm brushed mine, and I jiggled as chills ran over me. We picked up his bags as he told me about his flight. He'd been seated next to some woman who had bawled the entire time. She was flying home after having followed her husband on what was supposed to be one of his business trips. Instead, she'd found him fucking a woman he worked with.

Leaving the terminal, we walked over to the parking lot up to my new green Volkswagen Beetle. I popped the trunk and we threw in his bags.

"Why is it I'm not surprised by this?" He motioned toward the car.

"What?"

"I don't know. It just seems to fit. You seem like the Beetle type."

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked with a smile.

"Nothing bad," he replied. "It just fits, that's all I'm saying."

I pushed the button on my key, unlocking the doors, and we each headed to opposite sides of the car. "Well, what do you drive?"

He opened his door and stopped to look at me. "I guess you'll have to come to California to find out."

He got into the car, and I mumbled, "Shady little bastard."

Once we were both in the car, he grabbed my face and kissed me. I reached up to run my hand through his hair, only to stop, not wanting to mess up his mussed-up do. He pulled away, and I let out a long sigh, finally opening my eyes to look at him.

"Hello, gorgeous," I said.

"I've been waiting entirely too long to do that... I think I'll do it again." He leaned in again, shoving his tongue into my mouth.

When he finally pulled away, I warned, "If you keep doing that, I'm gonna lose it right here."

He laughed and sat back into his seat. "I'll be good...for the time being, but I suggest you get this car moving."

"Okay, okay!" I shook my head, biting my lower lip trying to control myself. I pulled out of the parking space, drove up to the lot booth, and paid to get out. The gate lever lifted up, and I zipped out of the lot and onto the circle drive. Rounding the corner to exit the airport, I ran over the curb.

"Hmmm, kinda took out the curb there."

"Yeah." I laughed. "I've been told I'm not a very good driver, but I've never been in a wreck."

I sped up, passing a huge Lincoln, and pulled over into the right-hand lane. The guy honked at me. I stuck my hand up and gave him the finger. "Fuck off!"

Logan looked over at me with wide eyes. I smiled at him as I closed in on the car in front of me. "Today, granny!" I threw a hand in the air. I swung over into the left lane and had to slam on the brakes as the light changed. "Jesus Christ, if that dumb-ass bitch hadn't been driving so damn slow." The lady's car pulled up next to ours and I shot her a nasty look. Logan began slowly pulling his seat belt on as the lights changed, and I sped off down the street, pointing different things out to him. "Oh fuck, I need to turn here," I said, coming up on an intersection. I glanced into my passenger-side mirror and sharply pulled the car over two lanes and began rounding the corner, listening to someone honk their horn at me. "Go to hell, you fucking whore!"

"Exactly how far away is your house?" Logan asked, cautiously.

"Not far," I answered, grinning. "Why?"

"No reason." He grabbed ahold of the "oh shit" bar on the dashboard as I switched lanes.

I passed the car in my way and switched back, shaking my head. "The people in this fucking town can't drive for shit."

"I-I can see that."

"Get the hell outta my way, bitch. For the love of God." I sailed through a yellow light, turning abruptly as my tires squealed. I was chattering away, pointing out antique stores, historic buildings, and restaurants.

"Jesus!"

"What...what?" I asked.

"You almost hit that guy on a bike."

"Where?" I asked, looking around.

Logan reached over and put his hands on the wheel. "God, you almost sideswiped that car!"

"I saw it," I said matter-of-factly. I turned off onto my street, went down a couple of blocks, and pulled into my driveway. "We're here."

"Thank fucking God!" Logan looked me over. "Road rage, anyone?"

"What?"

"You aren't a bad driver."

I smiled at him, crinkling up my nose.

"Bad doesn't begin to cover it." He unbuckled his seat belt and opened the car door. "How the hell did you even get a license?"

I looked at him for a second and burst out laughing. "You're so funny." I popped the trunk and got out of the driver's seat, then made my way to the back of the car. Logan followed suit and took one of the bags from me, shaking his head.

"I'm *still* trying to figure out how many points you racked up back there with that string of expletives flying out of your mouth."

"Well...they can't hear me." I closed the trunk. "And karma points don't count...when you're in moving vehicles."

"Now you're just making shit up as you go along, aren't you?"

I looked at him with my best wide-eyed innocent routine. "Ya-huh."

He looked at me, shook his head, and shrugged.

As he followed me along the cobblestone path to my front door, I heard, "Mmm, mmm, damn, baby, but that is one fine ass. I've missed that ass."

I smiled and turned around to look at him and tripped over a cobblestone. I stumbled forward but managed to keep myself from falling.

"And so graceful too," he said, laughing.

"Fuck you." I felt my face burn.

He pressed up against me as I fumbled for the keys. "If you insist."

"Damn, boy." I could feel his hard-on through his pants. "Somebody's an eager beaver."

I slid the key into the lock, and he began to nibble on my neck. "Um, this isn't LA, Logan." I looked around to see if any of my neighbors were watching.

"Then I suggest you get that door open," he demanded.

I went to turn the key, and he reached down and ran his hand over my ass and squeezed, causing me to jump. I heard a little *ping* noise and looked down. "Shit! I broke the fucking key off in the door."

He started to laugh as I struggled to find the amusement in the situation. "This is so not funny."

He set down his bag and bent down. "Here, let me look at it."

"I guess I could call Finn," I pondered, flipping open my cell phone.

"Maybe not," he said with a serious look. "There's still a piece of the key sticking out." He turned and unzipped his carry-on and pulled out what looked like a pocketknife.

"What are you gonna do, threaten the door?"

He looked up at me as he sort of flipped it around and it turned into a pair of pliers. My mouth fell open as he clamped it onto what was left of the key and carefully turned it, unlocking the door.

"Baby, that was so butch!"

"That turned you on, didn't it?" he asked, looking at me with a cocky smile.

"In more ways than you could ever know," I said, all too seriously.

He slowly pulled out what was left of the key and pushed open the door. We dragged his bags inside, dropped them on the floor, and went for one another. He reached out with his hand, swinging until he got ahold of the door, and pushed it shut.

"Don't you want a tour?" I asked between kisses.

"Later." He walked me backward toward the couch.

"Wait...not out here, Finn could walk in anytime."

"Down the hall?" he asked, covering my mouth with his and untucking my shirt.

I managed a grunt and ran my hands over his chest as he turned us and waddled in that general direction. I kicked off my sandals as he ran us into the wall, the corner of which went right into my back.

"Ow!"

"Sorry."

"No prob..." I tried to get out before he covered my mouth again. Once again we were moving. I got his belt undone, unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans as he pulled my arms up to yank off my shirt, tossing it behind him to land where it may. His large hands seemed to be covering every inch of my body all at once. I shoved my hand down his pants and he moaned as he began fumbling with my belt. I reached out with my free hand and grabbed onto the molding around my bedroom door.

"Here," I moaned.

He turned and pinned me up against the bedroom door, and I pushed his jeans and boxer briefs down over his hips. He started grinding up against me as I blindly fumbled for the door handle. I found it and turned the knob. The door popped open, and we fell back and landed roughly against the hardwood floor.

"Fuck, that hurt." We both started laughing. He had a red mark on his forehead where he'd bumped it on the floor, and I could already feel a bruise forming on my elbow.

"I have a feeling I'm going to be extremely sore tomorrow."

"I'd be personally offended if you weren't." He arched his eyebrows as he grabbed onto me and rolled us out of the doorway. Reaching out with his foot, he caught the edge of the door and pushed it closed.

I pulled myself off him and stood up. "Fancy moves."

"Thanks." He sat up and pulled my pants down, allowing me to step out of them. He put his hands on my legs and reached out with the tip of tongue and licked the glistening head of my dick. My body twitched as his hot mouth covered it, then slowly ran down over the shaft, licking and sucking. His full lips looked so good wrapped around my cock, and I let out a moan, weaving my fingers into his hair. He pulled his mouth away and I felt cool air running over my wet dick.

"Baby, you taste so sweet." He licked his lips as I grabbed his hand and helped pull him up.

I ran my eyes over him, marveling over every inch of his hard, muscled body. His smooth, hairless chest, the perfectly formed abs that ran down to form the V-shaped pelvis. My mouth watered at the sight of him. I'd jerked off so many times over the past months thinking about his body and the exquisite things he could do with it. He sat on the bed and started untying his black army-looking boots.

"And why in the hell did you wear lace-up boots?" I asked, reaching down and working on the other one.

"'Cause they look cool," he stated, smiling from ear to ear, causing me to go weak in the knees.

I pulled off his boot and yanked off his jeans and briefs. "My God, you're sexy."

He stopped and looked me in the eyes. He reached out with his hand and ran it down my cheek, cupping my chin with his hand. "I love you, Aden Ingle."

"You do?" I asked, shocked by the words he just confessed to me. *Christ, I could live in those eyes.* "Well, I love you, Logan Price."

He pulled me up onto the bed on top of him, and we slowly began kissing one another. My head was swimming from his declaration. I hadn't expected to hear "I love you," and I certainly hadn't intended on saying it. Finding it difficult to breathe or concentrate with his warm, naked skin rubbing against mine, I let go of all my thoughts. His tongue slowly moved into my mouth as I ran my fingers through his soft hair. We were grinding our hard cocks into one another as his hands slowly made their way down my back and slid over my ass. He massaged the cheeks softly as his mouth pressed harder onto mine.

"Logan," I screamed out as he pulled my ass open with his hands and ran a finger over my hole.

He rolled us over so he was on top, and I wrapped my legs tightly around his waist. His cock ground into mine and our precum began lubing us up with hot friction. He released my mouth as he kissed down my cheek and moved to my ear, lightly nibbling. I thought I would explode from the sensation of his warm breath in my ear. "I want you so bad it hurts," he whispered in a deep, raspy voice.

I reached up under a pillow and pulled out condoms and lube. "Fuck me, now," I demanded as I shoved the tube in his hand.

His hair was sticking to his moist forehead as he smiled, looking down at me. "Mmmm," he moaned deeply, "we have lots of time." He moved down and took one of my nipples into his hot mouth.

"Please, Logan" – I ripped open the condom – "I need you inside me...please."

He raised his face to look me in the eyes. He kissed me gently, lightly licking and nipping my lower lip with his teeth. He lifted himself up onto his knees, and I sat up and slid the condom over his beautiful hard cock as he squeezed some lube into his hands. I fell back onto the bed and he began rubbing the lube over my hole. He started to slip in a finger, and I groaned. "No, Logan, you…I want you inside me."

He slicked up my cock with lube and squeezed more into his hand before tossing the tube aside. I closed my eyes and could hear the wet noises as he ran his hand over his dick. He grabbed my legs and lifted me up slightly as he placed them over his shoulders, kissing and lightly licking my calves. I took in a sharp breath as I felt the large head push through the tight muscle. He let out a low grumbling moan as he slowly but continuously slid himself all the way inside me. I let out the air I'd been holding in my lungs when I felt his pelvis press against my ass. He let my legs fall off his shoulders as he leaned down and grabbed me behind the neck, pulling me up to press his wet mouth onto mine. He roughly shoved his tongue into my mouth as he gently pumped my ass, massaging my prostate.

I dug my fingers into his shoulders and let out a long groan, feeling my eyes roll back into my head. He pulled his mouth off mine and I slid a hand down over his hard chest to twist and pull his nipple with my fingers. He pushed me back down onto the bed and grabbed my legs behind the knees, forcing them down into my chest. He pumped steadily in and out, and I whispered, "Yes," biting my lower lip as my face contorted in agony and ecstasy.

"Aww, Christ." Logan pulled himself out of me and got up onto his knees.

"What's wro...?" I started to ask as he grabbed me by the thighs and flipped me over as if I weighed nothing at all.

"I'm sorry"—he yanked me up on my hands and knees—"but if I keep glancing down at you with that look on your face, I'm gonna lose it completely."

He shoved his knees between my legs, pushing them apart, and I let out a slightly evil laugh, realizing I drove him as crazy as he drove me. I gasped as I heard a smack and felt a warm tingling sensation rush over my left ass cheek.

"You don't need to sound quite so pleased with yourself, you rotten little cuss." He grabbed my hip with one hand and forcefully pulled me back.

I moaned and smiled as I felt the head of his cock pressing against my hole. Once the head popped in, he placed the hand he'd been using to guide his dick into me on my other hip and expertly shoved his full length into me. I let out a full-throated moan as he grunted and began to pump his hard flesh in and out.

I began to pant when he pushed farther into me with each thrust. I loved the way his hands controlled my body, twisting and pulling me into whatever position he wanted me in.

I could feel the sweat run down the center of my back. "I'm close, baby."

Logan reached up and grabbed my shoulder, one hand pulling me back while his other pushed me out from my hip, arching my back to the point I thought I might snap in two. Feeling my balls inch up, I reached down and grabbed my lube-and-precumsaturated cock and pulled roughly. I screamed out, "Oh baby...you're a fucking god," as my ass clenched around Logan's cock and I shot out thick, hot streams of cum. He instantly rammed deeper into me as he yelled out, digging his fingers into my hip and shoulder, releasing his load into the condom up my ass.

Logan wrapped his arm around my waist and pressed his face into my shoulder as he twitched and shuddered a few more times. I reached my hand back behind his head and turned as our mouths met in a soft kiss. The sweat ran down between us as he pressed his slick, warm body against mine.

Our lips parted, and he said, "I'm so crazy about you."

He slid his other arm around my waist, pulling me tight to him. Still on our knees in the middle of the bed, I could feel his dick inside me slowly begin to lose its hardness. I reached back to place my hands on his ass, keeping him tight against me.

"I could stay like this forever," I said as he nuzzled his face in between my shoulder blades, "you inside me."

He lightly kissed the back of my neck. "I love you."

I felt a pressure on my chest and my eyes began to burn as the words cut through me. Never in my life had those words created such an ache in my gut, wrenching me from the base of my spine to the tip of my skull. I was so happy being wrapped up in his arms and terrified at the thought of letting go. I felt so connected to this man, and the sheer power my need to be near him held over me scared the shit out of me.

* * * * *

We each lay on our sides, looking at one another. Logan had my hand in his and was holding it up against his chest. I reached over and ran my finger down the line in the center of his chest. There was still a light trace of sweat covering him. We lay there, neither one of us saying anything, for what seemed like hours. Every now and then he'd survey the room and I tried to gauge what he was looking at: the armoire, the crown molding, the crack in the plaster wall? The pillows from my bed were scattered all over the floor, and the duvet and sheet had been pushed down by our feet and were now shoved between the footboard and the mattress. Finally he smiled, and a little laugh slipped out.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"I was just wondering."

"Yes?" I figured he wanted to do something kinky but was reluctant to come out with it.

"I was wondering what it would've been like if I'd met you in high school."

"Where in the name of holy gay hell did that come from?"

"I don't know," he said with a sexy grin. "It just popped into my head."

"You're an odd one, Mr. Price." I acted scared, even though I thought it was kind of sweet. "Well, you probably never would've met me in high school, even if we had gone to the same school."

"Oh, I see." He gave me a smirk. "You were just so popular and much too snotty to have ever associated with the likes of me, huh?"

I rubbed his chest with the back of my finger. "You wouldn't have looked at me twice. I was an invisi-kid, like a ghost, with only a yearbook picture to prove I'd actually been there."

"That sounds kinda sad. Are you telling me you had no friends in high school?"

"Not really," I said as he locked eyes with me. "There were a couple of people I talked to, but we didn't hang out outside of school."

"I don't understand. Why?"

"It was totally me. I shut everyone out. It was a fear thing. I don't think I consciously knew it at the time, but being gay was really what kept me from allowing anyone to get close."

"So the fear of being ostracized made you ostracize yourself?"

"Yeah." I watched his face, waiting to see the "you're so pathetic" look. When he didn't say anything, I continued. "I guess, at least, it was my decision as opposed to someone else making it for me. I mean, there was one guy that was obviously gay, and I saw how he was treated, which wasn't pretty by any means. I don't know, I suppose I thought it would just be easier to blend into the walls. I wish I could say I was the gay avenger, running around high school kicking hetero ass, but such isn't the case."

"Well, if I had been in your school, I would've noticed you. I would've been like, Hey...look at that hottie sitting over there in the corner. Damn, I'd love to suck his dick."

"Oh my God." I burst out in shocked laughter.

"You would've let me too," he added, arching one eyebrow.

"Oh yeah, you know it, baby."

"You would." He poked me playfully in the side. "You would've been like, Oh yeah...give it to me daddy!"

"You're a dirty boy." I swatted his hand away. "Is that what you were like in high school, running around sucking all the dick you could get your mouth on?"

He took my hand and placed it over his heart. "Yeah, pretty much. I was a horny little bastard."

"Well, I'm glad I didn't know you then." I removed my hand and smacked him. "You probably would've broken my heart."

"Nah." Logan reached over, tickling me. "Once I got my mouth on your little sixteen-year-old cock," he added, reaching down and grabbing at my crotch, "I

would've been hooked. You would've strung me along, only giving it to me when it suited your diabolical purposes, and then after senior prom, you'd have dumped me and run off to college."

"Hell." I loved having his hands on my body. "I didn't go to my senior prom."

"What?"

"Nope, I met two gay guys my senior year when I worked at Kmart."

"Wait...you worked at Kmart?" He laughed. "That's it. I'm on the first plane outta here."

"Fuck you, little Mr. Rich Boy. I wasn't brought up with a silver spoon up my butt."

"Shit." He rolled onto his side, wide-eyed. "I hadn't figured it out till now. That's why I'm queer. They shoved the spoon in the wrong end...and I liked it a little too much."

"Sick." I shook my head and laughed. "I'm in love with a perv boy."

"Sure, sure...pretend to be disgusted, shaking that finger in my face. Just remember, Mr. High-and-Mighty, I know what you like to do with that finger." He laughed when my mouth fell open. "Okay, okay, blue light special boy, so what the hell were you really doing when you were supposed to be at your prom?"

"I was in a gay bar. I had my very first kiss that night."

"You did, huh?" he said. "Was it a good one?"

"It was fucking great."

"Better than this?" he asked, rolling on top of me and sliding his tongue into my mouth.

"All right, boys, cover your twigs-n-berries," Finn called out, kicking the door open, causing Logan and me to freeze in place. "Well, well!" She was standing in the doorway wearing an apron, holding two bottles of water and shaking her head. "I can see by the trail of luggage and clothes leading to your bedroom you two wasted no time before humping one another like cats in heat."

I started laughing out of both a mix of embarrassment and amusement at how pleased Finn was with herself for walking in on us in our current state. I couldn't figure out the reasoning behind the apron. Hell, I didn't even know we had an apron. "Well, introductions seem slightly absurd at the moment, but, Finn...meet Logan."

"Gee," Logan said, "this isn't at all awkward."

"Well," Finn offered, "not as awkward as it would've been coming in when you had his legs in the air and he was screaming, 'Oh Logan...you're a fucking god!""

I busted out laughing, and Logan said, "Very true, that certainly would've been more awkward."

"All right, boys, you can fuck each other later on. I'm bored, so you need to come entertain me."

I shot her a nasty look. "Finn, this isn't funny. You're being rude, so close the door and go away."

"I am shocked at your accusation! I'm just being a good hostess." She stomped over and placed the bottles of water onto the nightstand. "I'll just go back out into the living room and sit on the couch...by myself...with absolutely nothing to do." She turned to head out the door and stopped in the doorway with her back turned and added, "Except listen to the two of you have sex."

I looked at Logan, and he shrugged "You win. We'll be out in a minute."

"Yeah!" she squealed, turning around with a huge smile. "And Logan," she added, smiling and crinkling up her nose, "nice fucking ass." She winked at him and disappeared around the corner.

"Okay," Logan said, with a serious expression.

"I'm so sorry."

"I like her." He nodded "You gotta love a girl who can appreciate a hot ass when she sees it."

I shook my head as he got up and shut the door. How that bitch gets away with the shit she pulls is beyond me. Logan and I got up and went into the connecting bathroom and took a shower. He wouldn't let me lift a finger. He washed his hair, then my hair, himself, and then me, all the while kissing me and running his lips over every inch of my body. It was wonderful to not have to do anything for myself. I kissed him gently and slowly as we dried one another off.

I got dressed, ran out to the front door, grabbed his luggage, and took it in to him. I left him to dig through his suitcases and made my way out to the living room.

As I walked down the hallway, I ran my hands through my damp hair, catching a whiff of the citrus-sage scent left from the shampoo. I walked into the living room, which in its current state was a sort of mixed-bag ethnic design scheme. The entertainment armoire and the coffee table were chunky, heavy-looking wooden pieces made in Mexico. Finn had done some type of tobacco-colored faux finish on the walls, which I was particularly fond of. They made the dark-stained thick crown molding and the ornate wood mantel around the fireplace really pop. The window treatments, as Finn called them, getting mad whenever I called them curtains, were thin, flowing, deep jewel-toned Moroccan-inspired panels that sort of pooled onto the floor. Finn was sitting in the brown leather armchair, so I walked over and plopped down on the matching sofa, letting out a sigh.

"Well, well." Finn had the pasted-on expression of an actress in a television commercial. "Looks like someone's had their gears adjusted."

I smiled, a little embarrassed but also wanting to rub it in that I just got laid. "I feel like I just had my first meal after a several-month-long fast."

She laughed and pulled her legs up into the chair. "Well, I suppose if anyone deserves it, you do. If it were anyone else, I'd want to scratch their eyes out from jealousy."

"And by the way, we'll not be having any more repeat performances like the one you pulled earlier."

She flung her hand up into the air as if in disgust. "The thanks I get for keeping you hydrated."

"Save it, lady."

"Was he mad?"

"No." I knew full well she couldn't have cared less if he was mad. "Your favorable speculations as to the appearance of his ass seem to be the only thing he noticed."

She giggled, looking like a mischievous little girl.

Logan walked in wearing a tight white wifebeater, the sight of which made my mouth water, and a pair of loose-fitting gray cotton sweatpants. He sat down next to me on the sofa, stretching his arms out. "I feel great."

"I'd hope to hell so," Finn said.

Logan held up the bottle of water as if to say cheers. "Thanks for the water, by the way."

"See!" Finn pointed at Logan.

It's amazing how even when I know I'm right, I'm still unable to get anyone to notice. "I give up."

"It's extremely important to drink lots of water after intense aerobic exercise," Finn stated.

"Thank you, Guru Finn," I said.

Logan started laughing. "Intense being the key word there."

"All right there, ego boy." I took his free hand in mine and wove my fingers through his. "We get it. You're quite the stud."

"I always say, when you got it, flaunt it." Finn wiggled back into the chair a little more. "Now all we need is for more men to actually have what they flaunt."

"Hmm," Logan said, "you sound like a woman that's had to fake a few."

"Yes, well, I'm done with all that," Finn said. "Now I just tell them, I'm sorry, it's not working for me...just take your penis and go."

Logan and I started laughing. "Like men with tiny dicks who say they are strictly tops. What's up with that? When a guy informs me that he only tops, I'm expecting there to be a *sizable* reason for this, as if it would be wrong to ask them to waste their appendage being a bottom."

"It's amazing, 'cause when you think about sex in generalities, it doesn't seem like it should be all that complicated." Logan placed the bottle of water between his legs. "In reality, there are a million and one different little things, any combination of which, when put together, get a person off."

I reached between his legs and grabbed his bottle of water. "And there are some pretty twisted freak daddies out there."

"Like that guy I went out with last year." Finn looked at me. "What was his name, Randall?" I nodded my head in agreement. "After the first few times we had sex, which were quite nice, I find out he's into all this bondage shit. I'm as willing as the next girl to experiment, but it was the only way he wanted to have sex. I could deal with it every now and then, but there's too much set-up and take-down time for that crap."

"I dated a guy that was physically incapable of reaching an orgasm unless you pulled his hair," Logan said.

Finn scrunched her face up. "Makes you wonder exactly how he stumbled onto that little nugget."

"Well, at least on your first attempt at intercourse, you didn't have a guy with a dick the size of a Vienna sausage ask you, 'Are you sure you haven't done this before, 'cause you're not very tight?'" I placed the water bottle back between Logan's legs, letting my finger lightly graze his balls.

"No he didn't." Logan shot me a half smile.

"Yeah, 'fraid so," I said.

"Baby, I'm so sorry." Logan patted my knee and gave me a peck on the cheek. "What did you say?"

"Nothing." I shrugged. "I was sure he couldn't have said what I thought I'd heard, so I asked him to repeat it, which he seemed more than happy to do."

"You should've said, 'Well, maybe it's not so much my ass as much as that little nub of flesh between your legs you're trying to pass off as a dick,'" Finn said.

"Fuck that, you should've decked him. Does he live here? 'Cause if he does, I'll deck him."

I leaned over and gave him a thank-you peck for wanting to defend the honor of my ass tautness.

Finn began talking about the guy who wanted her to put a canvas bag over her head, when I suddenly realized that what started out as being very general chitchat about men and sex had morphed into what could possibly become a horror movie-esque discussion about men in a very factual, specific sense...the ex-factor, aka I Know Who You Did Last Summer.

It dawned on me that in all our lengthy telephone calls over the past months, Logan and I never really discussed our pasts. I couldn't even recall whether I'd informed him as to the evolution of Nathan's and my partnership, from biblical to business. Part of me was completely mortified at the prospect of doing this face-to-face on the first day I'd seen him in months, and only an hour after we'd made love. Another part of me, the one that doesn't look away when driving by a car wreck, unable to tear my eyes away from the tragedy, was curious for one reason only...I'd get to hear about his ex-lovers and try to figure out where, if at all, I may fit into his future.

As I stood in front of the oncoming train that could possibly splatter my hopes all over the room, I became that ten-year-old at Cub Scout camp playing truth or dare. Do I

dare merely to get to his truth? At some point in every relationship, you have to spill it when it comes to one another's sordid pasts. Compared to most of my gay friends, I doubted seriously whether my past was racy enough to garner more than an NC-17 rating. I hoped and prayed to please let him have been a bigger slut than I'd been...but only a little sluttier.

One out of two ain't bad. The good part, he had indeed been a bigger slut than I had. The not-so-good part, apparently he'd screwed half the free world. I'd always thought sex should mean something, that it was special. Of course, my actions hadn't always represented my beliefs, but all in all, I'd pretty much stuck to my guns. Except for a few alcohol-drenched moments, and Logan—the times I *had* hopped into the sack with a guy I barely knew—it had been my *intention* that it would turn into something more than casual. In Logan's case, I still didn't know what the hell was going on. I just knew that whatever it was, I liked it.

His views on sex were slightly different from mine. For Logan, sex could merely be "a good time had by all." I decided not to probe into what the "all" in his statement referred to. If it meant what I thought it did, I didn't want any details. He was of the "sex is a natural part of life" ilk. It didn't have to mean anything. As he went on, I felt my heart begin to sink. He'd just told me he loved me an hour ago, and now I was starting to think I wasn't so special; I was just a great lay. Momentarily caught up in the silver lining of all this, which was what a great lay I must be in order for him to get on a plane and fly halfway across the country, I missed whatever it was that had just been revealed.

"I'm sorry, what?" I asked.

"I'm going to the kitchen." Finn was getting up out of her chair. "Either of you need anything?"

"Yeah, a glass of wine would be great." Any more truth and I'm gonna need the bottle. Logan said he'd have the same, and once Finn disappeared around the corner, he looked at me.

"You, on the other hand, are a bit of a mystery to me," Logan said.

"How so?"

"I'm sort of in new territory with you." He pulled a leg up on the couch so he could turn to face me. "When I saw you at the restaurant that first night in Atlanta, it was like being struck upside the head with a two-by-four."

"Wow, that bad, huh?"

"No, ding-ass." He placed the back of his hand on my cheek. "I couldn't take my eyes off you. It was instant, like someone flicked on a switch in my brain. For the first time in my life, I swear I was jealous. I wanted to be the one at that table with you."

"Okay, I'm likin' this, keep going."

He smiled and let out a little laugh. "I'm being serious and you're joking around."

I most certainly wasn't, but I decided to smile and play along. "Sorry, please continue."

"I don't know what I'm trying to say, I just—" He stopped and lowered his head. "Things are different with you. This isn't just a fun sex thing for me."

Okay, so I'm not just a great lay?

"When you left the restaurant with Nathan that first night, it felt like I'd lost something. I felt sick to my stomach and kicked myself in the ass all night for not going over and introducing myself. Then the next morning...there you were. I mean, what are the fucking odds?"

I quietly leaned over and kissed him, but on the inside, I'd turned into Sally Field at the Oscars. You *like* me! You *really* like me!

"Holy sex fiend, Batman," Finn gasped, walking into the room with three glasses of red wine. "You two just can't keep your tongues out of one another's mouths."

Logan and I smiled at one another and turned our attention back to Finn.

The stories kept coming, and as I sat on the couch holding Logan's hand, I felt calm and at peace...for about five minutes. While I believed everything he declared to be the truth, I wondered in the back of my mind, is this someone who can give me what I need? Am I going to be enough to satisfy his apparently large sexual appetite for any length of time? How long would it be before he became bored with me? Shaking my head, as if to rid my mind of all its doubts, I resolved to just enjoy the week and stop analyzing everything.

* * * * *

The next morning, I was supposed to take Logan by the restaurant and show him around. When we were ready to leave, he informed me he would be more than willing to go anywhere I wanted so long as I wasn't behind the wheel. Since this wasn't the first time I'd ever heard this, I wasn't exactly shocked. I'd never gotten so much as a speeding ticket, a fact Logan had a little trouble believing, but whatever.

We finally made it to the restaurant and I took him around and explained our operations. He liked the way we streamlined the service staff by placing two waiters per table. One to stay out front, take the orders, refill drinks, and the other to bring out the food. We liked it because it cut down on congestion in the kitchen and at the bar. He was shocked at how many restaurants a city of this size could support. I didn't think it was that rare. While we're a bit on the more expensive side, unless you have a large family, which most people don't these days, it's less expensive to go out than buying groceries.

Nathan came in around eleven and whisked Logan back into the kitchen to show him around. I used my free time to put together a liquor order and place a few phone calls. When I finished my stuff, I looked at the clock to see an hour had come and gone. I got up from the table and walked through the kitchen doors to find the two of them. They were back on the line wearing chef jackets, chopping, sautéing, grilling, and yapping away, comparing techniques. I stood there for a good five minutes, arms crossed, and looking particularly sexy in a pair of retro wide-leg gray 1940s-inspired pants and a lightweight pale yellow cotton sweater that clung in all the right places. Not that it seemed to matter since neither one of them bothered to look up. The place could catch fire and you still wouldn't be able to get their attention. Now I really loved my job, but I just didn't quite understand the fascination with something they each did on a daily basis.

"Hey," I said, "what's goin' on in here?"

They each looked up, startled that I had walked in without them noticing. They simultaneously smiled, looking completely wholesome and innocent, like two little boys right before they throw a water balloon at you. Not wanting to seem like the evil babysitter sent to break up the fun, I smiled back and began shaking my head.

I walked over and hopped up on the cold red marble-top prep table. "Ya travel halfway across the country and within twenty-four hours you're doing the same thing you do at home."

They looked at one another, nodded, and both sneered. As if it were a dirty word, they both said, "Front of the house."

"They just don't get it," Nathan said.

"They're just here to make money and socialize," Logan continued.

I laughed at them as I let my feet swing back and forth as they dangled over the side of the table. "Oh...I forgot. What you guys do is *art.*"

Nathan continued to chop up veggies as he shook his head, obviously disgusted. "Of all the..."

"Yeah, yeah, don't give me any lip, I'm not the snob here."

"Ingrate," Logan added, turning around and throwing some leeks into a pot. "We're making lunch."

"Oh...well, what is it?" I asked, reaching over to stick my finger in a pan of sauce as Nathan smacked my hand away with a spatula. "Ow!"

"Why don't you make yourself useful and cut up some of that bread we threw in the warmer?" Nathan pointed to the warmer as if I had forgotten where it was.

I hopped down off the table to begin my chore.

Logan eyed the prep table a little as he handed a bread knife and cutting board to me. "That's a funky prep table. Where did you guys find that? I've never seen one like it."

Nathan and I looked at each other and started laughing. The table had a metal post frame that sat up on large black rubber wheels. It had a shelf down below filled with bread and butter plates, and the top was a seven-foot red marble slab that had at some point in its existence been dropped and split into two pieces.

"Oh" – Nathan pointed at me with his knife – "I'll let Aden tell you about that; it's one of his finds."

"I got a damn good deal on that table...forty bucks at an auction." I remembered how pleased I was with myself at the time.

"I should hope to hell you got a good deal on it," Nathan said, shaking his head.

"Why?" Logan asked. "Because the top's broken? It's marble; you can clean the hell out of it. It'll last forever."

"Thank you," I said.

"You're stalling." Nathan eyed me.

"Am not." I patted the top of it with my hand. "What's the big deal? So it used to be a mortician's table, big whoop."

"Aw, Jesus!" Logan backed away from both of us a bit. "That's just...yuck."

"You fucking pussies," I said with a shrug. "Christ, it's not like it came with a corpse. It's an antique."

"It's fucking twisted," Nathan said.

"I think it's kinda funny." I leaned into the table.

"I'm seeing a whole new side of you." Logan was squinting as he looked me up and down.

"Finn thought it was hysterical."

"Big shocker there." Nathan tossed some onions into the pan.

Logan was eyeing the table as if really seeing it for the first time.

"Wanna lay on it?" I asked with an evil smile.

"Hopefully not for another fifty to sixty years," Logan said.

* * * * *

For most of the week we knocked around the area. We talked, well, laughed mainly. I'd forgotten how much funnier Logan was in person as opposed to over the phone. The amusement on his face and the very physical way in which he told stories made him even more attractive to me. It was funny how much he was not the person I imagined him to be upon our initial meeting. In Atlanta he was very sophisticated and charming, like Cary Grant in *The Philadelphia Story*, amusing as well, except for that whole mother incident, all of which were a part of his personality. Behind the "ideal" qualities I'd always dreamed of finding in a guy, most of which he had, there was the slightest hint of a Jim Carrey to him...enough to keep you laughing, but not enough to embarrass you in public.

I knew he was having a good time, but in the back of my mind I was constantly afraid he was going to get bored. He lived in LA, for Christ's sake. How much fun could Springpatch seem compared to that? We went to Silver Dollar City and shopping in Branson. He got a kick out of all the cheesy theaters and roadside tourist traps,

buying a "Branson or Bust" T-shirt to commemorate the visit. I even resorted to, I'm ashamed to admit, taking him to the animal holocaust museum...aka the Bass Pro Shop. The place always gave me the creeps with all the dead stuffed animals everywhere, but I remembered he liked to go hiking and camping, so I thought he might find it interesting. We ended up almost getting ejected from the premises when we were caught sticking a pair of boxers into the mouth of a taxidermy bear. I was apparently trying too hard, because eventually he called me on it.

Logan was humming as he drove us back to the house. "You don't have to keep me entertained, you know."

"Well, I-I'm not," I said, playing with the CD player.

"I came here to spend time with you, not to have you play Julie the cruise director."

"Well, I know that." I felt slightly embarrassed. "I just want you to have a good time."

"I'm with you, aren't I?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Then I'm having a good time, so relax." He reached over and squeezed my knee. "I don't want you wasting your attention trying to come up with things for us to do. I'd much prefer to have all your attention placed on me."

I laughed, appreciating the artful way he could take a sweet comment toward me and twist it back around in reference to himself. It was annoyingly sexy. A smart-ass with dimples; what more could a guy ask for?

Chapter Six

People began filing back into the bar for cigars or a cigarette as the waiters busied themselves removing all the remnants of dinner. I got up to stretch my legs as they brought in coffee and dessert. A few people came to say good night, having to get home for the babysitter or whatnot. I glanced down when Finn grabbed my hand.

"Come with me to potty." She lifted herself up off the banquet. She gave Carrie the evil eye. "I will kill you if you dare set that bread pudding in front of me."

Carrie started laughing and placed the plate back on the tray. I followed Finn through the curtains that separate the dining room from the bathrooms. We waited until the ladies' room door opened and the current occupant left. I followed her in and plopped down in the chair next to the sink as Finn began hiking her dress up. True to form, she sat right down. She seldom wore underwear.

"Did you see what Mrs. Baker is wearing?" she asked, shaking her head.

I laughed, listening to her pee hitting the water. "It ain't right."

"I know, she has to be what, at least two hundred and fifty pounds, and the bitch dresses like she's Britney Spears."

"Oops, she did it again?"

"Toe up." She reached over and rolled up some toilet paper. "I swear, Aden, if you ever see me doing anything like that, I give you permission to haul off and slap the shit out of me."

"Oh, honey," I said as she stood up and pushed her dress back down, jiggling her legs. "You don't have to worry about that. I'd beat you senseless."

She flushed and walked over to the sink. I got up and stood in front of the toilet, lifting the seat. With the sound of the running water, I immediately began peeing. "Are you having a good time?"

"Of course." She dried off her hands. "I'm so full I want to purge. Nathan overdid it with the food."

I zipped up my pants and flushed the toilet, putting the seat back down. "The sea bass was incredible." I went over to the sink, washed my hands. "Melted right in my mouth."

"Did you notice the guy with Colleen and her husband?"

"Yeah." I threw away the paper towel. "It's her brother Jim, or Tim, I can't remember. Why?"

"He's yummy. Is he straight?"

"I think so." I smiled as she opened the bathroom door and we walked back out into the dining room. "He just moved here from Arkansas."

She turned and gave me an innocent smile. "Well, I think it would be only neighborly to go and welcome him to town."

"Go get him, girl." I let out a sigh as she made her way over to their table. She's an animal, I thought, laughing to myself. I shook my head and went into the bar. Walking through the cloud of smoke, I wound my way up to the hostess station. Opening the door in the base of the reservation desk, I reached in and squeezed some lotion onto my hand, knocking the bottle over, which sent a bunch of papers flying out onto the floor.

I rubbed the lotion into my hands, bent down, and began to pick up the papers. I shoved them back in and noticed my day planner lying inside. I grabbed it, not believing I'd almost forgotten it. I still hadn't gone digital when it came to my schedule. I loved the act of sitting down with a pen and coffee and organizing myself. I stood up, shut the door, and began to walk back into the dining room.

"Aden," one of our waitresses said as I spun around, "you dropped this."

"Oh, thanks." I took the envelope from her and turned it over, remembering the day I got it in the mail.

It was about a week after Logan had flown back to LA. I'd come home from the restaurant to get ready for work that night. I was sifting through the mail when I came across a letter from Logan. I took it into the kitchen and set it down while I made myself a sandwich. Every now and then I would turn and look at it sitting there on the counter. What the hell did it say, and why did he mail it? It couldn't possibly be good news. The only thing it could be was a breakup letter, otherwise he would've called.

Halfway into my sandwich, I tossed it down and snatched up the envelope, ripping it open as quickly as I could. Kind of like the Band-Aid theory, if it was done quickly, it wouldn't hurt as much. I closed my eyes and reached into the envelope, pulling out the contents. Taking a deep breath, I looked down. There was a plane ticket and a note. I looked at the ticket, a flight out of St. Louis to LA in just under two weeks. I opened the note. In bold black letters he'd written: *Make it happen!*

I exhaled, realizing I hadn't been breathing. I began laughing hysterically, putting my hand over my face. Then the silliest thing happened. I started to cry. What the hell? I

never cry. I sat down on the kitchen floor, leaned back against the cabinet with my legs out in front of me, and bawled for a good five minutes. Eventually I got embarrassed, looking around as if someone were watching me. I didn't understand why I was crying. Was I happy, sad, both, or just plain insane?

* * * * *

"I love this smell." I breathed in the scent while rubbing the cocoa butter sunscreen over his back.

"Me too." He patted his hands on his knees as I finished up.
"I'm so glad we did this. Yesterday we were home and it was thirty-three degrees outside; today we're on the beach in Mexico baking in the sun."

A slight breeze ran over my skin, momentarily taking the warm sting of the sun with it. I squished the white sand between my toes and patted him on the back. "All done, babe."

"Thanks, beautiful." He sighed, leaning back into the white wood lounge chair.

I picked up my mojito and took a nice long sip before settling back into my own chair.

The white foamy waves rolled into the sand as I looked over the beach littered with other couples and people in various-sized groupings. I glanced over to see a tall lean man wearing formfitting black trunks headed in our direction. With his jet-black damp hair, the guy looked like he'd jumped right out of the pages of a European fashion magazine. His dark-tanned skin glistened in the sunlight. I glanced over and caught my babe watching intently as model guy passed in front of us; he continued to ogle as the guy walked away.

I reached over and smacked him in the arm. "Charming."

"What?" he asked, his voice going up several octaves.

"You're such a pig." I rolled my eyes as the low rumble of a laugh bubbled up out of him.

"Awww, baby," he said with a wink, "you know I only have eyes for you."

"Lies and deceit." I laughed at his lame attempt to stroke my ego.

"Don't act like you never look at anyone else." He picked up his Corona and shoved the lime down into the bottle. He lifted his fingers to his mouth and licked them seductively, eyeing my crotch. "You're a dirty boy."

"That's why you love me," he said, taking a swig.

"You know it, baby."

"Besides"—he leaned forward, looking past me—"it's not like I've said a word about you cheating on me...even when you insisted on bringing him with us."

"What?" I asked, ripping off my sunglasses.

"Honestly, Aden." He pointed to the other side of my chair.

I turned my head to see Logan lounging on the other side of me. He pushed his sunglasses down his nose, peeking over them at me.

"Hi, baby," Logan said, smiling with a wink.

My eyes popped open as the plane jerked from turbulence. I felt something fall into my lap and looked down to see a small tube. I picked it up and saw it was cocoa butter hand lotion.

"Sorry about that," the lady sitting next to me said as she took it from me. "It slipped right out of my hand when the plane jumped."

"No problem," I said, smiling back at her.

"Flying makes me nervous." She rubbed her hands together, working the lotion into her skin.

I faced forward looking around the plane. I'd always loved flying. Even with all the things that could go wrong once you were up in the air, it was absolutely amazing to me that we could actually do it. Normally when I flew, I fell right to sleep. This time I was very antsy and I was surprised I'd actually been able to doze off at all. I was nervous about going to LA. Not to see Logan, that was a good thing, but meeting his friends made me a little uncomfortable. Gays from large cities could sometimes come off a little snobbish. They tended to look down on anyone who didn't live where they did, like it was unimaginable to live in a small town. Hello...we do have indoor plumbing. And they say size doesn't matter.

The plane landed, and I kept my seat until everyone else exited. Finally, a flight attendant came up to where I was seated.

"Is everything okay, sir?" she asked.

"Yeah," I answered, getting out of my seat. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to hold you all up. I'm meeting someone...a little nervous."

"Ah, I see." She laughed. "Just do the Marcia Brady thing."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You know...just picture them in their underwear."

"Yes, well, that would have an altogether different effect on me."

"Ah, so he's a hottie."

"Christ, am I that gay?"

She walked with me down the aisle. "One of the other flight attendants clocked you."

I started to laugh as my foot caught on the strap of my overnight bag, causing me to trip. As I fell, she reached out and tried to hold me up, which in turn pulled her down with me. I turned to try to catch her and slammed the side of my head into a seat. She came down on top of me with her head falling on my chest. The other flight attendant came running up to us.

"Jesus, are you two okay?" he asked, standing over us, unsure of what to do.

She lifted her head, looked up at me, and opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

I started to laugh as I patted her on the shoulder. "I can honestly say I've never been in this position with a woman before."

She hesitated and started to laugh as well. "Are you all right?"

"It was good for me," I said as she began to lift herself off me.

The guy grabbed her arm and helped her up, then did the same with me. As I stood up, they both looked at me and gasped.

"What...what?" I asked, looking around.

"Oh my Lord," she said, "you're bleeding."

They ran me back to the bathroom, and as I looked in the mirror, I saw the red bump on the side of my head with a small cut and a tiny trail of blood running down my face. I stared at it for a few seconds. They both stood there, waiting for me to freak out.

"Now I'll never be a teen model!" I screamed, making them both jump. After a second, she started to laugh hysterically and the guy looked between the two of us, completely clueless. I grabbed a paper towel, wet it, and began to wipe my face.

"I'll go grab an ice pack," the guy blurted out before disappearing.

I smiled and shook my head as I lightly pressed the bump, wincing after doing it. "Well, I look great now. This is so typical."

"Honey, bump or no bump, you're adorable."

The guy returned and shoved the cool pack at me. "I'd fuck ya."

"Thanks, guys." I offered a half smile, throwing the bloody towel in the trash. "I'm okay, really. I have no plans to sue."

"Well, I'd still fuck ya." He winked as I walked out of the bathroom and back into the plane.

"That's very sweet?" I pressed the cold pack on the bump, somewhat confused by the fact that his comment was indeed sweet in a twisted, ego-boosting way. I looked at the girl. "I apologize for trying to kill you." We walked down the aisle once again and she smiled with a little wave. "No problem; it's the most action I've seen in weeks."

I thanked them for their help and left the plane. As I walked down the corridor, she yelled, "Good luck." I waved back with my cold pack, hoping that Logan hadn't left, thinking I missed my flight. As I walked through the gate, I looked around, not seeing him anywhere. I turned to my left to see Logan and another man talking to an employee from the airline. He turned to see me.

"There you are." Logan came toward me. "I thought you forgo... What the hell happened?"

As the other man and the girl from the airline followed Logan over to me, I smiled and shook my head. "It's nothing, some guy on the flight called me a fag, so I had to kick his ass."

The lady from the airline got a look of panic as Logan asked, "What?"

"I'm kidding." I started to laugh. "I tripped over the strap" — holding up my bag with the broken strap dangling — "and took out a chair."

Logan rolled his eyes, letting out a big sigh, and stranger-guy began to smile.

"Are you okay?" the airline lady asked. "Do you need to see a doctor?"

"I'm fine." I removed the ice pack so she could see it was just a small cut. "The flight attendants took good care of me."

"Poor baby!" Logan wrapped his arm around me. "Here, let me take your bag." He took the bag from me. "You really are a klutz, aren't you?"

"So not making me feel better," I said as the airline lady turned and walked off.

Logan gave me a soft peck on the cheek. "Sorry."

"He's not very good with subtle, is he?" stranger-guy asked.

"God, I'm sorry." Logan shook his head. "Aden, this is one of my best friends, Sam. He wanted to come with me to get a look at you."

"Great." I held the pack up to my forehead. *Come to see the hick?* "I'm the circus freak, nice to meet you."

Sam looked to be our age. He had brown hair, which was styled forward and spiked up in the front. He was attractive in an intellectual college professor-looking way, the kind of professor that all the students had a crush on. I think it was the glasses. They could be dumb as hell, but slap on a pair of specs and I'd think the guy was a smarty. He seemed very polite in a reserved way and very comfortable in his own skin.

"The way Logan's been chattering away over the past months about you, I couldn't resist." Sam reached out his hand, then stopped, remembering mine was in use for the moment.

"You've been annoying your friends by talking about me too much?" I asked. *Great, they hate me already. Well, fuck them, that's cute as hell.* "You're so sweet."

Logan wrapped his arms around me and kissed me. I opened my eyes to see Sam standing there. He smiled weakly, unfolded and folded his arms back, and looked away. Shenanigans! I screamed in the back of my head as the hair on my neck stood up at the realization of the situation I'd just walked into. Logan pulled away and looked at me.

"Okay, invalid, let's go get your luggage so I can get you home and nurse you back to health."

I was thoroughly enjoying the attention I was receiving due to my injury. As we began to make our way toward baggage claim, I got little bits and pieces as to the history of Sam and Logan's relationship. When they first met, Sam was a bartender in one of the gay bars in West Hollywood—the same bar he now managed and co-owned. Logan had just moved to LA at that point and, other than the people he worked with, didn't really have any friends. Sam was sort of the key to Logan's social circle, not so much in that he was the ringleader, but more along the lines of it being Sam who brought Logan into the fold. Since pretty much every friend I'd ever met had been through work, the whole situation seemed weird. I mean, the words "into the fold" were actually used. What the hell was that all about? What is this, the gay Mafia? I couldn't tell if Logan was acting differently or if I was just being supersensitive.

Finally, after what seemed to be forever, we made it to the parking lot. After the morning I'd had, I was ready for a shower, some sex, and a nice relaxing evening curled up with my man on his couch. We dragged my luggage off the shuttle, and I followed the two of them to Logan's car. As Logan began to open up the back of his car, I stopped in my tracks.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said.

"What?" Logan asked, turning around to look at me.

"A Jeep," I continued, as Sam looked at Logan and smiled. "Well, that's not gay."

"That's Jeep Wrangler to you, mister," he said in a deep voice.

"I'll take *Issues With Homophobia* for two thousand, Alex," I said.

"The official automobile of the butchie wannabe," Sam said. "Subtly stating, I may be queer, but I'm no sissy."

"Fuck you both." Logan shook his head, giving us both a dirty look.

I looked at Sam and smiled as Logan began to roll up my hanging bag filled with clothes I'd spent a good hour ironing. As he shoved it into the trunk space, I placed my hand over my face and shook my head.

"What?" Logan asked, looking at me.

"Never mind."

"You dumb-ass," Sam explained, "you wadded up his clothes."

"It's no big deal."

"Sorry, muffin." Logan winked with a sexy smile.

"Please don't tell me he refers to you as if you're food?" Sam asked.

"I was just trying it out." Logan laughed.

"For all I care, he can call me his little ass whore as long as he gets me out of this godforsaken airport," I said, causing Logan to stand straight up and Sam's mouth to fall open.

"All righty." Logan slammed the gate shut on the Jeep and threw my carry-on into the backseat. "Let's get moving then."

Sam turned and began to climb into the backseat.

"I'll get back there, Sam," I said.

"Are you sure? I don't mind."

"Yeah, I'll sit back there with my bags."

We all piled in, and Logan pulled out and made his way through the lot. As we pulled onto the street, I looked at the sky, squinting. I began to dig through my bag for my sunglasses and the wind blew harder as the Jeep picked up speed. The contents of the bag were clanking around as I found a half-empty bottle of water and took it out, setting it in the seat next to me. Next, I came across my lip balm and set it aside. We drove down the street with the sun beating down and the warm wind blowing over us. Turning up toward the bright, sunny sky, I began to wish I'd brought some sunscreen. Finally, I found the glasses and ripped them out of their case. I looked forward, shoving them on my face, to see Sam watching me with a smile and Logan looking back through the rearview mirror.

"What?" I asked, trying to talk above the wind and noise of the other cars.

Sam glanced at my bag. "Okay, if I'm ever stranded on a deserted island I hope like hell you're with me."

I rubbed the lip balm on with my finger. "It's just a few things."

Logan adjusted the rearview mirror. "For just a few things, it sure was heavy."

"Okay, fine, I can't help it. I hate needing something and not having it. Sue me."

Logan shook his head disapprovingly as he switched lanes. "High maintenance."

"You say it like it's a bad thing?" Something hit me on the forehead. "Ow."

"What's wrong?" Logan asked.

"Something hit me," I answered, rubbing my head.

"Probably just a bug." Logan nodded.

"Oh, gee, we..." I started as something flew into my mouth. I panicked as I began to gag and choke. I leaned over the side of the Jeep and began spitting while scraping my tongue with my fingers.

"Are you okay?" Logan asked, slowing down a bit as Sam turned around in his seat and began patting my back.

I sat back up and opened the bottle of water, chugging down as much as I could before needing to breathe. My eyes were watering from the gagging. "I think I just ate a bug."

"Damn, baby." Logan reached back and squeezed my knee. "You're having a rough day."

"I'll be fine," I said, drinking some more water. "I just need to take a shower, crawl into some pajamas, and curl up with you, and everything will be fine."

"Shit, Aden, I forgot to mention this in all the commotion. I have this catering tonight. I thought I could get out of it, but the client was really upset when she found out I wasn't going to be there to oversee everything. They do a lot of business with the restaurant, so I couldn't say no."

"Oh, well, I understand of course."

"I'm sorry, Aden."

"Well, I'll just hang out at your place until you get home."

"'Fraid not," Sam said, looking back at me. "The guys and I are going to take you out."

"Huh?" I asked.

"Well, I didn't want you sitting at home alone on your first night in LA, so the guys offered to keep you entertained." Logan peered back using the reflection in the rearview mirror.

"They couldn't wait to meet you," Sam said, smiling.

"And I was planning on meeting you all down at Sam's bar as soon as I can get away."

"Great," I said with a smile. "That's great...good plan...great idea." Fantastic! Stuck in a new city with a group of strangers, and I look like I've taken a cheese grater to my head.

"Are you sure?" Logan asked.

"Sure," I answered, patting Sam on the shoulder. "I'm sure they'll take good care of me."

Sam gave me the once-over, along with a pity smile. "We'll bring him back without any...additional marks on him."

By the time we made it back to Logan's, it was a little after eleven o'clock. I couldn't believe the amount of traffic, which according to Sam was nothing compared to rush hour. At home, you could get from one end of town to the other in fifteen minutes, thirty minutes max during rush hour. We'd dropped off Sam, who said he'd be back around sixish to pick me up for dinner. I couldn't wait...an entire evening of scrutiny and me with no man shield. I was a little irritated but there really wasn't anything I could say without coming across like the Wicked Bitch of the Midwest.

Logan had mentioned that he lived in a condo, the thought of which I didn't find all that appealing. I suppose I was expecting Melrose Place. His condo was housed in an apartment-like community, which didn't mean quite the same thing in LA. At home, it meant cheaply put-together square buildings with vinyl siding and decklike stairs. In LA, it meant a resortlike five-star hotel. Architecturally, the building was very grand

and six stories high with some type of white stone exterior and huge windows. We came in through the main entrance into a large lobby with furniture, a front desk, and everything. I was shocked and a little uncomfortable. There were people everywhere, going to and from a huge gym. I'm not sure exactly what it was, except maybe the fact that when I go home, the chances of running into a neighbor were rare. Here it was inevitable, with hundreds of people living in one building. It was like a giant ant farm.

The lobby was tastefully done with marble floors, rich colors, and overstuffed chairs placed about in groupings. It almost made you feel guilty if you didn't stop and socialize, like it's mandatory to get to know your neighbors. As we walked along, Logan was smiling, waving, and saying hello to people. He looked like a politician running for office. The whole thing seemed extremely odd to me. This was how I behaved at work. The thought of having to do this once I got home felt utterly wretched.

His place was on the top floor. As I walked through the door, I was impressed. It was very modern and loftlike with sixteen-foot ceilings. The exterior walls were almost entirely glass. The floor plan was very open with dark hardwood floors running throughout. The walls were painted in a light grayish brown color, like putty, with large modern-style artwork sporadically hung throughout. The east wall of the living area was covered with built-ins with a large flat-screen hanging in the center. As you walked in, the kitchen was directly to the left and had stainless steel cabinets with doors that opened up as opposed to out. The matching stainless appliances looked very highend, and the dark granite countertops sparkled as Logan flipped on the lights. A pot rack, with an impressive array of cookware dangling from it, hung over an island that opened into the dining area, and from there it was a step down into the living area. It was sparsely decorated with black leather and chrome furniture.

The view from the windows in the living room overlooking the city was phenomenal, by far my favorite thing about the place, along with the large balcony. A very stark contrast to my little English Tudor house filled with clutter and chaos. Logan had great taste, it just wasn't my taste, and it seemed odd to me that anyone raised in that big beautiful old home in Atlanta would want to live any other way. I guess I just expected his style to be an extension of his mother's. It was a shock to me realizing how much there was we still didn't know about one another. It made me wonder what he was thinking when he set foot into my house.

"So what do you think?" Logan asked, smiling as he looked around his condo.

Cold, sterile, and eerily reminiscent of the serial killer's apartment in *American Psycho*, I thought, as I looked at him and smiled. "It's great, honey." *Mental note: check all closets and pantries for chainsaws, axes, and various other weapons of death at first opportunity.*

He held out his arms. "Get over here, you little scone."

I walked over to him, desperately trying not to laugh. I took his hands, and he pulled me into him and kissed me. Goddamn, he's a fantastic kisser, I thought as his tongue met mine. I wanted to die from sheer bliss as every inch of my skin tingled when he placed his lips onto mine. He pulled away and looked over my face.

Logan ran his thumb over my bottom lip. "Hello, beautiful."

"I missed you." I looked over the face I hadn't seen in weeks. His sharp blue eyes glistened in the light, and I reached up and ran my fingers over his strong leading-man jaw, feeling a tiny bit of stubble. "Sweetie...that whole calling me food thing isn't really working for me."

"No good, huh?" he asked, nodding with a smile.

I shook my head, scrunching up my nose.

"Got it." He lightly kissed me again. He pulled away and began inspecting my injury. "We should probably see about cleaning that up."

He grabbed my hand and led me through a door on the west wall into his bedroom. The color on the walls looked like a darker, richer shade of the color in the living area, and it came complete with its own window wall with another door leading out onto the balcony. The bed was massive, a California king, I guessed, with a stainless steel-looking headboard. There was a small sitting area up front by the windows, and the standard miscellaneous bedroom furniture filling out the rest of the room. We walked through the room, dropping my bags, and I followed him into a huge bathroom.

He flipped on the lights, walked me over to the toilet, and sat me down on the lid. It was brightly lit with industrial-looking fixtures. The same stainless steel cabinets made up the long vanity with dark granite countertops and double sinks. A huge walkin shower on the opposite wall had the same dark slate tile as the floor. There were multiple showerheads coming out of two opposite walls, as well as a large one dropping down from overhead. A long teak bench ran along the back of the shower, and it was enclosed with glass walls and a glass door. The shower looked fantastic until I pictured myself being drowned by all the water coming at me.

"Okay, let's see here." He turned around and walked over to a closet. Opening the door, he pulled out a white washcloth and my mouth fell open at the sight of this closet. It was meticulously organized with towels, hand towels, and washcloths, all white, neatly folded, and stacked in perfect rows. The bottles of various toiletries were sorted according to type, toilet paper and bars of soap, all methodically stored in their proper place. I smiled, thinking about my bathroom closet at home, stuffed full of shit with whatever happened to be put in last sitting in front. He must've thought I was a pig.

He pulled out a bottle of peroxide, a canister of cotton balls, and a Band-Aid, then set them on the counter next to the sink. Turning on the water, he washed his hands thoroughly, then wet down the washcloth. He was so sexy, looking all serious, I could hardly stand it. I checked out his ass in those jeans and began to feel myself getting hard. He picked up all the stuff from the counter, turned around, and walked back over to me. He straddled my legs and sat on my lap facing me. He placed the various objects on top of the toilet tank behind me and began gently pressing the cold washcloth over the bump on my forehead. I looked down and placed my hands on top of his legs, slowly inching them up his thighs. Logan was very meticulous, unfolding and folding

the washcloth, then pressing it to my forehead again. As I began to get closer and closer to his crotch, a half smile appeared on his face and he looked me in the eyes.

"What exactly are you doing, sir?" he asked.

"Nuttin'," I said, biting my lower lip.

"Liar." He laughed, swatting my hand away. "Don't distract me. I'm not wearing my boyfriend hat right now; I'm in nurse mode."

Wait...did he just call me his boyfriend? No...he referred to himself as my boyfriend. Okay, dumb-ass...same thing. "So, I'm your boyfriend?"

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me, not saying anything for a moment. "Why not? I haven't been involved with anyone else since I met you five months ago. I think that constitutes a title of some sort."

I smiled, realizing he'd just let me know he hadn't been screwing around on the side. I'd wondered but had been too afraid to ask. "Well, that's what you can call me then."

"Huh?"

"Instead of food, just call me boyfriend. You don't even have to use my name...just boyfriend."

He smiled and shook his head. "You're a cracker."

"Ah...but I'm your cracker, and that's really the point I'm trying to establish here."

He reached behind me, fiddling with the objects. "Okay, boyfriend." He lifted a cotton ball in front of my face. "This is going to sting a little."

I winced as he dabbed it over the cut. He lifted it and leaned in, blowing lightly over my forehead. He turned and tossed the cotton ball in the trash can and reached behind me once again and retrieved a Band-Aid. He ripped open the paper, discarded it, and lightly placed the Band-Aid on my forehead. He looked me over, inspecting his work, and I reached forward and started rubbing the front of his jeans. He smiled slightly and closed his eyes as I leaned in, kissing him. I began lightly pinching his nipple through his shirt with my free hand, and he let out a soft moan. That was pretty much the end of nurse mode.

I undid his belt as our tongues worked over one another. He placed his hands on my shoulders and massaged them, sending tingles down my body. I pulled his shirt out from under the waistband of his jeans, and he lifted his arms, allowing me to pull it off. I planted kisses all over his hard bare chest, lightly licking as I moved to his nipple, taking it in my mouth. He moaned and shoved his hand down, rubbing the front of my jeans, working over my hard cock. I thrust my hips forward, nibbling the now-hard nipple with my teeth.

"If you only knew how much I've missed you, Aden."

I looked up at him and softly kissed him again. He stood up off my lap and held out his hand. I took it, and he led me back into the bedroom to the bed. We undressed

one another, exploring each other's bodies with our hands and mouths. He shoved me down on the bed and climbed on top of me, putting his mouth onto mine. I wrapped my arms around him and ran a hand up into his hair while the other ran down the center of his back. He felt so good with his full weight pressing down on me. I wanted him to swallow me whole, to be a part of him.

He pulled his mouth away, running his fingers over my swollen lips. I watched his eyes run intently over every inch of my face as if trying to map it out.

"I love you," I said, as his eyes met mine.

"I hope so"—he stared back into my eyes—"'cause I'm completely hooked. You have me twisted into knots."

I lifted my head up and kissed him again. Our cocks swollen and aching, we began grinding into one another. He began to work his way down my body with his mouth; stopping at my nipple, he sucked, causing my vision to blur. I placed my hands into his hair and he sucked and licked down my stomach. The tip of my cock hit his chin and he grabbed it with his hand and rubbed the head across the stubble, causing me to writhe under him. He licked at the slit with the tip of his tongue lapping up the precum.

I felt his warm breath as he took me into his mouth, working his tongue over the head before sliding his lips all the way down the shaft. He began working his way up and down, and I started bucking my hips to meet his rhythm. I placed my hands behind Logan's head and began fucking his mouth as he reached up and thrust a finger in my mouth. I sucked and nibbled on it before he withdrew it. He pushed my legs apart and rubbed the wet finger over my hole. Every muscle in my body tensed as he slid it inside me. My ass clamped around his finger as my balls drew up.

"I'm gonna come," I said as I threw back my head.

He took me deep into his mouth and continued to suck and lick my dick while still working my hole with a finger. "Not a drop wasted." He looked up at me with a smile.

I pulled him up on top of me and kissed him, feeling his still-hard cock press down into my pelvis. I took his tongue hungrily into my mouth, tasting the sweet and salty flavor of my cum. He pulled away and rolled off me. I lay out of breath with my eyes closed as I heard a drawer open and close.

"Roll onto your side."

I did as commanded while he crawled across the bed. He dropped a condom and lube in front of me as he pushed my leg up. I felt his balls rest on the inner thigh of my other leg as he straddled it. I ripped open the condom and handed it to him. He rolled it over his hard cock, and I handed him the lube. My dick was already hard again from anticipation as I heard the click of the lid snap shut. I listened to the slick, wet noises as Logan worked the lube over his shaft. I lifted my free leg up, wrapping an arm behind the knee and pulling it up to my chest. I threw my free arm above my head and twisted my upper body so I could look up at him. The head of his dick popped in, Logan's

mouth fell open, and his eyelids began fluttering, as he slid himself all the way inside me. He let out a deep moan.

"I love being inside you."

My breathing became rough as I bunched up a wad of the sheets in my fist. Thrashing my head back and forth as the pressure built, I moaned, "Don't stop."

He pressed his hands down on my hip and began pumping harder and faster. I loved the feel of his pelvis slamming into me. He raised a hand and slapped my ass. The warm tingles ran up my skin as I felt my entire body flush with heat.

"Tell me you never want to be without me," he grunted, raising his hand again.

I let out a moan as the palm of his hand found my ass again, sending the warm flush of heat over my body. "I never want to be without you," I managed to get out between breaths, feeling my balls begin to rise up as the friction between my cock and the bed grew hotter.

"Aden," he managed to get out as his body tensed and twitched, while we each came simultaneously.

I reached up to run my fingers over his sweat-drenched chest, which was glistening in the sunlight pouring in from the windows. My entire body felt tingly as the cool air from the room mixed with the moisture on my skin. Logan slid out of me, and I closed my eyes tight, feeling the emptiness left behind.

I rolled onto my back and he fell on top of me. His face nuzzled into my neck; I felt the warm air rushing over my skin as his breathing began to regulate. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him tight to me, not wanting to let go. He ran his hand into my hair and lightly kissed my neck.

"I don't want to leave you."

"I'm not going anywhere." I ran my fingers across his back.

He let out a little sigh. "If you only knew how much I wished that were true."

I turned my head toward him. He looked into my eyes, and I leaned in and kissed him.

* * * * *

I was spread-eagle on my stomach in Logan's bed with my eyes closed. I reached back and rubbed my ass cheek as a large smile spread across my face; I was still able to feel a slight sting from the palm of his hand earlier. I heard the shower stop running and opened my eyes and looked toward the bathroom door. I giggled to myself thinking about him, then laughed out loud realizing how twelve-year-old-schoolgirl-crush-like my thoughts were. I rolled onto my back, grabbed his pillow, and pushed it into my face, breathing him in. I began to get hard again and cursed the bitch that was taking him away from me for the night. Compiling a list of horrible things I wanted to wish upon her, I started laughing into the pillow.

"What's so funny?" Logan asked.

I ripped the pillow off my face, slightly embarrassed, as if he might be able to read my thoughts. "Nothing." I leaned up on my elbows to see him standing at the foot of the bed naked. I bit my lip as I looked at his dick. It was a really nice dick. "Sure you don't have time for a quickie?"

"Jesus, you've sucked me dry as it is. I can't believe you're ready to go again."

"Confucius say, 'Those who come quickly compensate with expeditious rejuvenation."

"Horny little boy." Logan smiled as he pulled a pair of boxer briefs out of a drawer.

He turned around and I pulled my knees up, spreading my legs. I looked at him innocently, and bit my lip with a half smile.

He closed his eyes, rolled his head back, and groaned. "Cut that out, you little cuss. You know damn well it drives me crazy when you look at me like that."

"I can't help it." I frowned. "You're like man-crack and I need another fix." I lunged for him unsuccessfully as he dodged my efforts, leaving me on my stomach.

He moved to the side of the bed and slapped me on the ass. "It's getting late, you little tramp. Shouldn't you start getting ready?"

I shoved my face into the bed and moaned. I turned to look at him. "Can't I just stay here in bed and wait for you to come home?"

"You don't want to go out with Sam and the guys?"

No, I want to stay here naked in this bed and wait for you to come home and fuck me till I can't see straight. "Of course, I was just kidding." I rolled over and watched him move about the room, pulling out clothes. "So, exactly how did you and Sam meet? I never got the whole story there."

"Oh, well, it was nothing really." He began pulling on the white boxer briefs. "Kinda funny. I'd gone down to the bar for a drink after work. It was maybe the second or third time I'd been. I sat down at the bar and ordered a drink. I was looking around."

"Cruising," I accused.

"Okay...cruising," he said with a smirk as he pulled on a pair of dress pants. "Anyway, Sam was working behind the bar. He made me my drink, introduced himself, and we started talking. Out of nowhere, this guy comes up to the bar and slams his glass down. He was extremely rude, saying something about his drink. He'd ordered Absolut. He'd been drinking Absolut for years, and this was not Absolut. He made a point of saying Absolut a lot. Then he declared that he'd wanted a lemon twist, not a fucking lemon wedge."

"What an ass." I reached back for a pillow to prop myself up.

"Sam stood there with a blank expression just long enough for everyone around the bar to begin to feel uncomfortable."

Logan stood there looking at me in what I presumed to be the same way. I laughed, realizing I was getting a reenactment.

"Waaa! Waaa!" Logan screamed, imitating the way an infant cries, which nearly startled me off the bed.

I began laughing as he went on, scrunching up his face, getting his whole body into it.

"That's what he did, for like an entire minute while this guy stood there looking like the idiot he was. Then Sam told him, 'It's a fucking cocktail, shithead, not a harvested organ that would save your mother's life if only you could get to the hospital in time. Now get out of my face and don't come back unless it's part of your twelve steps."

"He said all that to him?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"It was hysterical; everyone around the bar was laughing, and the guy stormed off in a hissy. Sam turned back around and I looked at him and said, 'Okay...I want to be your friend.' We've been friends ever since."

"Jesus, I could never do that."

"I know." Logan pulled a shirt off a hanger in his closet.

"Before you put that on, let me get one more good look."

He got that sexy half smile and sauntered around the room, running his hand slowly over his abs. "It's all for you, baby."

I smiled, chewing on my lip, trying not to laugh. I let out a pathetic whimper.

"Ah, dry your eyes." He slipped on his shirt. "Before the night's over and done with, I promise to fuck you till you can't walk right."

I laughed out loud as he tucked his shirt into his pants. He walked over to the bed and laid a big kiss on me. He pulled away. "Now get your very hot but lazy ass out of bed and get ready."

"Yes, sir," I said with a salute.

"Hey, I'm likin' that sir stuff," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, don't hold your breath waiting for the next time you hear it."

"Time will tell, boyfriend."

* * * * *

As soon as Logan left, I ran through the shower and got myself ready. I panicked briefly, thinking about what to wear. Then I caught a glimpse of the bump on my head in the mirror and decided it couldn't possibly matter. Short of a ski mask, nothing was going to hide that. When I finished getting ready, I looked at the clock...it was four fifty-five. I had an hour to kill, so I kept the promise I'd made to myself earlier by going through all his closets. While I found no discernable collections of weapons, I did discover that my boyfriend was completely anal. He was organized to the extent of it

being considered a personality flaw. I'd always considered myself a clean person; but after seeing his apartment, I felt like I needed to hop on the first plane home and spend the rest of my week off doing things like pulling out the refrigerator and scrubbing the back of it with a toothbrush.

As I closed the door to his perfectly organized hall closet, I had a slightly evil thought. I walked into the living room and surveyed the terrain. I knew as I was doing it that it was very childish, but I couldn't stop myself. It felt utterly delicious as I hopped around the room moving a piece of sculpture two inches to the left, then taking the coffee table book from one end and moving it to the opposite end. I walked over to the wall of shelving and opened a drawer under his flat-screen. I found all his remotes and a *TV Guide*, which I removed. I began to close the drawer and stopped, leaving it partially open. I tossed the various remotes over the coffee table and end table and pushed the lamp on the end table back a few inches. I looked around and saw a collection of vases sitting neatly in a row on a wall shelf. I ran over and moved them around, jumbling up the order.

As if possessed by mischief-making mythical elves, I ran toward the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. I looked around the room. It was very quiet as my gaze darted from one object to another. I took one step in, half expecting an alarm to go off screaming, *Intruder! Intruder!* I slowly entered the kitchen. I reached up toward the pot rack, my fingers inches away from one of the pans. I stopped and slowly pulled my hand away. Something told me this would be the one room it wouldn't be all that smart to fuck with. I began to back out of the area. In a fleeting act of defiance, I turned and pulled one of the drawers out, leaving it just barely open, then turned and ran back into the living room.

I looked over the room once again. My gaze locked onto the furniture. I started visually moving them around the room in my head as the doorbell rang. I turned swiftly, feeling guilty, as if caught on tape by hidden nanny cams with apartment security now waiting on the other side of the door to drag me off to bad-boyfriend jail. I walked over to the door and opened it to find Sam on the other side.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Um...yeah, just let me grab my wallet."

I turned and ran back through the apartment to Logan's bedroom and retrieved my wallet from the nightstand. I came back into the living room and found Sam standing there looking around the room. He opened his mouth to say something.

"Let's go." I gave him a sweet smile. "I'm starving."

"Yeah...sure," he said, turning and following me out the door.

* * * * *

I listened to the *click* from my seat belt as Sam pulled out of the complex.

"We're picking Willy up on the way. Bradley and Nick are meeting us at the restaurant."

"Cool." I was twiddling my thumbs as we drove along. "Bradley and Nick are the couple?"

"Yeah, we've all been friends for years. A little over a year ago those two decided out of the blue they were in love."

"So, basically they both had too much to drink one night and had sex?" I asked.

"Yeah," Sam answered with a chuckle, "I think that's pretty much the way it went down."

"Must've been some good lovin'," I said, trying to keep my hands still.

"I'd say so. It took a while to get used to seeing them together in that way."

"I bet." I looked at him. "That rarely happens, though...two friends winding up as a couple."

He made a sort of humming noise and we drove on for a bit, not saying anything. I pulled down the visor and slid open the mirror as Sam messed with the CD player. I checked out my bump in the reflection when I heard... *Just ask him*.

Excuse me?

Quit being a fucking pussy and ask the goddamn question.

I can't just blurt it out.

Pussy.

It takes a little finesse.

You're pathetic.

Go to hell.

Little pansy queer boy's too scared of the big mean man.

"Fuck off!" I yelled out loud, slamming the visor up as Sam jumped, jerking the car around.

"What the hell!" He placed a hand over his chest.

"Oh, I...sorry. It was too quiet."

"O...kay." Sam glanced over at me from the corner of his eye.

"Sorry, won't happen again." Nice going, dumb-ass. Good way to gain someone's trust.

"You really are a little odd, aren't you?" he asked.

"Difficult to argue that one at this point."

"I'll say this much for you, you've got balls."

"And I'm not afraid to use them." I laughed.

"I should say not." He looked at me with a half smile. "Your little redecorating scheme back there."

"Oh...yeah, I don't know what came over me. I intended on just moving a few things to poke fun at his analness. It got a little out of hand."

"That's funny," he said. "I wish I could be there to see his face."

I bet you do, I thought, feeling a little sick to my stomach, beginning to worry how Logan would react.

Using his turn signal, he moved into the next lane.

"So how long have you been in love with him?"

He jerked the car, bumping into the median before stopping at the light.

"Sorry?" he asked, looking mildly uncomfortable. "What...what do you mean?"

"Logan...how long have you been in love with him?"

Sam laughed nervously, giving me a you-must-be-crazy look. "That's just... We're just friends...that's all."

"I realize that." I was tapping my finger lightly on the door handle. "But how long have you wanted to be more than just friends with him?"

Sam moved the car forward as the light changed. "You're crazy." He squirmed in his seat a little turning the corner. "What would even make you think that?"

"I understand if you don't feel comfortable talking to me about this. You don't even know me. I just sensed it from the moment I met you at the airport. You looked a little too uncomfortable watching us kiss. Rather than pretending I didn't know, I thought I'd simply address it and get it out in the open. Maybe it was wrong of me to say anything. I apologize if I've offended you."

He turned the car into a small apartment complex and pulled over to the side. He reached down, put the car in park, and turned to look at me, studying my face, obviously wondering whether he should or could trust me. "He doesn't know, and I don't want him to."

"Oh my God." I held up a hand. "I'm not trying to pull an Aaron Spelling-type bitch-fest confrontation here. I come in peace."

He seemed to relax a little. "It's very difficult, well, not difficult...it used to be. I don't know what it is anymore, but I do know I don't want to alienate him from my life. He's still the best friend I've ever had."

"And I don't want to come between that," I assured. "I suppose that's why I brought it up. I mean, I don't know exactly what's going on between Logan and myself. We live so far apart, it's hard to allow myself to imagine anything permanent coming out of it. At the same time, it's difficult to imagine something permanent not to come out of it. Either way, I'd like to think we could be friends...get along at the very least. Honestly, it makes me really uncomfortable to think that you might feel threatened by me."

"I'm not," he said. "Well, not threatened"—with a smile—"but since we're being honest, there is perhaps a teeny, tiny part of me that would like to hate you and hopes your relationship with Logan, if that is indeed what it is, falls off a really high cliff and smashes into the very sharp, jagged rocks at the bottom."

After a very brief momentary silence, we each busted out laughing.

"A very descriptive teeny, tiny part." I let the whole "if it is indeed actually a relationship" thing slide, since I didn't even know how to define what was going on between us.

"But it's nothing personal," he added, eyes widening.

"No, I understand—I think I can allow you that without feeling personally offended."

"I'm a bitter fag." Sam sighed. "I really hate that."

"You don't get to be our age and still maintain the sweet innocence you had at nineteen."

"I suppose not. Wait, exactly how old do you think I am?"

"Oh hell no." I shook my hands at him. "I am so not going there with you. We're on precarious enough ground as it is."

"Fair enough." He laughed. "I must say. You certainly aren't what I was expecting."

"Really, pray tell?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I guess some subservient, boring type of Midwest househusband wannabe."

"Ouch, now that hurts."

He laughed, and we both nearly jumped out of our seats as some guy started banging on the driver-side window. I hadn't even noticed him approach the car and began to miss the boring Midwest, assuming we were about to be carjacked.

"Open the fucking door, bitch," the guy demanded, putting his hands on his hips.

"Willy!" Sam placed his hand over his heart, seeming more than a little irritated. "You scared the hell out of us."

Sam opened the door and stepped out of the car.

"Like I care," Willy said. "I've been watching you from my apartment window for the last fifteen minutes"—pointing up to a building—"what's the big idea, making me walk all the way out to the damn street?"

Obviously miffed, Willy looked like a typical California boy, well tanned with dirty blond hair brushed to one side in that surfer-dude style. He was wearing a tight white shirt tucked into jeans, with a black belt that had an oversize silver belt buckle with Madonna's cowboy logo from her *Music* CD. He looked, well...gay. Even without the belt buckle. He just looked *too* manicured. It was apparent the boy spent a considerable amount of time in front of the mirror.

"We were talking. When we were actually ready to pick you up, I would've pulled up to your building." Sam leaned over to release the seat.

"Don't think you can make it up to me by bending over and grabbing your ankles." Willy slapped Sam on the ass.

Sam stood up, allowing Willy to climb into the backseat.

"First of all"—Sam pushed the seat back and slid behind the wheel of the car—"there's nothing to apologize for." Closing the door, he added, "Secondly, save it, bottom boy."

"Hey." Willy scowled. "I'm versatile. I give it every bit as good as I take it."

"Versatile," Sam said, laughing as he turned the car around, "otherwise known as big bottom boy."

"Jesus." I folded my arms. "You say it like it's a bad thing. I think of it as obtaining maximum pleasure for minimal exertion."

"All right then, sister!" Willy held up a hand for a praise Jesus. "You toss that hair over the side of the bed and go."

"I'll never understand why faggots get all hinky about admitting who takes it up the ass." I shrugged.

Sam switched lanes and made a right-hand turn. "Probably because straight people always feel the need to ask us who's the man and who's the woman."

"Which is ridiculous" – Willy played with his hair as he looked at his reflection in the car window – "considering everyone knows the only thing fags do with women is go shopping."

"I hate that question," I said.

Sam sped up a little to make it through a changing light. "The straights just can't deal with up the butt."

"Right, 'cause straight people never do up the butt."

"She's a pistol," Willy said to Sam while patting me on the shoulder. "I like this one. He can stay."

"Thanks, and I don't even want to know what you mean by 'this one."

"Oh, honey." Willy gave my shoulder a squeeze before letting it go. "You have no idea how many not-so-significant others we have all tried to bring into the fold over the years."

"There it is again," I said, shaking my head.

"What?" Sam asked.

"Into the fold, what's that all about? Who are you people, the gay Sopranos?"

"Oh," Willy crooned, "I like the way that sounds."

Sam smiled and looked at me as we pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. We all got out of the car, and as we walked through the door, the first thing I noticed was how bright the lights seemed to be. I immediately felt self-conscious about the bump on my head. Sam went over to the hostess station to let them know we were here.

"Christ." Willy looked at me. "What the hell happened to your head? Is Logan beating you or what?"

"Or what." *Thanks, Mr. Flawless, you would feel the need to point that out.* "It's nothing...just a little self-mutilation."

He looked at me funny, and Sam signaled us to follow him. I waited for Willy to go and followed them single file behind the hostess. The dining room was very clean-looking with white walls and light pecan-colored wood floors. There were multicolored hanging pendant lights over the bar, which was in the shape of an S curve and stained to match the floors. It was a bistro-style open kitchen where you were able to watch the chefs prepare the food. I never particularly liked this approach. To me, it took away from the dining-out experience, but then again, it could be due to my disdain for cooking in general. The food just seemed to taste better if it came to you on a plate and you didn't have to be subjected to watching the work that went into it.

We wove through the dining room to a U-shaped booth where Bradley and Nick were already waiting for us.

One of them was tapping his finger on the table. "You're late."

Willy slid into the booth. "Don't look at me."

The hostess excused herself, and Sam and I slid in after Willy was situated. Sam made all the necessary introductions. Bradley and Nick made a very attractive couple. Both nicely dressed and clean-cut with short dark hair. They almost looked like bookends, but it was quite obvious Nick was of the more laid-back variety while Bradley seemed a smidge high-strung. I felt very odd sitting at the table with all of them. There was an obvious ease between them, betraying their history, which only furthered my anxiety and made me feel very much the interloper.

"You know how I hate to be kept waiting," Bradley said.

I put my head down a little as if being scolded by a parent.

"Pull the stick out of your ass, Bradley." Sam opened his menu. "We're like ten minutes late, and you're being rude."

"You'll have to learn to ignore him." Nick looked at me while placing his hand on top of Bradley's. "He was an only child."

Bradley rolled his eyes, removed his hand from Nick's, and began perusing his menu. Nick looked at him, then back to me, and shook his head and smiled. Bradley was a casting director for Warner Brothers, which might explain his slightly edgy behavior, and Nick owned his own business, some type of mountain biking extreme sports retail store. Willy, on the other hand, was a wannabe actor waiting to be discovered, he informed me while looking directly at Bradley. Bradley, of course, never looked up from his menu, giving me the impression that there may be a little tension there.

"So, Aden, what do you think of your trip so far?" Nick asked.

Let's see, a concussion, being pelted by and then eating insects, and now dinner with a man who's in love with my boyfriend along with three other complete strangers. "It's been great." I smiled. Christ, I need a drink.

"We'll have to get you two out on some bike trails this week," Nick said with an eager expression.

Oh my hell...this one's going to put my danger-prone ass in the fucking hospital. "Sounds...fun; I really don't know what Logan has planned for us, though."

"Nick," Bradley said, "he's here to spend time with Logan. He didn't fly halfway across the country to go biking."

"Oh, well sure." Nick nodded his head. "It was just a thought."

Bradley looked at me and winked. I smiled back in an attempt to thank him for saving my life. The waiter came to the table, told us the specials, and took our drink orders. He left, and everyone had their faces stuck in the menus. I wasn't used to having to make decisions as to what I was going to eat. I thought briefly about Nathan and Finn, desperately wishing they were here with me.

I closed my menu, set it down, and looked around the table. Sam was checking out a wine list. Willy's face was all scrunched up as he read the menu, as if this were the most important decision he'd been faced with in days. I watched Bradley and Nick as they read different entrées off to one another. Bradley kept pointing to things only to have Nick shoot them down, as if Nick was his personal nutritionist. My first instinct was to make fun of this, but as I watched them go back and forth with their mini power struggle, I began to ask myself, Is this what couples do? Is this what it means to be in a relationship? Is this love?

As I observed them, my perception changed from them appearing silly to kind of sexy. The way they smiled at one another as they went back and forth, the slight touch of a hand, a whisper in the ear. They were flirting with one another in an extremely subtle manner. You'd never pick up on it at first glance, but that's what they were doing. I wondered if this is what they were like in bed with one another. In the midst of fucking were they catching up on one another's day, making plans for the weekend, discussing who to invite to that dinner party they were planning in a couple of weeks? It left me feeling uneasy.

The waiter returned with the drinks and everyone placed his orders. I picked up my wineglass, sucked down about half the glass, and asked him to bring me another the next time he came around. Willy started to giggle.

"Somebody knows how to sling 'em back." Willy lifted his glass and took a polite little drink.

"I have yet to meet anyone that works in a restaurant or bar that doesn't," Sam said. "It's our special gift."

"You certainly do," Nick said to Sam. "You drink too much."

"I know, Mommy," Sam retorted, "but we can't all get our kicks from a PowerBar and a smoothie."

"All I'm saying is you need to start taking better care of yourself," Nick warned. "You're not getting any younger."

"Please." Sam rolled his eyes. "It's my bad, unhealthy behaviors that allow you to feel so superior and smug."

"Rowr," Willy sniped, with an appreciative, devious smile.

"And who, in the history of the world, has ever gotten younger?" Sam asked. "I never understood that expression, like I'm supposed to be shocked. Oh my God! I've stopped getting younger! Shit, man, when did that start to happen?"

I started laughing. I couldn't help myself.

"You're awfully pissy," Bradley said as Nick mumbled something about Benjamin Button under his breath.

Sam stretched, leaning back into the booth with a half smile. "This coming from the man who had an aneurysm because we were a few minutes late."

Nick and Bradley looked at each other then back at Sam. "We fold," they relented simultaneously.

I sat through the rest of the meal listening to them all going back and forth with one another. While their banter seemed a bit hateful, it was apparent they cared for one another. I chimed in every now and then, just enough to keep myself from seeming antisocial, but for whatever reason, I felt the need to keep my guard up. They told me a few stories about some of the group vacations they'd all taken together: Las Vegas, Hawaii, a ski trip to Colorado. It was interesting to me because I almost never left the state of Missouri. Short of shopping trips to St. Louis and Kansas City with Finn, and my "business" trip to Atlanta, we never went anywhere. Logan had a life outside of his work. I was a little envious of that.

Bradley talked about his job in casting for a bit, which I found very interesting. It was something I knew I could never do. I would never have the heart to turn all those hopeful actors down. Dashing their dreams and sending them back out into the cold, cruel world. When the conversation turned to Logan and me, I tried to downplay the situation without seeming lackadaisical. I wasn't trying to be evasive in a none-of-your-business way, but knowing the situation with Sam, it seemed wrong to carry on in a manner that would seem like I was rubbing his nose in it.

By the time we left the restaurant and made it to Sam's bar, I was more than a little lit. We single-filed it into the joint, with Nick holding open the door for us. It was a bit more upscale and fairly small compared to the way I'd imagined it. I'd been picturing a vast dance club packed with shirtless, sweaty men doing the bump and grind. It was more of a conversation bar. There was the typical dance music playing loud enough to make you feel as though you could speak without the entire establishment overhearing your conversation. The bar itself was along the back wall, the typical boxlike formation with about fifteen stools running along the front with a couple of drink stations, so people sitting at tables were able to actually get a drink. The bottles of liquor were stacked up on shelves along the back bar and enticingly lit so they looked like shiny precious jewels. There were four bartenders running around furiously making cocktails.

The rest of the bar was filled with wooden tables and chairs that were heavily lacquered to protect them from wear and tear, as were the wood floors. The lighting was dimmed at a level to be respectable of the vanity-conscious clientele, and the walls

were painted in aesthetically appealing earth tones, going from lighter shades at the point farthest from the bar and becoming much deeper, visually drawing your eye inward.

I followed "the fold" to a couple of tables and helped move chairs out of the way as Sam and Nick pushed them together. We all took our seats, Nick and Bradley on one side, Sam and Willy on the ends, and myself beside Willy, sitting next to the empty chair that my boyfriend was supposed to be occupying.

The place was crowded, and I couldn't ever remember being in such a confined space with so many gorgeous men. Every direction I looked stood a pack of hotties, all smiling, talking, and laughing with cocktails in hand. It looked like a Budweiser ad I might find between the pages of *The Advocate*. The kind I used to laugh at thinking how unrealistic that every guy in the photo was gorgeous. I was in the land of the pretty people.

Nick and Sam went to the bar to grab cocktails for everyone, and I surveyed the room, making eye contact here and there with some of the men. I turned to see Willy staring at me, smiling ear to ear.

"What?" I asked, feeling busted as my face turned red.

"So," Willy said, "exactly what were you and Sam talking about sitting in my parking lot earlier?"

Bradley's ears perked up hearing this. He scooted over into the seat next to Willy and looked at me eagerly. "What's all this about?"

"When they came to pick me up," Willy mentioned to Bradley under his breath as if it were something I shouldn't hear, "they sat alone together in the car talking about something."

Bradley's eyes widened, and they both turned their attention back toward me.

"Nothing, just your typical run-of-the-mill stuff."

Willy made a loud noise like a game-show buzzer. "Not buyin' it."

"Sam doesn't shoot the shit unless he's behind the bar being paid to," Bradley said.

"Unless he's trying to work someone," Willy said. "Was he hitting on you?"

"No," I said, laughing. "You two are amoral."

"That leaves only one other possibility." Bradley looked at Willy. "But it's almost too delicious to be true."

"No way," Willy gasped, "he'd never be that direct."

"Unless he felt like he was backed into a corner," Bradley said.

"A last-ditch effort," Willy continued.

"Now or never," Bradley added.

They both turned to me and Willy opened his mouth. "Oh my God, he did, didn't he?"

They looked at me, anxiously waiting for an answer. I began to perspire. I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure what they were referring to. I tried to think up a lie, but I didn't know Sam well enough to come up with something off the cuff. If it didn't mesh, they'd know I was lying, but I didn't want to be the one to betray his confidence.

"Did what? What the hell are you talking about?"

"That he's—"

"You can't just tell him," Bradley said, interrupting. "What if we're wrong?"

Willy paused for a moment. "Fuck it, he'll find out eventually." He looked at me and opened his mouth to speak.

"That he's in love with Logan," Bradley jumped in, causing Willy to turn and give him a dirty look for beating him to the punch.

I leaned forward and placed my hands on the table. "You know!"

"Of course," Willy said with a wave of his hand. "It's right there on his face plain as day. Like a cold sore."

"Well, he doesn't know you know. And I swear to God, if he knows you know now and I get blamed for telling you, I'll rip your pancreas out with my teeth."

"Ew." Willy moved back in his chair as if he thought I might actually do it.

"How can he not know we know?" Bradley asked. "It's completely obvious to everyone...except Logan."

"Obviously none of you have ever discussed it," I said. "He didn't even tell me. I told him I knew, and he specifically asked me not to mention it to Logan. Nevertheless, you two had better keep your mouths shut."

"You are one ballsy broad," Willy said. "You just blurted it out?"

"Yeah, I could tell, and I didn't want to have to pretend and have it hanging over my head all week long. It's really quite selfish of me, I know."

"Here they come," Willy said, smiling.

 $\hbox{``I must say''}-Bradley\ leaned\ forward-\hbox{``I have a whole new respect for you.''}$

"Thank you...I think," I said with a grimace.

Nick and Sam came back to the table. Sam had me take a glass of red wine out of his hand. I immediately brought it directly to my mouth and began to suck it down. I was a nervous wreck.

"I didn't even think to ask what you wanted." Sam passed a cosmo to Willy. "So, I just got you a glass of red wine." He looked back at me as I tipped the glass up and sucked the last bit of wine down my throat. "Obviously the correct choice," he added.

"Thirsty," I said with a smile as a little burp escaped my lips.

Willy and Bradley began laughing hysterically, and Nick looked at Sam, trying to figure out what the joke was.

"What's so funny?" Sam asked.

"He burped," Willy said, laughing again.

"You people are so infantile." Sam picked up my empty wineglass and headed back to the bar.

I sat there with my hand over my mouth, feeling utterly humiliated. *Hello...my* name's Tammy Trashed.

Finally, they both settled down when I gave them a serious glare.

"Don't worry." Bradley took a drink from his glass. "Not a peep."

"About what?" Nick asked, setting his beer bottle on the table.

"I'll tell you later," Bradley said.

I rolled my eyes.

"Well, well," Willy said. "Check out Mr. Yummy walking through the door."

I turned to see Logan standing at the door looking around the room. He spotted us and looked at me and smiled. I was never more happy to see his face. He walked over to the table, pulled off his jacket, and set it on the back of the chair. He leaned over and kissed me.

"Did you miss me?" he asked, pulling away and taking a seat in the chair next to me.

You have no idea. "Nope, barely noticed you weren't here."

"Liar," Logan said with a big grin.

I gave him my evil grin and leaned over and kissed him again as Sam came back to the table and set two glasses of wine in front of me.

Logan turned to see the wine and looked up at Sam. "Oh, did you see me come in?" he asked, picking up one of the glasses.

"No." Sam cocked his head to the side and took a seat.

Logan looked slightly confused as Bradley, Willy, and I began to laugh, with Nick and Sam joining in.

"Okay," Logan said. "I get the feeling I've missed something."

"You have no idea," Willy said, causing him and Bradley to lose it even more.

"You're all drunk." Logan placed his glass on the table.

"No," Sam said. "Just the three giggle girls down there."

"How was dinner?" Logan asked.

"Nowhere near as interesting as this," Bradley answered, finally calming down a bit.

As I looked around the room, it occurred to me that there were only a handful of women in the entire bar. "Where are all the chicks?" I asked.

"It's a gay bar, sweetie," Willy said, as if I'd suddenly lost my marbles.

"Where are all the gay chicks?" I asked, taking another sip of wine.

"They have their own bars." Willy cringed.

"How sad." I frowned. "So what, there's no intermingling?"

"That's right." Logan nodded. "Everyone went to the same bar back in Missouri. I never really noticed that until now. I had quite a good time there, from the bits and pieces I remember."

I started laughing. "I should say so. You were up on the dance floor with no shirt sandwiched between two drag queens."

"Good Lord." Sam rolled his eyes.

Logan smiled as the memory of his actions vaguely came back to him.

"That's one I've never seen before." Nick was grinning at Logan.

"Please don't tell me they were booger drag." Willy gasped, as if that would be the most horrifying thing that could ever happen.

"They were gorgeous," Logan declared with a high-and-mighty posture. "Probably the only opportunity I'll ever have to dance between Janet and Cher."

"You're so cute," I said, watching him and unable to keep myself from smiling.

"Oh my God." Willy sat up in his chair and looked across the bar. "There he is...Intense Guy."

Everyone turned toward a man standing back in a corner, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, holding a bottle of beer. He was very attractive and thin and was wearing a gray sweater and black jeans. He had dark hair and dark eyes and looked about the room without expression.

"Jesus, Willy." Sam was swirling the ice around in his glass. "Why don't you just go and talk to him?"

"No way!" Willy's eyes widened. "I've never seen him talk to anyone."

"It's no wonder," Nick said, "with a personality like that."

"I think he looks mysterious," Willy said.

"I think he looks bored," Logan said.

"I think he looks creepy," I said.

"What?" Willy asked. "Come on, you have to think he is hot."

"It's weird." I curled my lip. "Skulking about in dark corners leering at people."

"When you put it like that..." Bradley lifted his glass and took a drink.

"I never understood why guys do that." I reached my hand over, placed it on Logan's leg. "Why would you be interested in someone that by all evidence has no social skills to speak of?"

"Well...he's probably very shy," Willy said. "Maybe he's just out looking for that one special person."

"To take back to his apartment and hack up into little pieces," I said. "He's probably a Jeffrey Dahmahwannabe."

Bradley and Sam began to laugh.

"Okay," Willy said. "I'm not liking you so much anymore."

I smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"I didn't think people from the Midwest were supposed to be so cynical." Nick grinned.

"Yeah, it's a little less geography and a little more psychotic, paranoid mother," I said.

"That's my boyfriend." Logan gave me a wink. "Able to kill a fantasy in a single bound."

I took my hand off his leg and smacked him in the stomach.

"Well, I hope you're happy," Willy said. "You've completely ruined him for me."

"You may be happy in a year or so, when you wake up and see his picture on the front page of the newspaper being hauled into the police station in handcuffs," I said.

"Handcuffs." Logan leered at me. "We'll have to pull those out later."

"Okay," Bradley said, "let's keep it G-rated."

"Speak for yourself, missy." Willy placed his elbows up on the table. "I want all the nasty details."

"Surprise, surprise." Nick looked at Willy.

"I'm going to go check on things at the bar." Sam got out of his seat. "Anyone need a cocktail?"

"Sorry, Sam," Logan said, then turned back around to me. "Sam hates it when we get too explicit."

"I do not," Sam said defensively. "Christ, it's not like we haven't had this same fucking discussion a gazillion times before. That's all we do is talk about sex."

"I'll have another." Bradley looked at Sam.

"Great...anyone else?"

Everyone else shook their heads, and Sam turned to head off toward the bar.

"Well" – Willy got up and walked around the table – "I'm not being left here with the couples. It's getting late, and I need to go find myself a little trick."

The four of us sat and talked for another thirty minutes until Bradley stated he needed to get up early the next morning. We went in search of Willy, only to discover him standing back in the corner talking to Mr. Intense, aka Scary-Leering Guy. We opted not to interrupt and found Sam at the bar talking with a couple of guys. Bradley asked him to keep his eye on Willy.

"I'll make sure he doesn't get sliced and diced," Sam said.

"Okay" – Bradley crossed his arms – "not the mental picture I wanted to be left with."

"Sorry," Sam said.

"Good night, Sam." Logan gave him a hug.

"You must be tired," Sam said. "After your day, I'm sure you can't wait to get back home."

We all said our good-byes, and on the drive home, Logan gave me the rundown on his evening. He had apparently tried to escape several times, only to be stopped by the woman throwing the party, who was constantly in a panic over nothing.

Finally, we made it back to his apartment. As we stood outside his door and he fumbled through his jacket for his keys, I somehow remembered, through my fuzzy, alcohol-induced haze, my shenanigans from earlier that afternoon. Then I remembered Sam's final words at the bar about not being able to wait to get home.

That little fucking bitch, I thought, beginning to feel uneasy.

After pulling his keys out of his pocket, Logan began to unlock the door. I grabbed his arm, turned him around, and kissed him, pinning him up against the door. He moaned a little as his arms snaked around my waist. He ran his hands over my ass and squeezed lightly. I ground into him, putting everything I had into it, hoping it would still be fresh in his mind when he saw the state of his condo. I pulled away suddenly and said, "Okay, I'm ready. You can open the door now."

"You're so odd, you little tease." He shook his head at me.

He unlocked the door and opened it, allowing me to go in first. I tried to block his vision with my body only to turn around and see he'd disappeared into the kitchen.

"I'm getting a bottled water; do you want one?" he asked.

"Yeah." I peered around the corner.

He closed the fridge, and as he turned around, he saw the drawer slightly ajar. He looked at it funny, shook his head, and went over to close it. I dashed back out into the living room, looking nonchalant as he walked into the room with two bottles of water in his hands. I tried to steady myself from the effects of the wine. He stopped suddenly and looked about the room.

After a several-moment pause, he said, "Did a little redecorating, I see."

"Um, well...not really. Sort of... I mean...everything just seemed a bit too perfect." I raised one eyebrow in an attempt to seem defiant.

"Interesting." He looked around again before staring at me intently for several seconds. It was very quiet, and I began to fidget as I started to feel antsy. "You think you're pretty funny, don't ya?"

I started to laugh out of nervousness as he set the bottles of water down on a table. He pulled his jacket off and tossed it over a chair.

"See that?" He pointed at his jacket.

I nodded, chewing on my lower lip as I shuffled back and forth.

"I'm gonna leave it there," he said, as if to let me know he could and that it didn't bother him in the least. "But you," he added with an ornery smile, "you're gonna get it!"

I screamed as he jumped toward me and I took off running to the other side of the couch. He jumped onto the couch and hopped over it as I turned and tried to make for the kitchen. As I was more than a little drunk, he easily grabbed me by the waist, and I yelled out, laughing hysterically as he tickled me.

"You rotten little cuss." He picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder. "Looks like I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson."

"Put me down," I demanded, trying not to laugh, "you big bully."

"You be quiet." He slapped me on the ass. He walked over to the table and wrapped his fingers around the caps, snatching up the bottles of water. "Think you're pretty cute trying to poke fun at me?"

"And just what do you think you're gonna do about it?" I asked, laughing as I reached down and slapped him on the ass.

"Ohhhhh"—he spun around and walked toward the bedroom—"you're in a world of trouble now."

Unable to stop laughing due to all the wine I'd consumed, I said, "Just 'cause you're bigger than me doesn't mean you can push me around."

We passed through the door into the dark bedroom and he walked over and set the water down on the bedside table. He clicked on the lamp as I dangled from his shoulder. Turning toward the bed, he said, "That's exactly what it means."

He lifted me with what seemed like no effort at all, and threw me onto the bed. Screaming as I landed on my back, I started laughing again as he grabbed me by the ankles and yanked me across the bed toward him. He let go of my legs and they dropped over the side of the bed.

"Big, tough, manly man," I teased as I ran my hand down my stomach to the zipper of my jeans, rubbing my cock, "gonna teach me a lesson."

He ripped off his shirt, looking down at me with a sly smile. "Sit up, you dirty little brat."

I pulled myself up, yammering away about nothing as he lifted my arms and yanked off my shirt. I dropped my arms and shoved my face into his crotch to lick his hard-on through his pants. He placed his hands on the back of my head and ground my face into his slacks. I let out a whimper and he put his hands on my shoulders and shoved me back onto the bed. He reached down to undo my belt and pants, and I raised my hips as he jerked my jeans and briefs down, causing my hard-on to snap up and smack me in the stomach.

He stood up, looking down at me as he undid his belt, slowly slipping it out of the loops of his pants. My eyes widened as he ran the thick leather through his hands and smiled wickedly.

Thinking he might be planning on whipping me with it, I smiled sweetly. "Now, Logan," I started nervously as I began to slowly back my way up the bed, "I was just having a little bit of harmless fun."

"Ohhhhh." He laughed, tossing the belt onto the bed. "I see." He undid the button and unzipped his pants, let them fall down his legs to the floor. Logan slid his boxer briefs over his hips, his hard cock bobbed in the air as he slid them down and stepped out of them. Picking the belt back up, he loomed over me. "That's quite a change from a few minutes ago when you were slapping my ass asking what I was going to do about it."

"Kidding." I backed up farther toward the headboard as he climbed onto the bed on his knees.

He grabbed my ankles and pulled me down the bed as he climbed over me. Straddling my waist, he pinned me down. "Kidding, huh...? Just some harmless bit of fun?"

"That's all, sweetie," I said innocently, keeping my eyes on the belt in his hand.

He ran his hands up my sides, lifted my arms above my head, and lay down on me, covering my mouth with his. I closed my eyes as he slowly worked his tongue into my mouth. He ran his hands up my arms and grabbed my wrists together in one of his hands. He stopped kissing me and pulled himself up my body to straddle my chest. I looked up as he slipped one end of the belt through the other, pulling it tight around my wrists. He sat up on his knees and leaned forward. His hard cock was swinging above my face as he tied the other end of the belt around one of the metal rungs in his headboard.

A string of warm precum drizzled down onto my cheek as Logan slid back down my body. He leaned down and licked it off my cheek. I shivered as the stubble from his chin scratched my face. He pulled down on my shoulders, scooting my body down the bed a few inches, until there was no slack in the belt.

"Now I can do whatever I want to you." He eyed my torso and ran his finger down the center of my chest.

"Play nice." I laughed.

He smiled, and with a devious look in his eyes, he leaned over and ran his tongue up from my belly button, over my chest to my neck. I groaned as he sucked on my neck, twisting each of my nipples between his fingers. He moved over to my ear and nibbled on my earlobe. "I'm seriously going to enjoy this," he whispered into my ear, "and baby, I'll make you this promise...you're never gonna forget this night."

I wasn't sure exactly how much time passed, but it felt like hours as Logan worked over every inch of my body with his mouth and hands. Licking and sucking me into a frenzy, he discovered every last erogenous region of my body, bringing me just to the point of orgasm before pulling away. Over and over again he'd push my body just to the edge of explosion only to stop. My cock ached and my skin felt like it was on fire as he tortured me with his tongue and fingers. I was in a complete haze, thrashing against the bed, begging him to stop...begging him not to stop...ready to give or do anything he wanted.

Finally, after my whimpering and begging reached a fever pitch, he rolled on a condom, tossed my legs over his shoulders, and slid his thick, hard cock inside me. Even then, he started slow, taunting and teasing my hole until I pleaded with him, desperate for release. Then and only then, he began pounding into me and finally took my cock in his hand. He pulled a couple of times before I burst. I came harder than I ever had before, soaking my chest and stomach, even my face. He continued slamming into me until he filled the condom inside me.

He fell on top of me and kissed me softly, sucking my lips, and licked every drop of cum off my face. He scooted me up on the bed, slipping out of me and creating some slack in the belt. He undid my wrists and I wrapped my arms around him, too weak to hug him tightly. My body was shaking as he told me loved me and continued to softly kiss me.

When I finally settled down, he slipped off me and went to the bathroom, then brought back a warm washcloth he used to wipe me clean. He returned it to the bathroom and grabbed a bottle of water as he climbed back into bed. Taking several drinks before he pulled me up and leaned me back against his chest, he then held out the bottle. I reached up to take it, but my arms were still shaky, so he placed the bottle to my lips and let me drink. When I was finished, he covered us up with the blankets and settled us down into the bed. I rolled onto my side, and he spooned me, wrapping his big arms around my chest. I snuggled into him as the warm heat from his body radiated into me. I felt him kiss the back of my neck before I passed out.

* * * * *

The next morning I woke up to full sunlight pouring through the windows. It was so bright that for a moment I forgot where I was.

"Miniblinds," I said weakly, covering my eyes with my hand.

I looked over and cracked my fingers to see Logan lying next to me sleeping. I smiled at him before realizing how badly I needed to pee. I got out of bed slowly, trying not to wake him, and as I stood up, I felt every muscle in my body twinge. I was sore in places I never knew I could be. It seemed as if I could feel every inch of my body. A smile spread across my face as I hobbled into the bathroom. I reached back to push the door shut and noticed the redness around my wrists. That dirty fucker, I thought, laughing as I lifted the lid.

After relieving myself, I sneaked out of the bedroom in desperate search of caffeine. Tiptoeing into the living room, I stopped in my tracks, looking around the room. I laughed out loud. He had gotten up at some point during the night and moved everything back to its proper place.

I shook my head and jumped slightly as he sneaked up behind me and put his arms around me.

"Good morning, boyfriend."

I could *feel* him smiling as he pulled me tightly to him.

"How do you feel?" he asked, kissing my neck and nuzzling his face between my shoulder blades.

Not saying a word, I lifted my arms up, displaying my red, swollen wrists. He looked up and laid his chin on my shoulder.

"Mmmmm," he said, "that's the sexiest thing I think I've ever seen."

I felt his cock begin to pulse against my ass as he started getting hard. I reached back and slapped him. "You twisted little perv." I laughed, trying to wiggle out of his arms.

A low laugh rumbled out of him as he held me tight and lightly bit my shoulder. "I'm sorry, babe."

I could tell by the tone in his voice he was no such thing. "Please tell me you have coffee?" I asked, as I smiled and turned around in his arms and looked over his face.

"I do." He stared into my eyes. He kissed me softly and lifted his head and looked me in the eyes again. His expression changed from whimsical to serious, and he looked into me so intently, it shook me a little. "Move in with me."

"Wow," was all I could mutter. I reached up and ran my fingers into his hair, unable to take my eyes away from his. "Can I think about it?" I asked.

"Aden, I love you. I don't want another second of my life to tick by without you. I realize that you're the one who'll be giving up everything you've worked for, and I don't want you to think that by making this decision, you'll be losing all of that. I've really thought about this, and...I'll sign over half of my restaurant to you if you say yes. We can build a life here together."

I told him right then that I would. That Logan was willing to offer me half the life he'd worked so hard to build made me realize how much he really cared for me. He wasn't the man from my dreams, but I couldn't imagine that even he could be more wonderful than Logan.

* * * * *

When I got back home and told Nathan, he didn't seem all that surprised. He confessed that after Logan came to visit, he knew that at some point this might happen. He just didn't think it would be this soon.

I began taking Nathan around and showing him some of the front-of-the-house operations, preparing him for when he would have to do it without me. We also chose one of our employees and offered her a management position. I began training her to take over for me.

Finn was a whole other story. After I told her, she was speechless. For the first time since I'd known her, she didn't know what to say. Once the shock wore off, she found her tongue.

"Why the hell can't he sell his dump of a restaurant and move here if he loves you so much?" she asked, shaking her finger at me. "I'll tell you why. That would cause him too much inconvenience."

"Finn," I said, fixing her a cosmopolitan, "his restaurant isn't a dump, for starters. Movie stars eat there. He has a hugely successful restaurant in LA, which from what I understand is no easy feat. He's in a whole other tax bracket. You can't compare the two. This isn't just my restaurant," I added, running my arm through the air like Vanna White. "I can't very well tell him he can come here and take over a portion of it."

"Movie stars eat there." She took the martini out of my hand. "Whoop-de-do. I don't care if the fucking Dalai Lama frequents the dive. That does not give him the right to swoop down like a chicken hawk and steal my best friend. I hate him, and I hate you too," she added, downing her cosmo and slamming the glass down on the bar.

"I love him, Finn. You know I wouldn't up and do this unless I was sure this was right. I'll never know if I don't at least try."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh sure, make with the love stuff. This just bites."

We looked at each other and both burst out laughing.

* * * * *

Over the next two months, I began to make arrangements for my move. Nathan refused to allow me to give up my part of the restaurant. He said we'd just leave things the way they were for a year. That way if something went wrong, I wouldn't have to worry about where I was going to go, I could just come back home. Finn also refused to buy my house from me. She said she would stay there and rent it for a year, and if by that time I hadn't come to my senses and moved back to live with her, we'd revisit the topic.

Logan seemed a little disappointed when I asked him to also give it a year before we did anything legal on his end. I was trying to be sensible, but I think he saw it as me not believing in us. I know rationally he understood where I was coming from, but he took it a little to heart.

Chapter Seven

"Well"—Finn cleared her throat as she got up out of her seat—"as many of you may know, I've not been altogether happy at Aden's decision to run off and leave me. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty goddamn pissed off." She looked at me and smiled. "But it isn't every day you find a best friend who loves you unconditionally in spite of all of your"—she paused, took a sip of wine—"idiosyncrasies. Who else is going to enjoy eight-hour shopping binges and won't make fun of me for eating Oreo cookies with fatfree Cool Whip? Now that I think about it, I should be pissed, but I know I must love you with all my heart, otherwise I'd be too fucking selfish to let you go."

Her eyes started to well up, and I got up and gave her a hug. "What am I going to do without my very best friend?" I whispered into her ear.

"Suffer, I hope," she whispered back, with a little-girl laugh. She pulled away from me, and we both sat down.

"We've accomplished so much together, my mind reels just thinking about it. I should be angry, thinking about all the extra work you're leaving me with, but instead I find that I just feel lucky and proud... Lucky that you walked into my life with your generosity and drive, and proud to have done all of this with you. We made a damn good team, you and I. Knowing you as I do, I'm sure life holds only further greatness and accomplishments in your future. But I want you to always know that this is your home, and you will always be welcome here regardless of where else life may take you."

"Thank you both so much. I don't know—"

"Oh, sorry." Nathan interrupted me. "There's one other person who wanted to say a few words."

One of our waiters pulled out a television and DVD player on a rolling cart and plugged it into the wall. I looked at Finn and Nathan, wondering what the hell was going on. The lights dimmed and Nathan turned on the TV with a remote he took out of his pocket. After a second, the static switched into a black screen, and then Logan's smiling face popped up.

"Hey, Aden." He was standing on one of the patios of his restaurant, with the sun shining and the ocean in the background. "I really wanted to be there with you tonight, but I was afraid to set foot in town, for fear I might be snatched off a street corner never to be heard from again."

Several people laughed, and I just smiled, happy to see his face, those dimples, and his messy blond hair.

Logan continued, "I guess first off I should just go ahead and apologize to everyone for stealing him away from you. If it makes you feel any better, when he's spoken to me about you, it's always been with a great deal of fondness, appreciation, and respect. Aden is a truly classy man, which speaks volumes for all of you that care about him. I know he's sad to be leaving you, and I think I can speak for both of us. We hope and wish you will all come out to California and see us. We'll keep a table waiting for you." He paused and looked down. "Aden" —he looked back up into the camera — "I still count my lucky stars every day for bringing you into my life. I love you... Now drink the hell up and get on the damn plane already." He shot the camera a sexy smile, lifting a champagne glass. The screen went black and once again to static.

* * * * *

The restaurant had cleared out except for our staff, cleaning up, and Finn, Nathan, and I were sitting at a table in the bar finishing off a bottle of wine.

"Thank you, guys, that was so much fun. I can't believe you two did all of that. It was amazing."

"Well," Finn said, "we're pretty damn amazing... Should've thought about that before deciding to run off to California."

"I know, I know." I grinned. "When did Logan send that tape?"

"Jesus, him again," Finn scoffed, taking a puff off a cigarette.

"He called last week and asked if he could send something for you tonight," Nathan said. "It was really nice of him. It's obvious how much he cares for you."

"I just hope I'm worthy of it."

"Please," Finn said. "He's the lucky one, Aden, and he knows it."

"I think you're just a smidge prejudiced." I finished off the last of my wine. "I don't know. I just have this uneasy feeling that I'm going to fuck it all up somehow."

"Aden," Nathan said, "it's just nerves. Despite your...quirks, you're the most responsible person I've ever known. There is no way in hell you could do anything to mess this up."

* * * * *

"I hope you know what you're doing." He stood in front of me with his arms crossed.

I looked around, finding myself in what appeared to be an expansive white space with nothing such as walls or buildings that could give me any sense of size or scale. I turned back to face him as my dream man looked me over, a slight sting to the expression on his face.

"I'm sorry, love." I reached out to him.

He took a step back, moving farther away from me.

"After everything we've been to one another...all the years we've been together. I can't believe you can just toss me aside."

"You're not real."

"Not real!" He took another step, backing farther away. "What makes our relationship any less than what you think it is you have with him? I've stuck by you for fifteen years. You hardly know him. He's just a blip."

"That's not true." I raised my voice.

"Well, I hope you're right." He took a few more steps back. "Don't expect me to be here for you when it all goes to shit."

"I'll always be grateful to you." I reached for him again. "But I need more. I need something real."

"Something real," he said, shaking his head. "Someday you'll realize what it is you're giving up for him...maybe sooner than you think."

He turned and began to walk away, slowly fading to fuzziness, then to a blur, and finally gone altogether, leaving me alone in the white space.

My eyes fluttered open to my sunlit bedroom. I looked over at the clock as the alarm began to go off. I crinkled up my forehead, rolled over, and shut it off. I groaned, feeling the dull pain in my head.

"Too much wine," I muttered to myself. I smiled through my hangover, realizing that by tonight I'd be back in LA with Logan.

* * * * *

After downing a handful of Advil, Finn and I dragged my bags out to her car and loaded up the trunk. I looked over at my car, worrying about how and when I'd get it to

California. Realizing it didn't matter, I shook my head in an attempt to toss out all the little details that could easily drive me crazy if I let them.

"Ready?" Finn asked.

"Yep." I was glad she'd agreed to drive me to the airport in St. Louis, although at first she refused. I could've flown directly to St. Louis, but I guess I wanted to squeeze in a little more time with her. I laughed thinking how she was completely unable to let me forget for one instant how unhappy she was with my leaving. As we drove along, we made small talk and laughed as if we were going on another one of our shopping jaunts. We made the drive in less than two and a half hours.

After arriving at the airport and parking her car, Finn and I walked along looking for my gate. Neither one of us said a word to the other. I felt excited and like shit at the same time. It was like going home for Christmas. On my way there, I was sad because I was leaving Finn, Nathan, basically my created family. Then leaving my parents to come back, I'd be sad because I was leaving my family to come back to my life. Either way, it sucked. Even though I wasn't really that close with most of my real family, there was still a history and a lot of childhood memories there. While my parents didn't relish the fact that I was gay, I knew they loved me.

Coming up on the metal detectors with my ticket in hand, we stopped, surveying the area. Finn and I found an open row of chairs away from the few people who were already there forming a line.

"Goddamn, I'm so going to miss you," she breathed dramatically, with a look of relief after having said it. "It still feels like you're just going away for a week. Then I'll be back to pick you up, we'll go have dinner, and talk about everything that's happened while we were apart."

"I know." I was trying not to cry. "I haven't been able to convince myself that this is permanent and I won't be seeing you on a daily basis."

"You're such a fuckhead for doing this to me."

My mouth fell open in shock, and we both started laughing. "So much for the Hallmark moment."

"Well, you're such an ass; I really hate you right now." She threw her hand in the air. "I can't believe you're leaving me for the other woman. You're the first man that's left me that I've not been happy to see go."

"Thanks," I said, knowing that in her way, that was about as good a compliment as I was going to get.

"What sucks even more is that I really like Logan and have no doubt that he's a real chance for you to get everything you've ever wanted. It would be much easier if he were a prick and all wrong for you." She scowled. "Then I could hate him guilt free."

I grabbed her hand. "God, speaking of guilt, my dream man made an appearance last night."

"What...? Honestly, Aden." Finn shook her head. "I can't believe you're still having those stupid dreams."

"They aren't stupid," I said disapprovingly. "But I have a feeling I won't be having them anymore."

"Good, you've been dreaming about this dude for over a decade...it's not natural."

"He was letting me go. I think it's a sign that moving to California to be with Logan is the right thing to do, but he was very upset. I felt terrible. He was so hurt, and the look of betrayal he had on his face."

Finn reached up and smacked me on the back of the head. "He's not real, you freak!"

"Ow." I rubbed my head. "I know, it's just..."

We both tensed as they called my flight number to begin boarding. I still had to get through security, I thought, as we got up out of our seats and turned to look at one another. Finn reached up and slapped me hard across the face.

"Ow," I said, wide-eyed, rubbing my cheek.

"Quit whining and give me a hug."

I shook my head and put my arms around her. She placed her chin on my shoulder, and I felt her relax into me. "You really are a psychotic bit—" I stopped as my mouth fell open. My stomach began to turn and my head started to swim. Unable to believe what I was seeing walking in our direction, I blinked several times. I tried adjusting my eyes to make sure I wasn't going insane. I watched him until he passed us, and a ringing in my head began to get louder and louder. That was really him. That was the man from my dream.

"Oh my hell." I pulled away from Finn sharply. I picked up my carry-on and threw it over my shoulder. Without thinking, I grabbed Finn tightly by the wrist, turned around, and ran like mad, dragging her behind me as if she were no heavier than a child's toy.

"What in the name of hell are you doing?" she screamed from behind me. "The fucking plane's in the other direction."

"I can't." I was desperately searching the backs of the heads in front of us, looking for his. "I can't believe this, he picks now of all times to walk into my life. What a bastard. This is what I get for not staying true to myself. I should have waited."

"What are you talking about, you freak?" she asked, breathing heavily and slapping at my hand on her arm. "You're cutting off the circulation. I am a delicate flower!"

"Stop fighting me and pick up the pace a little," I yelled back at her, pulling us to the right to keep us from knocking over a woman and her child. "Move it!" I screamed. "Honestly." I glanced back to see Finn staring at me with her eyes bugging out and her mouth hanging open.

We burst through the glass entryway doors and I ran all the way to the curb, where attendants were ushering people into cabs. Finn was bent over with her hands on her knees, breathing heavily, and I was turning in circles, trying to catch a glimpse of him. I hopped up and down trying to see over the heads of other people and cursed myself for not being taller.

"Aden," Finn spat out in a husky Kathleen Turner-type voice, "what the hell is going on?"

Just as I turned to look at her, I saw him climbing into a cab. I took her by the arm and headed toward the front where people were waiting for cabs.

"Aden, please stop. I'm a smoker, I'm going to have a heart attack."

"You're fine." I dragged her with me as his cab pulled away. "You can rest in the car."

I jumped down off the curb and onto the pavement, running up as an attendant opened the next cab door for a woman and her child. Yanking on Finn's arm, I hopped in front of the woman as she began to step down off the curb. I began shoving Finn into the cab as she pushed me back, becoming close to the point where she was no longer going to take any more shit from me.

"Sorry, this is an emergency."

"You can't do that!" the attendant demanded.

"Fuck off!" I screamed, sliding into the seat next to Finn. The woman on the curb gasped and placed her hands over her daughter's ears. "Sorry, lady." I slammed the door shut. I looked at the driver. "There's a one-hundred-dollar tip if you catch that cab that just pulled out."

The cabdriver squealed his tires as he pulled away from the curb, cutting off another car.

I settled back into the seat. "The number of the other cab was five-one-nine."

"Aden." Finn snatched up my arm, forcing me to face her. "What is happening?"

"I saw him." I glanced down as she rubbed her wrist with her other hand. "God, did I do that?"

"Um, yeah." She reached over, pinched the hell out of my arm. "Who the fuck did you see?"

"Ouch, damn it!" I frowned, rubbing my arm. I glanced forward to see if the other cab was anywhere in sight. "The man from my dreams. When we were hugging, I looked up and there he was, walking along like any other human being."

Finn was looking at me, trying to gauge the exact level of my insanity. "He was just walking along in the airport? There was no one around him or walking with him?"

"Right." I sat up in the backseat, looking out the front window.

"Are you sure he was real and not just some type of hallucination? I mean, there have been times when you thought you'd seen him in the past only to find out when you got closer that it wasn't him."

"Finn, it was him." I locked eyes with her in an attempt to convince her of my seriousness. "I'm sure of it. There's not one ounce of my being that does not believe with all certainty that it was him." I turned back around to look for the cab again.

"There it is!" the cabdriver and I screamed at the same time, as I pointed to the right.

Finn shimmied up in the seat next to me, squinting to see if she could get a glimpse of him. "So you saw him get into that cab?"

I could tell her interest was finally piqued by the possibility that maybe I might be right.

"Yes," was all I could utter.

"They're pulling off!" Finn and I yelled at the same time.

"I see it, I see it," the cabdriver declared, turning sharply, throwing Finn and me into the door of the cab.

"Alive, damn it!" she screamed. "It would be fucking great to get there alive!"

I looked at Finn, who had her eyes peeled for Dream Man's cab. I smiled, realizing it was becoming a little game to her. Suddenly, the expression on her face changed as she slowly turned her attention to me.

She sat back into the seat, pulling me with her. "Aden, what are we doing? You're supposed to be on a plane on your way to California, to spend the rest of your life with the man you're supposed to be in love with."

Guilt swept over me. "One has nothing to do with the other." I pushed those feelings to the back of my brain.

"How can you say that?" she asked.

"Look, Finn"—I turned to face her—"I've been dreaming about this man for...well, forever. Are you really going to sit there and tell me that I shouldn't be doing this?"

"I just want to make sure you realize what it is you're doing here."

"I do! Realize, that is."

Dream Man's cab turned off the road into the Alcott Hotel and stopped under the awning as we pulled up behind them. We watched his silhouette as he paid the cabdriver. My breathing stopped as his cab door swung open. I felt like I might faint. Finn snatched up my hand when his leg swung out of the door. He lifted himself the rest of the way out of the cab and bent backward, stretching. He was wearing jeans, a white T-shirt, and a suede tobacco-colored jacket. He looked exactly as if he walked right out of my dream, the well-defined jawline like a young Gregory Peck's.

I stared at him closer, thinking that maybe his hair was darker in real life. The trunk of the cab popped open and he walked around to the back, lugging the strap of his carry-on over his shoulder. He took another suitcase and a hanging bag out of the trunk and placed them on the curb as an attendant from the hotel rolled out one of those hanger carts.

Finn noticed me squinting as I assessed the object of my dissection. "Are you sure it's him?"

I was chewing my lip as I faced her. "It could...be his twin."

"Could be his twin or is his twin?"

I looked back out the window, then felt a little flutter in my chest. "It's him."

"He's gorgeous," Finn said.

"I know."

"I'd fuck him," the cabdriver added.

Ew, I thought. How dare he defecate all over my dream man like that. I pulled a one-hundred-dollar bill and a couple of twenties out of my carry-on and tossed them over the front seat.

"Thanks." I began shoving Finn as she opened the car door.

We climbed out of the cab as the driver yelled, "Thank you, sexy. If it don't work out with him, you give me a call. The name's Tony, Tony the Tiger."

I shut the cab door and looked at Finn, shaking my head in disgust.

"Excuse me, but exactly when did the entire free world become gay?" she asked. "Oh my God, Aden, did you even think about that? What if he isn't gay?"

"Please, men that gorgeous are always gay."

"That's not true...but it feels true." Finn shook her head as we walked toward the doors of the hotel. "One of these days your stereotyping is going to get you into trouble."

As we entered the hotel, we spotted him at the front desk checking in. Finn started to walk toward him, and I grabbed her arm, pulling her back. I led us over behind a huge potted plant and peered around it, watching him from a distance.

The lobby was enormous with huge columns, which, like the tiled floor, were made from a creamy marble. Staff buffed the crystals of enormous chandeliers dangling from the ceilings as other employees bustled about. The entire room was buzzing with energy as voices seemed to echo back and forth. I listened intently as elevator doors opened and closed, high-heeled shoes clicked across the highly polished floor, and luggage carts zipped across the room. People were scattered about, rustling newspapers, yelling at their children, and passing in and out of the front doors.

"What are we doing?" Finn asked. "This is ridiculous. People are staring at us."

I tried to look more nonchalant about my stalking by pretending to be having a conversation with Finn by fake laughing and moving my lips.

"You look like an idiot," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "Aden, if you don't stop that this instant, I'm going to leave you here." She glanced over at an older couple who were now watching us with a look of concern. "What are you looking at?" she asked with a snide expression. "Mind your own damn business."

The couple quickly averted their eyes, and I laughed. "You can't leave me here, because your car's at the airport." I peered back around the palm.

"Guess you were wrong about the dream, huh?" she said, looking at me. "Looks like he wasn't letting you go after all."

"Shit, I hope he isn't still mad."

Finn rolled her eyes and shook her head. "It was a dream, idiot. You really are fucked in the head, you know."

"Right, you're right." I nodded as if to remind myself. "Christ, this is weird."

"There he goes." Finn pointed.

As he made his way toward the elevators, I quickly ran up to the front desk, jumping in front of two other women so I could have the same receptionist that he checked in with.

She gave me an odd look as I smiled a little too widely. I could hear Finn apologizing to the women behind us for my rude behavior.

"This is going to sound really strange, but I don't suppose you could give me a room next to the gentleman that just checked in a moment before?" I smiled sweetly, desperately not wanting to sound creepy.

She looked at me, opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry, what?"

"Okay." I rested my elbows on the counter and placed my head in my hands for a moment. I folded my arms and scooted in a little closer to the girl. "I swear to you that I'm not some sicko that's stalking his next murder victim." I turned and shot Finn a nasty look when I heard her snickering behind me. "I just need to meet that man. That's all. I just want to meet him, maybe talk to him a little bit. I'm supposed to be on a plane to California right now...long story," I added, wishing Logan hadn't just popped into my head. "God, this is hard."

Finn shoved me aside. "Look, he has been dreaming about that man since he was sixteen."

"Fourteen," I said.

"Whatever." She shot me a nasty look before turning her attention back to the receptionist. "He was on his way to California to get married to another guy, when he saw the dream dude in the airport. So here we are. All he wants is to stay the night and see if we can't accidentally on purpose bump into him so my friend here can meet him. Period, end of story." She brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "So what do you say, is there a room next to his that's open? We aren't asking you to tell us his name or any other private information about him."

The girl looked at my pathetic, pleading eyes. She turned toward the guy working behind the desk with her. He gave her a smile. "How would you like to pay?"

I dug through my carry-on bag and fished out a credit card. I handed it to the girl and spun around to the two women standing behind us and apologized again.

"I understand, sweetie," the lady wearing a pink suit said with a wink. "My nephew's gay. Good luck."

I grinned a little despite wondering what her nephew must be like, considering she didn't seem to find what I was doing very odd. The receptionist handed me back my card and slid two card keys across the counter. "The room you initially inquired about is across the hall from this one. I'm sorry it wasn't available, but I'm sure you'll find this room to be suitable."

I pulled myself up onto the counter and gave her a kiss on the cheek, which startled her. "Thank you so much," I said as Finn yanked on my arm, dragging me away from the desk. "Really, I appreciate your help."

"Well, let's go set up camp," she said.

We began to make our way toward the elevators, and as one of the doors opened, I saw Logan starting to walk out of it. I stopped in my tracks, closed my eyes, and shook my head. When I reopened them, I realized it wasn't Logan.

"Wait a minute." I pulled my overnight bag off my shoulder. "Can we just go over here and sit down for a minute?"

"Sure."

We went over to a pair of wingback chairs and flopped down. Finn rummaged through her purse and retrieved a pack of Marlboro Lights and a lighter. She slipped one out and lit it, inhaling deeply.

"Can I have one of those?"

"Are you sure?" she asked, with a worried expression. "You never smoke."

"Finn, please." I held out my hand, pondering the very real possibility that I may indeed be losing my mental capacities. She gave me the pack and the lighter. I slid one out, lit it, and inhaled, only to cough horribly. I shoved the lighter into the box of smokes and handed it back to her. I took another drag, not coughing as much.

As I sat there smoking, the realization of what I was doing started to sink in. Guilt swept over me, and I couldn't imagine how many karma points I'd racked up in the "mean or bad things I do" category. I took another puff off the cigarette and flicked the ashes into the ashtray sitting on the table between us. Rationalizing, I knew that at this point I hadn't actually done anything to betray Logan, at least nothing serious. I could turn back now and chalk it up to the shock of seeing Dream Man. However, if I got up and walked into that elevator and went up to that room, the line would start to get a little fuzzy.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Finn asked with a look of concern as she took a drag off her smoke.

I noticed the redness around her wrist from where I'd dragged her at the airport. "Oh my hell, look at your arm. I am so sorry, Finn. What the hell is wrong with me that I could do that to you?"

"Aden." She flicked her ashes into the ashtray. "My arm is fine, for Christ's sake. It's not like you hacked off a limb." She looked at me, waiting, and then snapped her fingers. "Focus, honey... Do you want to go back to the airport?"

"I don't know. I can't figure out what the right thing to do is. In the past, it's always been clear-cut, no questions. Bam!" Running my hand through my hair, I added, "This time, I really don't know. Is the right thing turning back now and hopping on the first plane to California and Logan? I know I love him, and he loves me. But by doing that, would I be denying or running away from my destiny?"

"I think deep down you know what it is that you need to do." Finn snubbed out her cigarette.

"No, sweetie, I don't." I took another puff. "I haven't a fucking clue. I mean, there has to be a reason I've seen this man in my dreams for so many years. Is it really fair to go to California being unable to completely give myself to Logan? If I don't at least meet this man, I know I'll spend the rest of my life wondering what if."

"See, I told you that you knew what it is you needed to do." Finn took the cigarette from my hand and stamped it out in the ashtray. She got up out of her seat and held out her hand. "Come on, the time to stalk has come."

"I'm so glad you're here."

I got up, and we began walking toward the elevators. I stopped about twelve feet in front of them and looked at the shiny brass doors as they slid open, allowing people to get in or come out. I spun around and faced Finn. "I think we should leave."

"What?" she asked. "Aden, I swear if we get halfway back to the airport and you change your mind again, so help me I'll castrate your ass."

"Well, excuse me for having second thoughts, like you have any room to talk, Sybil."

"Jesus, let's just go up to the room so you can sit down and think this out."

"Fine," I said, turning around, slamming right into someone, knocking me back onto the floor. My carry-on flew through the air and landed a few feet away, tossing its contents all over the floor around me. Okay, this is what I get for screaming at the woman and child while running through the airport. Twenty points.

"Jesus, are you okay?" a man asked. "I'm so sorry."

I opened my eyes to see Dream Man standing over me. I turned to my left to see Finn just standing there with her mouth hanging open, looking at him. She turned her attention back to me to make sure that I wasn't unconscious.

That really is him standing over me.

He got down on his knees and asked, "How many fingers?" Smiling and holding up three fingers.

"Three." I smiled back. "I...I'm fine, really." His voice seemed a bit off...deeper. *Maybe he has a cold?*

He reached up and pulled a stick of gum out of my hair. "Gum?"

"I think I'll pass," I said, laughing. "You go ahead, though."

Finn got down on her hands and knees and started picking up my scattered belongings. "It's really his fault. He wasn't watching where he was going."

I shot Finn a nasty look.

"Hi." He smiled at Finn, helping her gather up my things. "Well, we really can't blame anyone. Things happen for a reason, right? It must have been fate."

"I'm really sorry." I pushed my upper body up with my arms. He did not just use the word fate. "I'm such a klutz."

Handing Finn some of my stuff, he turned to me and smiled. "It was a pleasure. I've been all over the world knocking people down in hotels, and I have to say, baby, you're the best."

I nodded my head. "I get that a lot." His eyes too...they're brown, not green.

"I bet you do," he said with a look.

"Okay," Finn said, "Romper Room's over. We should probably get up off the floor."

"I must say, I feel a little cheap." He lifted himself off the floor. "I usually don't offer gum to a guy until I at least know his name."

While I introduced myself, I had to admit that there were a few things about the real-life version of my dream man. "Rufus Foster." He offered his hand.

Good Christ, I actually get to touch him. I slowly took his hand and felt a jolt of electricity fire tingles up my arm. It was definitely him. "Rufus, that's like, one of my favorite names." Like, very good, Valley Girl.

"We knew it would be." Finn stepped between the two of us. "I'm Finn, Aden's apparently invisible best friend."

"Nice to meet you, Finn." Rufus shook her hand. "Well, the two of you must let me buy you a drink later. Then I can apologize for running you over by plying you with liquor."

"That sounds great. Uh...when? Where? What time? Where? Oh." I was wringing my hands. "I said where twice, didn't I?"

Finn gave me a strange look. "He must have hit his head."

"Well, how about six o'clock in the hotel bar?"

"Sounds lovely." Finn smiled her sweet little-girl smile. "Until then," she added, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me toward the elevator.

"Bye," I said.

"Stop acting like you rode the short bus to school," she mumbled under her breath while rapidly punching the Up button on the elevator.

The doors opened, and she yanked me in. I watched him while he watched us as the elevator doors closed.

"No, no," I said, once they shut. "Why, w-why were you in such a goddamn rush?"

"What, you want reasons...? You want a list of reasons?"

"Um, I'm thinking, yeah." I held up the hand that shook his in front of my face. "I touched him. I *really* touched him."

"Good Lord." She rolled her eyes. "One, it wasn't two seconds before 'your favorite name Rufus' knocked you on your mind-changing, personality-swapping, all-of-a-sudden-Bette-Davis-aggressive-like ass that you were ready to turn around and head for California. Two, you were acting like an idiot. I mean, for Christ's sake, I all but had to wipe the drool off your mouth. Three, it's now almost one thirty. If we're gonna get you ready by six o'clock, Cinderfella, we've got to get a move on. Put some hustle in our bustle. Get some heat in our feet. Place some hurry in our flurry. Fix some—"

"I think I get it," I interrupted as the elevator doors opened. Finn breezed past me with a satisfied grin on her face. I followed her down the hall until she came to a stop. Standing in front of the door to our room, I turned around as Finn struggled with the key card to get the door open. That's his door. Just on the other side of that big sheet of wood he'll be sleeping, changing clothes, and showering...naked.

"Hello" – Finn walked into the room – "door's open there, freak daddy. Get in here and stop obsessing."

I felt my face burn as I entered our room, which was pretty nice. The wall directly across from me as I walked in was almost all glass. There were two double beds against one wall, a made-to-look-antique armoire on the opposite wall with a television in it, and a small table with two chairs in the corner. While most hotel rooms of this size feel small and cramped, this one felt open and airy. Must be the huge-ass window wall, I thought. The walls were painted a deep cream color. There were a few pieces of art on the walls and a rather ornate Bombay Company-looking night table separating the two beds. The bathroom was large with a whirlpool tub and a shower. There was a separate water closet and a long marble countertop with double sinks.

"Well, you have your carry-on, and after your little accident downstairs, I know you have all your toiletries in it," Finn said.

"True; I do not, however, have any clothes to change into."

"Okay." Finn headed for the door. "I'll catch a cab back to the airport and pick up my car. I have a bag packed in the trunk. After that I'll do a little shopping before coming back to the hotel."

I looked at her a little funny.

"Well...I didn't want to go home to an empty house, so I thought I'd stay in St. Louis tonight."

"Fine." I felt momentarily guilty about leaving her to go back to an empty house. "Okay, I guess I should confess here and now that Rufus isn't an exact replica of my dream man." I cringed a bit, waiting for the Finn fallout.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "That's it...back to the airport."

"He could totally be a brother or a slightly off twin!" I watched and could tell she was not having any part of it. "None of that matters, though, Finn... It's him. The reaction when we touched. I could feel it."

Finn was examining my face, and I could tell she was just about ready to call shenanigans on my ass.

"I can't explain it, Finn, but it's him, I know it."

The look on her face said, *Bullshit!* She finally let out a sigh.

"I guess I'll call the airline and have them hold my bags in Los Angeles, and I need to call Logan so he doesn't drive all the way to the airport to pick me up."

"What are you going to tell him?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," I answered, biting my fingernail.

"You better not blame me. I don't want to be any part of it."

"Christ, Finn, I would never do that. It is funny how you're getting all ethical all of a sudden. How many times have I lied to your boyfriends for you?"

"Oh fine," she said with a smirk, "say whatever you want to. I would've never asked you to lie if I knew you were going to throw it up in my face every chance you got."

"Save it," I said, laughing as I dug through my bag for my cell. "I've never mentioned it before, Mary Martyr. Go get your car so I can do this and get it over with."

She huffed a little before walking out the door. I decided it would be best to call the airline first and take care of my luggage. In other words, prolong lying to Logan and adding a little more kindling to the fires of hell I was going to burn in when this was all said and done.

The lady from American Airlines was very nice. She told me they'd give the hotel a call once my luggage had been retrieved and let me know where I'd be able to pick it up. She asked if I'd like to go ahead and book a flight for tomorrow. I didn't know what to say. I really hadn't thought about tomorrow, and I was somewhat pissed at her for doing so. After claiming to have missed my flight, I was unable to come up with a reasonable excuse to not do so. She booked me on a flight leaving shortly before ten a.m. the next morning and wished me an enjoyable evening in St. Louis.

I couldn't think of what I was possibly going to say to Logan. I dialed the number for Harlow's instead. Nathan answered the phone, and I began blurting out everything that had happened since we'd left that morning without so much as telling him it was me calling.

"Jesus Christ," he said after my rambling ended. "Exactly what is it you think I'm supposed to feel about this?"

"Fuck, Nathan, a little guidance please." I slammed my hand into the bed. "Am I doing the right thing? 'Cause right now I feel like I'm falling down a shame spiral to hell."

"Hell no, you aren't doing the right thing, you idiot, and I don't think you really need me to tell you this."

"So I'm like the most horrible person in the world?" I asked, pulling on a loose thread from the bedspread.

"Well, maybe not *the* most horrible person, but Aden, Jesus...this is the most self-centered thing I've ever seen you do. I mean, this harebrained scheme is out there, even for you."

"Thanks, damn it. I feel much better now."

"Boo hoo hoo, this pisses me off. Are you thinking of Logan at all?"

"Of course; I keep asking myself how I'd feel if the situation were reversed, but I'm too close to it. But I know I'd be hurt. I feel extremely guilty right now."

"Good, listen to the guilt. I'd be pissed as hell if it were me you were doing this to. I honestly can't believe you're willing to risk trashing the past eight months over a stupid dream. Christ, Aden, I know you have all of the fantasies and shit, but it was always my impression that Logan was the fantasy. Now you're off chasing some complete stranger when you should have your butt on a plane to LA. Fuck, I just spent weeks preparing a fabulous going-away party, not to mention I only resigned myself to losing my business partner because I thought you really loved Logan. I thought I was supporting you, making the transition as easy as I could for you."

"I'm sorry, Nathan, I didn't think—"

"And that's not like you, Aden. Not to think."

"But, Nath, wouldn't it be better to find out as opposed to always wondering what if? I mean, there has to be a reason for all this?"

"Aden, you can rationalize the severity out of what you're doing if you choose to, but don't expect me to get behind it. You have committed yourself to someone else. The time for this type of behavior is over."

"Thanks for the support, friend. I'm so glad I called. I feel much better."

"Look, just because you're turning into an asshole doesn't mean I don't love you. Fuck. All I can say, is if you do this, be damn careful. Talking to him is one thing. If you sleep with him, then you're a real shit. Logan deserves better than that."

"God, Nathan." I got up off the bed. "I would never do that."

"Just be careful about how much you drink. You tend to romanticize things even more to the extreme under the influence."

"Right," I said, chewing my fingernail, "you're right, that's good. No drinking. Anything else?"

"Keep Finn with you at all times. Her presence will keep things from getting out of hand. She's your insurance policy. I think if you do those two things, you'll be fine."

"Okay." I breathed a tiny sigh of relief. "I think that's smart. Thank you, Nath."

"It'll be okay," he said. "I know you. You'll do the right thing."

We talked for a few more minutes, allowing me to calm down a little more. I hung up and scrolled down the numbers in my phone until I got to Logan's restaurant. I set the phone down on the bed and took a deep breath. I picked it up and set it back down several times before I finally grabbed it and hit the Talk button. Please, let him not be there. Please, let him not be there.

"Thank you for calling La Luna's. This is Angie, how may I help you?"

"Angie, hi, it's Aden. Is Logan there?"

"Hey, Aden. No, he's already left for the day. Isn't he picking you up from...?"

"Yeah, he is. That's the problem. I didn't make the flight. Well, actually I just didn't take it. I decided at the last minute to spend another night here in St. Louis with Finn."

"Oh thank God." She breathed out a loud, long sigh of relief. "I just knew you were about to tell me you weren't coming and that you wanted me to tell him."

I placed my head in my hand trying to keep it together. "No, hon, I would never do that to you."

"I know he was going to go home and then run some errands before heading to the airport, so you can probably catch him on his cell or at his condo. I guess now it's your condo too."

"Yeah, our condo, that's right." I shut my eyes, feeling like a complete pile of shit. "You know what, could I just have you get ahold of him for me? I know you're busy, and I hate to ask you, but...I forgot to charge my cell last night."

"Please, it's fine. It'll take no time at all. Is there a specific time I can tell him to call you?"

"Well, we're going to have cocktails and then dinner somewhere, maybe a club somewhere, who knows...girls' night out kind of thing. You can tell him midnight or one o'clock, or I can just call him when we get back. Just tell him I'll call him when we get back in."

"Okay; this is awfully naughty of you, though."

"What?"

"He's been absolutely euphoric all week and was almost unbearably giddy this morning just knowing that today was the day."

Thanks, bitch, why not just reach through the phone and shove me through the plate glass window. "You tell him tomorrow morning, American Airlines flight 1295 departing from St. Louis at nine fifty. He's lasted this long, one more night won't kill him." All this lying might kill me, however.

"All righty," she said. "See you tomorrow then."

I should fire that hag as soon as I get there, I thought, hanging up the phone. I turned and caught my reflection in the mirror hanging over the dresser. "All righty," I said in a mocking tone. *She has never trusted me.*

Gee, I wonder why?

"Good Christ my hell, I really don't have time for you right now."

Listen here, you rat bastard. You're on a one-way train to Shadyville, and if you're not careful, the house of cards you have under construction there is going to come tumbling down around your ankles. And let's make sure that's the only thing that winds up around your ankles tonight.

"The only thing in my life that's shady is you. Not once have you ever given me any good advice. What the fuck kind of conscience are you?"

What the hell makes you think I'm supposed to give you advice? That's not my job. My job is to cut through the thick quilt of bullshit you live wrapped up in and shine a little reality on your otherwise fantasy-induced haze of a life.

"Point."

What?

"What the fuck is your point?"

That you are projecting the anger you feel toward yourself onto Angie, and with the evergrowing list of sins you continue to rack up, you might want to rein it in a little.

"Fine!"

What?

"I said fine. You're right. I'll try to put a lid on it, okay?"

Good. I mean, after tonight, you're going to have to build a homeless shelter in order to get that karma back on track.

"What the hell does that mean?"

It means that tonight you are going to do the hot and nasty with your dream stud.

"W-what – you don't – I mean, I don't even know that."

Puh-lease, you'll have drinks, maybe a light dinner, and then he'll ask you into his room. You'll rationalize your way into saying yes, telling yourself it's only to talk. Then he'll kiss you, and next thing you know, you'll be ankles in the air.

"I'm getting in the shower now."

You can't run away from me.

"Oh, pop off."

Chapter Eight

Standing in front of the mirror after my shower, I'd just exfoliated and was now ready for my pore-minimizing mask. I love being gay. If I weren't gay, I just know my skin would be completely tragic. Let's say it out loud, shall we? "Pore-minimizing Mask."

"Who the hell are you talking to?" Finn asked from outside the bathroom.

"Just myself," I said, mildly embarrassed.

"Can I come in?"

"Of course."

The door flung open, and she dragged in a toiletries bag.

"You are so prissy." She opened her case and unloaded the multiple bottles of hair products, the Chanel compact, eyeliner, mascara, various shades of lipstick, and umpteen shades of eye shadow.

I glanced down at her, raising an eyebrow. "Hi, pot – meet kettle."

Giggling, she asked excitedly, "Want to come and see what I bought for us to wear?"

"Okay."

As I followed her out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, she asked, "Yours or mine?"

"Um, let's start with mine."

With game-show-hostess flair, she took a hanging bag from the handle of the armoire, twirled around, and then stopped a few feet away from me. Slowly, she pulled down the zipper and folded back the sides to reveal a sleek black suit. With a huge grin and wide, excited eyes, she screamed, "It's Calvin!"

"Shut up!"

"You shut up!" she said.

I reached out for it greedily. "Get out!"

She handed me the bag. "You get out!"

We both started laughing and hopping around the room. "Wait, just wait." She grabbed a bag off the floor and pulled out a shoe box.

I snatched the box from her, threw off the lid, and pulled out a pair of black Italian leather shoes. "They're beautiful."

"I know, I couldn't believe it." She tossed a bag at me and added, "There are socks, a nice pullover shirt, and some panties in there for you."

"What do I owe you for all this?" I asked, afraid of the answer.

"Nothing, sweetie," she said with a cute smile. "I took your credit card. Thanks for the dress, by the way."

"I should have known. Well, let's see what I got you."

She pranced back over to the armoire and took the other hanging bag. I pulled the rest of the contents of my bag out and tossed them on the bed. "Um, Finn, this shirt is a size too small."

"I know." She unzipped the bag.

I started to say something and then realized what she was up to. "Finn, I'm not trying to look like a bar whore."

"Listen, Pruddy McPrude, you have a hot body. There is nothing wrong with showing it off." She pulled her dress out of the bag. It was a very simple deep midnight blue cocktail dress that had a little bit of beadwork around the scoop neckline and a slight flare to the skirt. Holding it up in front of her, she asked, "Well?"

"You are going to be the one thing anyone who sets eyes on you tonight will remember about their evening."

A sweet, innocent little-girl expression came over her face. "You are too sweet, Aden Ingle." She walked over and gave me a hug and a light peck on the cheek. "You better get a move on, honey. It's almost five."

"Me?" I hung the suit in the closet. "You're the one that needs to get moving."

"I'm not going down with you," she said, hanging the dress on the handle of the armoire.

"What?"

"There is no way I can be ready in an hour." She placed her hands on her hips. "Besides, it'll give the two of you a chance to talk alone."

"No, no." I began to panic. "I'll turn into Short Bus again. You can't send me into that bar alone. I'll be ridiculous."

"Nonsense, you'll be fine. In a sense, you've known this man for fifteen years. You've said yourself that he's been a source of comfort to you through the years. Just think about that, and you'll be fine. I promise."

"Right, you're right." I nodded my head. "Comfort...my source of comfort."

* * * * *

I stood at the door of our room looking through the peephole until I saw Rufus come out of his room and disappear down the hall. I waited five minutes, listening as Finn sang her sexpot-porn version of The Pussycat Dolls' "Don't Cha," in the shower.

Strolling down the hall, riding to the lobby in the elevator, and walking up to the doors to the hotel bar, I repeated, "My source of comfort," over and over in my head. I was cool and calm as I pulled open the door and entered the bar.

The lighting was lower than the lights in the lobby, but still not as dark as most bars. There were tables scattered about and huge parlor palms like the ones in the lobby. Large columns throughout the room gave it a slightly secluded feeling, almost acting as visual partitions segregating one part of the room from the others. The bar was the typical brass and etched glass variety, and sitting at the very end of it was Rufus.

He looked very tall and lean in a dark gray leisure suit with a pale yellow formfitting sweater. Impeccably groomed, he was drumming his fingers on the bar in time with the light jazz music playing throughout the bar.

My source of comfort looked up and spotted me, flashing a sexy smile. I stopped in my tracks, my knees weakened slightly, and I felt perspiration begin to collect under my arms. *Source of comfort, my ass. I'm going to fucking kill Finn*. I began walking toward him, and he pulled the bar stool next to him out for me.

Rufus looked me up and down, making me feel naked and on display. "You look great."

"You too." I grinned. *Complete sentences, Aden.* "Look good, that is...better than good, actually." *Stop right there, don't go any further.* He smiled at me. "Hot, actually. You look hot." *Oh God, God help.* "Gee, you're pretty."

Rufus started laughing and patted his hand on the stool next to him. "Have a seat there, Don Juan, we'll get you a drink."

"Drink?" I pulled the stool out a little farther. "I don't think I should, Comfort." He looked at me, and my eyes widened. "I mean, Rufus... Southern...Southern Comfort?" Laughing nervously, I hopped up to sit on the stool. My eyes began to bug out of my head as my ass didn't stop on top of the stool. The sleek material of my suit glided right across the well-buffed and polished leather bar stool, causing me to slide off the other side of the stool and onto the floor at his feet.

"Jesus." He hopped off his stool and looked down at me. "Are you all right?"

"Nice shoes." I felt my face turning bloodred with heat. "Valentino?" I asked, trying to downplay my embarrassment.

The bartender ran down to our end of the bar as Rufus helped pull me up. "Are you okay, sir?"

"I'm...I'm fine really. I just slid right off." I slowly climbed onto the bar stool. "Isn't that silly?"

"Are you sure?" the bartender persisted, obviously wondering if I was already intoxicated. "Because that looked like it really hurt."

Rufus sat down next to me. "He's used to it."

"Jesus, did anyone else see that?"

"No one noticed." Turning to look over the bar, he announced, "Accident-prone!"

I turned to see the entire bar nodding and turning their attention back to their company.

I felt as if I couldn't possibly be more humiliated.

The bartender asked with a look of anxiety, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"He'll have a SoCo and...?"

"Wine." I looked at him with as much confidence as I could muster. "A bottle of wine." Turning to Rufus, I asked, "And what will you be having?"

"I'll have another Tanqueray and tonic with two limes."

"Would you like to look at the wine list, sir?" the bartender asked.

"Pinot noir." I wiped my forehead with a cocktail napkin. "Whatever you recommend." Surely one or two glasses can't hurt.

The bartender walked to the other end of the bar, and Rufus looked at me. "You certainly know how to make an entrance. I'm not sure if I've met anyone quite like you before."

"I'm sure you haven't, unless you frequent psychiatric hospitals during your free time."

"You're not crazy." He looked me over as if inspecting the merchandise. "You just seem to be afflicted with a touch of the Jerry Lewis."

"Thanks for the diagnosis, Dr. Rufus."

"Something tells me after a glass or two of wine, you'll loosen up." Rufus nodded.

"You mean become cheap and easy," I said as the bartender sat a wineglass in front of me. Feeling my cheeks flush with heat, I added, "I get the unfortunate feeling I'm going to be the customer all the employees wind up gossiping about in the kitchen."

"Yes, sir." He poured some wine in my glass. "They're already laying odds on what you might do next."

"Great."

A little laugh escaped from him as he made his way back toward the other end of the bar.

"So," Rufus asked, "what is it that you do when you aren't causing a commotion?"

I lifted my glass and took a sip of wine. "I'm one of the trapeze artists for the Cirque du Soleil."

"Really?" he asked, with a shocked expression.

"No, but wouldn't that be cool? I always thought that would be cool. Actually I'm the director of programming at WGAY TV in San Francisco."

"Seriously?" he asked, curling his lips down and nodding his head, obviously impressed.

"Actually no," I said taking another sip of wine. "But that would be a killer job too, wouldn't it?"

"You aren't bipolar, are you?"

"Christ no." I watched him lightly drumming his fingers on the bar. "Just really fucking nervous."

"I make you nervous?" he asked, smiling.

"Very, and I have this tendency to prattle on nonstop when I'm nervous."

"Well." He scratched his head, looking at me intently. "Maybe I can think of something to stick in your mouth to slow down that nervous babbling."

My eyes widened and my mouth fell open.

"How about one of my nuts?" he asked.

I turned to look at him as he shoved a basket of peanuts across the bar toward me. I burst out laughing and he looked obviously pleased with himself. "You really are a bastard, aren't you?"

"Stop...stop it." He held up a hand and grinned as if I were throwing a compliment his way. "So, what's your trade, how do you make a living?"

"I own a restaurant." Goddamn, he's so fucking cute. "What is it you do, Rufus?"

"I work for a software company in Santa Barbara. I'm in St. Louis to update our system for American Express."

"Wow" —I took a big drink—"so you're a smart guy. I don't suppose you could like accidentally lose a credit card account while you're in there tooling around in their system?"

"Sorry," he said with a wink, "I try to keep my illegal activity outside of the workplace."

"No need to apologize," I said, taking another sip of wine. "It's an admirable quality."

I picked up on his comment about Santa Barbara, and he informed me that he was from there. Born and raised. He had one brother (younger), and his parents (divorced) and grandparents all still lived there. He's twenty-seven years old, and calling him a "smart guy" was a bit of an understatement. His father had been one of those "don't let my kids waste time outside playing when they could be inside reading and studying" types of parents. It wasn't until his parents divorced when he was fourteen that he was actually really allowed to get out and socialize to any great degree. He had the option of skipping two years of high school and going to college early. At his mother's urging, he

decided to stay in high school and not rush into adulthood before he was able to handle it. After the separation, his mother began encouraging Rufus and his brother to slow down and helped them become more socially extroverted. He joined the drama club his junior year, and it was at that point he discovered he was gay and met his first boyfriend.

After high school, they each headed to different universities, although he'd still see this guy every year during the holidays when he'd go back to visit his parents. Rufus graduated with a degree in computer technological something or other (a bunch of big words I didn't understand) from UCLA and was immediately snatched up by the company he worked for now. He said it wasn't the best offer, moneywise, but it was enough, and it enabled him to move back to his hometown, which he loved.

He didn't say so, but I could tell a large part of the reason he moved back home was to be near his mother. His eyes lit up when he talked about her, which I found an incredibly endearing quality. I threw in little tidbits about myself every now and then but tried to keep them on the more general side. He'd had enough to drink that he'd talk about himself without necessarily worrying about whether I was sharing to the same degree.

"So I take it your family knows that you're gay?" I asked.

"Hey, guys," Finn's voice called from behind us.

Rufus looked up and I twirled around, carefully, on my bar stool, and we both admired all that was Finn.

"You look incredible," Rufus said.

"Stunning." I was smiling like a proud parent and looking around to see if everyone else in the room was as dazzled as I was. I wasn't disappointed. "You look like Hollywood royalty, Finn."

"So"—she slid onto a bar stool—"where *is* that drink I was promised earlier today? No fair teasing a girl. Cough it up."

Rufus turned to wave down the bartender to find that he was already standing before Finn awaiting whatever instructions she might have for him. She looked at him for a couple of seconds with a mischievous smile on her face while I imagined he was silently praying she would ask him to be her love slave.

I started to giggle at his eagerness, and she finally said, "I would absolutely adore a cosmopolitan, up, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. Oh, and if you could really shake it hard, so there are little ice chips floating on the top of it, I would really appreciate it."

An undecipherable noise emitted from his lips, and he turned and trotted down the bar to make her cocktail.

"I love being a woman." She pulled her cigarettes out of the tiny matching blue beaded purse she had neglected to show me earlier. "So, have you boys been getting acquainted?"

"We most certainly have," Rufus said, picking up his glass. "Once you get past your friend's initial wacky antics, he's really a pretty normal guy."

I peeked over at Finn and caught her rolling her eyes and giving me a "what the hell have you done now" look. "Yes, well, you have to lick through the hard, candy-coated outside to get to the chewy chocolate inside."

"I think I prefer the way you put it," Rufus said.

I noticed some type of commotion out of the corner of my eye. I looked up the bar and my mouth fell open when I saw the bartender jumping around as if he were at a Metallica concert shaking Finn's cosmo. Finn and Rufus turned to look as well, and the three of us all started snickering to one another.

I was amazed by the entire scene. "That is completely ridiculous."

"I think it's kinda sweet," Rufus said.

"Then you should be extremely excited to have stumbled onto Aden, huh?" Finn asked. "He's very good at making a fool out of himself, as you've witnessed."

"You would be correct," Rufus said.

"Excuse me." I picked up my glass. "I think I have had – what did you say?"

"You're really sexy when you get all flustered." He looked me up and down hungrily like a piece of meat again.

"Oh Lord," Finn said in disgust. "You homos...here comes the mutual gush fest."

The bartender came back holding Finn's cocktail with both hands as if it were the Holy Grail. "Here you go...ice chips and everything."

"You are so sweet." Finn lifted the glass, took a tiny sip. "Oh, that is the single best cosmopolitan I've ever had," she added, with a look of satiation.

"Thank you," he said, blushing, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"We'll let you know if we need anything else."

"What?" the bartender asked, then looked back at me. "Oh, yeah...sure."

He turned and headed back down to the other end of the bar. He glanced back to snatch another look, and Finn smiled, giving him a little wave. He slammed his knee into a beer cooler and stopped momentarily, straining to keep from yelping in pain. "I'm okay." He waved.

"So, Rufus," Finn asked, "what is it that you do?"

He began to answer when I interrupted. "Sorry, dear, we've already covered that. That's what happens to people who aren't ready on time, they miss out on things."

"Rowr." She held up a hand like a claw. "Who pissed in your Cheerios?"

"Finn?" a voice asked from behind us.

The three of us spun around to see an extremely gorgeous man standing behind Finn with a questioning smile on his face. He was well over six feet tall, athletic build, black hair, full lips, and wearing a loose-fitting suit. "Jesus, it is you. Finn McCauley. I can't believe it! How are you?"

"I'm great." She looked at me to see if I might know who he was. "You?"

"Great, I'm great," the man said. "My God, I would've never thought it possible, but you look even more beautiful than you did in high school."

"High school." She was still trying to figure out who the hell he was.

Rufus and I looked at one another and smiled while pondering the possibilities. "Are you the one Finn lost her virginity to?"

She swung her arm over and smacked me. "Stop it, Aden. He won't know you're joking."

"You don't remember me, do you?" he asked, smiling.

"I'm sorry, no." She reached around and picked up her martini glass. "As a matter of fact, I don't think I remember anyone who looked like you in high school," she added, looking him up and down.

"That's because no one ever looks like that in high school," Rufus mumbled under his breath.

"You're right," the mystery man said. "I guess I do look a little different now."

Finn shook her free hand in the air as if unable to wait any longer. "Okay, enough of the suspense, I can't take it. Who are you?"

"Peter Riley." He smiled.

Finn scrunched up her forehead, filing through the records in her brain, trying to place the man standing before her with the man he wasn't in high school. Shaking her head in frustration, she finally looked up at him with pleading eyes.

"Peter Riley; we were lab partners in chemistry junior year. Mrs. Hasting's class."

Recognition passed over her face, only to be replaced by shock once she looked back up at him. "You're Peter Riley?"

He nodded and smiled.

She held up her hand, swishing her finger over him. "Whose body did you steal, because you look incredible?"

"Well," I said, with a look of irritation, "that's not rude."

"And your face, or your nose, to be precise," she added, completely ignoring me, squinting. "Plastic surgery?"

Peter burst out laughing and shook his head. "You haven't changed a bit. Everything that comes out of your mouth is one hundred percent pure Finn. I always loved that about you."

"You like that?" I asked.

"Shut up," she snapped at me. "Like you can talk after the things you've done today."

My eyes bulged, and she got an "oops, sorry" look on her face.

"Really," Rufus said, with a half smile, "I can't wait to hear about this."

"It's nothing really," I said innocently. "Just a little changing of plans, nothing you'd want to be bored hearing about. So, Peter, you like bitchy women?"

"Yeah," Finn said, "let's get back to that. You never did answer my question."

"Well"—Peter folded his arms—"I hate to disappoint you, but no, I didn't have plastic surgery. I just sort of grew into my nose one day, and the rest is the result of the gym and a personal trainer."

"I'd say you grew into your nose." She was wide-eyed. "It was huge."

"Looks to me like it still is," Rufus said.

"Yeah," I added, "but it certainly doesn't appear to be huge."

"Nope," Finn smiled. "Everything looks fine now, just fine."

"Big nose?" Rufus asked.

The three of us all sort of pondered it for a few seconds, knowing that it had some sort of significance to us, but unable to figure out what it was. Our eyes widened in recognition, and the three of us simultaneously peered down.

"Do I have something on my pants?" Peter asked, looking down.

"Nice Dockers." Rufus smiled.

Peter looked confused. "I'm not wearing Dockers."

My face burned ever so slightly, and I turned toward Finn to see that she was still eyeing his crotch while running her fingertips over the rim of her martini glass. I reached over and lifted her chin. "His face is up here, sweetie."

"Thank you, I forgot," she said, a little too seriously.

"So what are you doing here?" Peter asked. "Do you live in St. Louis, or are you just visiting?"

"No." She reached over and placed her hand on my knee. "I brought my friend Aden up to the airport."

"So you're just in town for the night?"

"That's right," she said, seemingly unable to tear her eyes away from the man.

"Well, I don't suppose you... That is, if your friends don't mind, maybe I could steal you away for dinner? I'd really love to catch up."

Finn peered over at me, and I gave her a look that unmistakably, indisputably, said, *No, I need you*.

"Of course they won't mind." She smiled and slid off her bar stool. "I'm kind of a third wheel here anyway, if you get my drift."

"Great." Peter grabbed her hand to help her down.

"Well, I—"

"You boys play nice." She cut me off with a naughty smile.

"It was nice to meet both of you," Peter said.

"Yeah," Rufus and I said simultaneously, then watched them walk out of the bar. *That's just great. No Finn and I'm drinking. Fucked, party of one. Fucked, party of one.*

"Did he even actually meet us?" Rufus asked, confused.

"No, I don't think he did. I'm sorry Finn is so rude."

"Nah." He took a drink. "She saw an opportunity and grabbed it. You can't blame a girl for that."

How does that shady bitch do it? "Sure you can; besides, I don't think that was an opportunity."

"Sure it was. It's a reverse Cinderella. He was obviously a geek in high school, and she was the unobtainable desire of his pubescent lust. Now, several years later, he has transformed into a hot man and has come back to reclaim his heart's desire."

"Are you sure you don't write Harlequins?" I asked.

"Cute." He smirked. "Well, maybe we should follow suit and go find some grub."

"Well, there is this one place Finn and I usually go, that is, if you like Italian."

"Love it." He hopped down off his stool and flagged down the bartender to sign for the bill.

I began to get up when he said, "Stop."

"What?"

"Don't move," he said.

I sat perfectly still, and he leaned down and placed an arm under my legs and the other around my waist. He lifted me up and sat me down feetfirst on the floor.

"There," he added, smiling, "safe and sound."

I smacked him in the chest and turned, heading toward the door. I heard a couple of people snickering as I went by, and I could feel Rufus grinning smugly behind me.

* * * * *

We walked into the restaurant, making our way to the bar in the back. The lights were dim, and the ceilings were only around eight feet high. There were large antique chandeliers, which hung so low you had to lean sideways to keep from hitting your head. The L-shaped dining room had a total of only twenty tables, which were squeezed in tightly. The walls were cluttered with miscellaneous antique pictures of no discernable theme. The noise level was high with chattering people who'd probably had too much to drink, with me well on my way to being one of them.

We took a seat at the bar, giving our names to the bartender to put on the waiting list. We each ordered a glass of red wine.

"This place is funky." He let his gaze wander around the restaurant. "I'm not used to needing a helmet in order to have dinner."

"It's an adventure, but the food is great. They have an Italian salad that's better than sex." "Damn, that's a sad statement." He rubbed the palm of his hand over his knee as if it itched. "Maybe I'll get a chance to prove it wrong."

I stared at him for a moment and started laughing. "You're good at subtle."

"Subtle, schmuttle—you only live once, Aden. Better take advantage of it while you can."

"And just what exactly is the *it* I should take advantage of? Life or your dick?"

"What's wrong with both?" he asked, laughing. He reached over and put his hand on my knee, which sent shock waves traveling up my thigh. "I have a confession to make. I saw you before I knocked you down at the hotel."

"You mean you knocked me down on purpose?" I asked.

"No, I saw you at the airport earlier today."

"When?" I asked, hoping it wasn't while I was being a psycho.

"I was walking along and turned just in time to see a very pretty blonde girl slap an extremely sexy guy across the face. I started to laugh, and then she hugged him. An hour later I walk out an elevator and run into someone at my hotel. When I look to see who it is, I see that it's Mr. Got Slapped from the airport, and crawling around on the floor gathering up his beauty aids is Ms. Slapped."

"Um, I can explain," I said, trying to cut him off.

"I figured Mr. Got Slapped had to be gay by the amount of beauty aids lying on the floor around him. But the weirdest thing about all of this happened before I ever left Santa Barbara. I had a long talk with my mother, telling her how much I just wanted to meet a nice guy and settle down. That I hated not having someone I loved next to me in the morning. That love was pretty much the only thing missing from my life."

"Um," I started.

"Do you know what she told me?" he asked, looking at me with a smile. "Watch for a sign. That's what she said. That there are signs every day that are held up, and if we learn to read them, we will always go in the right direction."

Okay, Mommy watches Oprah. "Wow, that's very..."

"Fucked?"

"No."

"Bullshit?"

"No!"

"Freaky?"

"Yeah," I said, "really freaky. So you think that those were signs pointing you toward me?"

"Don't get me wrong." Rufus leaned back into the bar stool. "I've always thought all this kind of stuff was a load of bunk. But I don't know. It seemed odd seeing you twice in one day, and both times someone was physically abusing you."

"Thanks for pointing that out." That's twenty points apiece, for a total of forty points in my favor.

"So I thought why the hell not." He shrugged. "It's not as if my mother has never been right before. I didn't seem to be having a lot of luck doing things my way, whatever that is, and it certainly helped that you're hot as hell," he added, smiling and scrutinizing my face. "What are you thinking?"

"That I have something to tell you." I was picking at my cocktail napkin and looking down.

"Shit, I knew this was going too well. What is it; you're really a woman? You want to be a woman? You're in love with a cousin?"

He apparently watched Springer. "Now this might freak you out a little, which is why I haven't mentioned it already." I looked up at him.

"Okay." He swallowed a large mouthful of wine.

"I've seen you before you knocked me down in the hotel as well." I kept an eye on him as he squirmed in his chair a little. I told him everything, minus Logan, all the way back to the beginning, the dreams I've had over the years, spotting him at the airport, and chasing him across St. Louis to the hotel. I wasn't sure, but I don't think I saw him blink the entire time I was blurting it all out.

"I guess that's what Finn meant by that comment earlier about the things you had done today?"

"Yeah," I said, knowing that wasn't completely what she meant by it, "sort of."

"Christ," he said, "I was only twelve when you were fourteen. The man you were seeing in your dreams didn't even exist yet."

"To be fair, I wouldn't really call you a dead ringer for my dream guy."

Rufus shot me a look that was a dead ringer for Nut Bag.

"Perhaps just close enough so I'd be able to recognize you. I used to tell myself that you were just there to keep me from being lonely, but in the back of my mind, I always believed you might be real."

"So why were you at the airport?"

Shit. Damn. Fuck. "I was going to LA." I lowered my head, staring down at my wineglass sitting on the bar. "To move in with my boyfriend."

"Shit! Well, what the fuck are you doing here with me?"

"Puh-lease." I began getting defensive. "I'm sorry, but I was more than a little shocked when I saw you at the airport. Try to put yourself in my shoes and then tell me you wouldn't be here where I am now."

"I don't know," he said, "maybe not."

"Save it." I adjusted myself on the bar stool. "I think Logan, hell, anyone, would have done the same thing."

"His name's Logan?" he asked. "What the hell kind of name is Logan?"

"Gee, Rufus, I don't know."

"Your favorite name, huh?" He fired a sharp look my way. "Well, what the hell happens now?"

"Guys, your table's ready." The bartender smiled at us.

"Dinner?" I asked, looking at him, not wanting him to hate me.

Chapter Nine

As we rode the hotel elevator up to our floor, Rufus and I stole glances at one another. Neither of us said a whole lot during dinner. We just sort of ate, and he tried not to look at me. A couple of times I'd catch him looking at me, and we would each smile.

The doors opened, and Rufus said, "Well, this is my floor."

"Mine too." I breezed past him, heading down the hallway. I turned around to see him jump as the elevator doors began to close on him. He lifted his arm and the doors reopened. I waited until he caught up with me, and we continued down the hall, both stopping at the same time.

"This is my room," we each said, pointing to different doors.

"That's really fucking weird." He placed his hand on his forehead.

"Well, we sort of begged one of the desk clerks to give us a room near yours. Did I forget to mention that?"

"Oh, that's really creepy."

"Yeah," I said with a smirk. "I guess one could look at it that way."

"Fucking signs, my ass," he said under his breath.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Signs, my ass." He threw an arm in the air. "Hell, this whole day has practically been staged. Everything I thought was some strange, fatelike coincidence is actually..."

I shook my head and slid my key card into the door. It clicked, and the door popped open. As I started to go in, I turned to look at him.

"I'm really sorry, Rufus. You know, I realize you think this entire day has been staged by me, but you saw me at the airport before I saw you. Yes, I hunted you down to this hotel, and yes, that put us in proximity to where we'd be more likely to see each

other a second time, but there is no way I could have planned what happened outside the elevator in the lobby this afternoon. So, when you say something like, 'fucking signs, my ass,' all you're really doing is what most people do in life. Strip every little bit of magic out of their lives. Why is it when people hit puberty, they become so willing to rip out the Peter Pan inside of them and grind him into the ground? Okay, so maybe this didn't work out the way you thought it might. I still think your mother had the right idea. She sounds like a smart lady to me." I walked through the door to my room, allowing it to close behind me.

Jesus, you'd think I'd broken his Big Wheel. I went over to my bed, slid my jacket off my shoulders, and laid it at the foot of the bed. Making my way into the bathroom, I switched on the light. I took off my shirt and twisted around in front of the mirror, checking for bruises from my fall in the bar earlier. I heard a knock at the door and made my way back into the room to look through the peephole.

Opening the door, I stood there briefly, looking at him as his gaze moved down my bare chest and stomach. He stepped in, grabbed me by the waist, and pulled me into him. Pressing his lips to mine, he shoved his tongue into my mouth, forcing open my lips. Momentarily stunned, I stood rigid for a few seconds before I began to reciprocate.

He pulled away and locked eyes with me. "I think it's time to make your fantasies come true."

Rufus leaned in, kissed me again. Nudging me into the room a little farther, he pushed the door closed with his foot. He walked me backyard toward the bed, and I dropped the shirt I still had in my hands.

As we kissed, I kept waiting for something to happen. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but as he slid his hand up, running it across my chest, I asked myself what the hell I was missing here. I ran my hands over his chest and down his stomach. Is this really real? I was obviously physically good to go, so why did I have this unsettled feeling in my stomach? Was it just nerves? Did I drink too much?

Rufus brought a hand up behind my head and pulled it to one side. He began roughly kissing and sucking my neck. What's missing? His hand rubbed my cock through the front of my pants. I grabbed his face and kissed him again. Something was off... I didn't understand, my dream was coming true. I pulled away from him again. He looked at me and smiled. He ran his hand over my chest and started pinching my nipple. He leaned in to kiss me again, and I pulled away.

"What is it?" he asked, reaching over and running a hand through my hair.

"I...I can't do this, Rufus."

"What is it, the boyfriend?"

"I don't know." I felt like I might be sick. "This doesn't feel right."

He reached down and placed his hand between my legs. "You're obviously feeling something."

"Oh please"—I shoved his hand away—"I'm a guy. It's not that I don't find you extremely attractive, and it isn't like a part of me wouldn't love to have sex with you right now. I guess maybe it is Logan. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be talking right now; I'd be licking every inch of your body. But it doesn't feel right; I don't feel the same way when I kiss you that I do when I kiss him."

"We're just getting started, baby." He moved in on me.

"Yeah, um...cool your jets there, mister." I held up a hand. "What is this, anyway? Why the hell are you even here? It wasn't five minutes ago you seemed more than a little pissed off. Now you're all smiley and shit."

"Look, I just want you, that's all," he said with a sexy smile.

"Uh-huh, I'm not buying this. What the hell do you have up your G-string?"

He stood there looking at me for a moment, and it was almost as if the mask had slipped as I watched the warmth drain from his face, being replaced by a cool indignation. "You know, I've been your little science experiment or toy or whatever the fuck you call it all day," he said, with more than a little impatience. "Then you lay this bomb on me. I think I should get a little something out of all this!"

"Rufus, I'm sorry." I threw my hands in the air. "I wasn't playing with you, at least not intentionally."

"Well"—he stepped up to me with a forced smile and placed his arm around my waist—"then shut the hell up and let me fuck you."

"Fuck me?" I asked, pushing him away. "So if I bend over and take it like a man, that's going to make everything okay for you?"

"Yeah, you fucking prick tease. You've strung me along all goddamn night. I don't know, but right now the thought of bending your little ass over makes me feel pretty fucking good."

"You know"—I looked at him as if really seeing him for the first time—"once you scratch the surface a little, you're really quite an ass. I've been beating myself up for misleading you, when it's really you who's been holding back. You've been playing me to get into my pants, and now trying to use that to guilt me into sex. Get the fuck out!"

Rufus looked at me as if I were the Antichrist and spun around, then went out the door, slamming it hard enough to vibrate the walls. I ran over to the door and opened it. He had his back to me, cursing under his breath and fumbling with his key card.

"I'm sorry I ever saw you today, you...you...meanie!" I screamed. "I wish I'd never had the fucking dream in the first place!"

"Not half as much as I do, you psycho nut job." Then I heard: "Get some fucking counseling," as I closed the door.

The hotel phone started to ring.

I stormed over to the phone and picked it up, putting it up to my ear.

"Aden?"

My eyes popped open and I didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"H-hi...Logan?"

"Yeah, baby, it's me. So did you and Finn have a good time?"

"Huh? Oh, well, yeah. How...? I told Angie I'd call you." I sat down on the bed.

"Well, when Finn called earlier, she gave me the number to the hotel as well as your room number. You know, when you were in the shower this afternoon. She said you asked her to keep trying to get ahold of me."

"Oh, well, yeah...I guess I forgot." I wondered why the hell Finn had called him.

"That's it," he said in a sweet voice, "we're putting you on some ginkgo the minute you get to LA."

"Oh yeah, that would be a good idea."

"Are you okay? You sound funny."

"No." I felt my chest fill up with pressure. "I'm fine... I miss you, that's all." This is what was missing. The "heart exploding, can hardly catch my breath, I'm in love with you" feeling.

"I miss you too, boyfriend. You know, I was a little pissed when I got your message earlier. I had a whole romantic night planned."

"I-I'm so sorry, I didn't even think of that." My heart sank even further.

"I love you so much; I can hardly stand being away from you. I can't wait for tomorrow."

"I love you too, Logan, and I'm sorry. It was bad of me to do." I noticed my shirt lying on the floor a few feet away. *You have no idea how bad I've been*. I pulled a hand up and covered my chest, feeling suddenly as if someone were watching me. I tried to keep it together, but I started to cry as feelings of guilt ran over me like a pack of crazed lesbians at a Melissa Etheridge concert.

"Aden, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just really love you." I know I knew this. Why didn't I just get on the stupid plane? I walked over to the shirt and picked it up and went back to sit on the bed.

"Well, it's nothing to cry over. Besides, you have me."

"Oh Jesus." I pulled on the shirt. "Logan, I have to tell you..."

I heard the door shut and saw Finn standing there. "What's going on here?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

"Hey, Logan." I wiped my eyes with my shirt. "Can I call you right back? I need to go blow my nose, and I really have to pee."

"Okay; are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, baby, I'm fine. I probably just had too much to drink or something. I'll call you back in a few."

"All right," he said with a chuckle. "I'll talk to you in a bit."

I hung up the phone and burst into tears again. "I am a bad man...a bad, bad man."

"Please...melodrama. You didn't actually sleep with him, did you?"

"No!"

"Well, what the hell happened?"

I patted the bed next to me, and she flopped down as I filled her in on the skinny from the time she deserted me until right before she walked in.

"So basically a make-out session, a little groping, and a meal?" she asked.

"Ya-huh," I said, sniffling. "I don't deserve him. I'm not good enough for him. He deserves much better than what I've given him today."

"Could we dial down the drama, please?" she asked, getting up and unzipping her dress, allowing it to fall to the floor. "You aren't going to tell him?"

"I...I don't know." I scrunched up my face. "I mean, well, I probably should. I've been awful enough to him as it is. I should at the very least be honest with him. Shit, I don't know. What do you think? What should I do?"

"Honey." She grabbed one of my old pajama tops out of her suitcase. "I'm probably not the person you should be asking."

"Why not?"

"Look, I assumed you'd make the decision to go ahead and move to California. You aren't stupid. But I'm not going to lie and say I wasn't hoping you'd fuck it up and have to come back home with me. I'm selfish...we know this. That said, you've made a choice, and I'll support you in it. I may be a bitch, but I'm not cruel, and I want you to be happy. But don't ask me my opinion. I don't trust myself to give you the right answers."

"But why call Logan if you wanted me to fuck it all up?"

"I don't know?" She let out a deep sigh. "Maybe deep down I wanted to keep you from making a big mistake. It was painfully clear that this entire night had nothing to do with Rufus. I think deep down you're just scared, Aden. I will say you've acted enough on impulse for one day. Look where it's gotten you. Be smart." She went into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

I picked up the hotel phone and dialed the number. I chewed on a fingernail as I listened to the phone ring over and over. When I heard the receiver being picked up on the other end, I said, "Okay, please, please, don't say anything until I'm finished. Just let me get it all out and then you can berate me."

"Okay."

As I blurted it all out, I listened to his breathing and the occasional moan of disgust coming from the other end of the line.

"Goddamn, you drank, and you let Finn go off on a date! Why the hell did you call for my advice if you were gonna ignore it and do whatever you please anyway?"

"Well fuck, Nathan" – I fell back onto the bed – "it wasn't intentional. She just ran off. I can't exactly blame her... He was gorgeous."

"Yeah, and I suppose you tripped and fell onto the wine bottle."

"I was nervous, damn it. Jesus, Dad! Are you going to help me or scold me?"

"Well, both, if I can. This is certainly a big gay mess you've gotten yourself into."

I sighed and scratched my forehead. "I have to tell him, don't I?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know, shit. It just seems like the right thing to do. I can't very well start lying to him on top of everything else."

"The right thing for who, Aden, you or Logan? First of all, I hate to break it to you, but you've already lied to him. Secondly, telling him about this is only going to hurt him. The only reason you wanna do it is to clear your guilty conscience. It's sick, really. If you'd slept with this guy, then yeah, I think Logan would need to know. But telling him about this, even if it turned out he was fine with it, which I believe he probably would be after a while, the only positive thing it does is alleviate your guilt, and I think that's just selfish. You love each other; that's what matters. Hell, I knew that the first time he came to visit you, as did anyone who saw the two of you together. I knew right then that at some point you'd leave and run off to California."

"Shit, well maybe that's true. Hell, I don't know. It makes me feel worse thinking about not telling him."

"Guilt, selfish," he said. "Look, if you feel the need to tell someone, go see a priest."

"But I'm not Catholic."

"Jesus Christ, Aden..."

"Okay, okay. I get the point."

"I was wrong."

"About what?" I asked.

"It's you who doesn't deserve him. I swear, the only decent thing you can do is get your ass on that plane tomorrow and spend the rest of your life making this up to him by loving him the way he loves you."

"Fine, Nath, I hear what you're saying. I do love him, you know. I don't know what I was thinking. I have to go; I'm supposed to call him back."

"You were thinking about this dream guy as if you actually knew him. You're a special person, Aden. When you and I were together, it wasn't easy for me to love you. All the things that drove me crazy are the things that drew Logan to you. He loves you because of who you are. Do yourself a favor, buddy," he said. "Sleep on it. Your whole outlook may be different tomorrow. Will you at least promise me you'll do that?"

"Yes, I promise I won't say anything tonight. I don't think the phone would be the best way to tell him anyway."

I hung up the phone, only to pick it up and dial it one more time. Logan and I only talked for a few minutes, and I managed to control myself for that short period of time. His voice was so happy and upbeat. It made me feel sick to think about possibly ruining that.

After hanging up the phone, I lay back on the bed and wondered if things would've been different had Logan and I been living together for the past eight months as opposed to living apart. We really hadn't spent that much time physically with one another. We talked every day, usually more than once, but I didn't really have that "we are a couple" feeling yet. I loved him, I knew I loved him, but there's something about living with one another, knowing each other's habits and idiosyncrasies. Does he brush his teeth up and down or side to side? The type of deodorant he uses...which section of the newspaper he reads first.

Maybe that stuff shouldn't matter, but isn't it the little stuff that makes you feel like you're part of someone else's life? All I knew was that I couldn't wait to see him, to be with him. To hold his hand, look at his beautiful face, and be able to reach out and touch him. I'd give anything to be able to run my fingers through his hair and feel his arms around me. I wasn't worried anymore whether this was the right thing to do. Now I just hoped he'd still want me.

Chapter Ten

After getting virtually no sleep, Finn and I got up and began getting ready in silence. I didn't know what to say to her, and I could tell she felt some guilt about saying she hoped I'd ruin things with Logan. Every now and then we'd look at one another, not saying anything. What she confessed to me didn't change the way I felt about her. I suppose I was making her sweat it out a little.

Standing at the airport terminal, I looked at Finn. "I should have knocked on his door this morning."

"What the fuck for?"

"To apologize."

"For what, making out with him?" she asked. "Showing him a good time his first night in St. Louis? Aden, he's a big boy, and apparently, pretty much a prick. You don't owe him anything."

"I just feel bad, that's all. You know I can't stand the thought of anyone hating me."

"Yes." She turned and sat down in a chair. "That's a really nasty quality you have."

I sat down next to her and scooped up her hand. "There is one good thing to come out of all this."

"I know...you got to spend a little more time with me." She smiled.

"Okay then, two good things."

"Spill."

"I no longer have a single doubt about moving to California. I know this is right. I'm supposed to be with Logan. It's where I'm meant to be."

"Sounds like a nice feeling to have," she said with a sigh. "I'm sorry about the way I've behaved over the last twenty-four hours. I haven't been a very good friend, huh?"

"Nope." I looked at her seriously until I was no longer able to keep myself from laughing any longer. "Oh, Finney, you are who you are. You know, you don't ever have to worry about losing me. If you ever really need me..."

"You'll be there, I know." She reached over and squeezed my hand. "I love you, though."

"I know." I smiled at her. "Hey, in the midst of my meltdown last night, I never got the goods on you and your high school hottie."

A huge smile spread across her face. "He is something else. We had a great time, and he said he'd like it if we could find a way to keep in touch. It was nice; for once a guy didn't beg me to see him again."

"We know what happens when the men start in with the begging; another one bites the dust."

"Exactly, I hate that. But I don't know," she said with a naughty smile. "I mean, he lives in San Francisco; there can't be any future in that, right?"

"Um, hi...flying to California, remember?

"Yeah, but you and I are very different when it comes to men."

"How did you leave it?"

"We swapped numbers, e-mail, that sort of thing. He's supposed to call me tomorrow night."

"I don't know, but this all sounds very familiar to me."

"I wouldn't go choosing any china patterns yet." She rolled her eyes. "Honestly, you are so silly."

"Well, excuse me for hoping that my best friend might be, possibly someday in the future, moving closer to me. That is, if Logan will even have me now."

"Please tell me you are not still planning on telling him?"

"Of course I'm going to tell him, Finn. No secrets. I don't want to lie to him. It's not fair."

"Bullshit," she said. "After everything Nathan said to you last night?"

"What?" I looked at her with squinted eyes. "How do you know what Nathan said?"

"I was listening in from the phone in the bathroom," she admitted with an evil grin.

I shook my head. "You are so bad."

"Well, I can't be left out of the loop; besides, I think he was right. You're only making yourself feel better. It's not like you had an orgy."

My flight number was called over the intercom, so we each stood up. I turned to look at her and I smiled. "I guess this is it."

"Looks like it; that is, unless you see any other men walking around you feel like hunting down?"

"No." I laughed. "That's the good thing about me. I never do the same wrong thing twice." I bent down slightly and gave her a big hug. "So"—she squeezed me—"what are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I hope you at least think about what Nathan said."

"How can I not?" I nodded as we separated. "There's certainly a lot of truth to it."

"I'm glad you realize that. You and Logan are a perfect fit. It would really suck to ruin that over something like a man from your dreams."

"That was very sweet." We walked toward the metal detectors. I turned and gave Finn one last hug. "I love you, honey; take care of yourself."

"Right back at ya, babe."

I made my way through the metal detectors and security. I walked along the corridor, looking out the window to the parking lot below. I found my gate and went up to the airline employee and handed her my boarding pass.

"So, are you just visiting LA," she asked, looking it over, "or do you live there?"

I thought about it for a moment, realizing I was willing to do whatever it took to keep Logan happy. "I'm flying home," I said, smiling. "I'm flying home."



Ethan Day

I am a gay man living in Missouri...I can hear the gasps already!! How very unsheik of me, yes I know. It was here I was born, and here I have stayed.

The worst thing about being a romance writer is finding a real-life hottie that can live up to the fantasy I create in my head and subsequently thrust upon him before actually getting to know him. To all my past and future boyfriends, my sincerest apologies...I can't help myself!

I was the youngest of four children and the only boy, so needless to say, I was spoiled rotten. I've always had an extravagant fantasy life. When I played with my *Star Wars* action figures as a child, I liked to make up my own stories. Naturally, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo were totally meant for each other, and Princess Leia made a bitchin' wise-cracking fag hag.

I somehow managed to survive high school living in a small racist town in Southwest Missouri and emerged unscathed, realizing life was too short to pretend to be anything other than who I was. I was the little homo that could...so damn it, I did!

After a few stints in college, I eventually signed up for a Creative Writing course. I took the class because there were no tests. For once my scholastic laziness paid off, and I found an outlet for all the fantasies running amok in my head. It was love at first write, and I've been doing it off and on ever since.

Now I have decided it's time to un-barricade the doors and unleash my imagination onto the world. So very sorry, world!! With the help of the lovely and talented team at Loose Id, LLC, my fantasy life is now available for public consumption. I'm desperately hoping you're really, really hungry.

Feel free to visit Ethan on the Web at http://www.ethandayonline.com or join his Yahoogroup at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ethanday/