



SEDUCING LIGHT

...My heart started beating in a strange, uneven rhythm. He leaned toward me, shoulders and palms open. He looked worried, but earnest. Years of sizing up other men based on their body language told me he was being honest with me.

I remembered his heat as I went into him, his strong thighs gripping my sides. That memory trapped me, held me there throughout my days and nights, but I'd sooner have my jailor than his.

His closet door didn't just protect his Hollywood career...it held him hostage. All his money couldn't free him.

What did he want with me? And I knew—I knew—he wanted me. I wouldn't fit in his rich man's world so where did that leave him? Or me?

Hell, I wasn't even sure what I wanted with him. I moved in different circles. Poorer circles. People in my world worked nine-to-five jobs with paychecks barely stretching one Friday to the next, and didn't give a fuck what the world thought about them.

It was better to forget we'd ever put our hands on each other. We should chalk it up to a moment of foolishness or gross stupidity.

Only, I couldn't rid myself of the memory of him beneath me. At night, in my solitary bed, I could still feel his body so tightly around mine. When I slept, his eyes were there, always waiting for me, his gaze full of desire, hope and wariness.

What did I want, and how far could I push him to get it?

The pickup protected our lower bodies from anyone with a camera. I reached out, laid my hand on his thigh, and slid it up to cup his balls. He stared at me with the witchy look he always gave me in my dreams.

“Just so you know, Nick, there’s no halfway with me. It’s all in, balls out, or nothing.”

He took a deep, ragged breath, and kissed me...

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SEDUCING LIGHT

BY

KC KENDRICKS

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SEDUCING LIGHT
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CHAPTER 1

Of all the lame-brained, half-baked, and downright idiotic ideas I ever had in my life, driving this wreck of a car into the middle of nowhere took the blue ribbon prize. I slammed the hood down on the Buick and listened to the echoes roll off the nearest mountains. Montana was beautiful, but no place for a vehicle to break down. Desperation had sent me here seeking one last chance to put my life back in order.

It didn't look like it was going to happen today.

Had I been able to afford a decent car, this would not have happened, but there was no point standing out here in the middle of bum-fuck-land feeling sorry for myself. I had to hoof it back to the last little town I'd driven through and see if

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I had enough money for one night in a motel.

I opened the trunk, grabbed my stuff from the back seat, and started to reorder my packs. My less valuable cameras and equipment needed to stay locked in the car, out of sight. I would have to trust the universe—the same one enjoying way too much fun at my expense lately—that everything would still be here when I got back with a tow truck. Provided, of course, I could scrounge up enough money to pay for a tow.

The list of friends able to loan me sufficient funds had grown smaller as my financial woes piled up. This adventure, the one supposed to restart my career and salvage my life, now tolled the death knell to the promise that was. I closed the trunk, locked the car doors, and started walking.

I'd barely gone a half-mile when a fancy, black, four-wheel drive rig with dark tinted windows passed me, slowed down, and coasted to a stop along the side of the road. A tall man—I put him at my height, about six-one—walked to the rear of the pickup. Dressed in scuffed cowboy boots, tight blue jeans, a gray UCLA sweatshirt, and an unmarred cowboy hat, he appeared to me to be the epitome of Wild West meets California Coast. The wisps of dark hair his hat didn't hold down danced in the breeze, brushing his collar. Standing against the vivid grey-blue of a stormy Montana sky, he was sexy gorgeous.

I knew that body, the set of those broad shoulders. The give-a-guy-a-hard-on swagger. Reflective sunglasses hid his eyes as he nodded to me.

“Need a lift?”

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My heart raced at the familiar voice, one I'd heard many times in dark movie theaters, countless interviews, and sound bites. I had to be mistaken. My luck didn't run to the good side.

"Nick Light?"

He frowned. "Who wants to know?"

I held out my hand. He was the reason I'd driven all the way from Los Angeles to Montana in my piece-of-shit car. "Asher Myles. I'm with *Dream Living Magazine*."

Light stared at my hand as if it were a viper.

"I recognize the name," he said, his voice nothing more than a growl. "Get in the truck."

I nodded and did as ordered. The magazine's publisher had warned me Nick Light disliked photographers, referring to them all as paparazzi. It seemed her words of caution were to be taken seriously. He slid behind the wheel, started the engine, and snarled at me, "You're late."

"My car broke down."

"The hell you say? I guess I saw it then, huh?" He made a u-turn and headed back towards my poor, crippled Buick.

"Um, can we stop at the car so I can get the rest of my things, please?"

A muscle worked in his jaw. Without a word, he pulled in behind my car and left the engine running while I grabbed all my belongings. I heard him speaking to someone and glanced covertly over my shoulder to see him talking on the citizen's band radio. I almost had everything safely re-packed when I sensed him at my side. He held out his hand, palm up.

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“Give me your keys.”

I straightened. “Why?”

“I called for a tow truck to come get your car and haul it to Moxley’s garage for repairs. We’ll leave the keys in it. This isn’t the city. It’s safe out here.” He tapped his fist on the roof of the Buick. “Besides, it doesn’t run, so who can steal it?”

Damn. How would I pay for that? I had to deliver the photos before I got any money from the magazine. They’d given me a chance to prove myself, but with the gossip about me, they’d been unwilling to advance even traveling expenses.

“Thanks. I think it’s the radiator.”

Light grunted. I’d hoped for better conversation with him. The man was Hollywood royalty, so why didn’t he behave like it? I wasn’t one of the paparazzi or a shot chaser. I had a legitimate career. Well, once upon a time I’d had one, anyway.

Up close, Nick Light was even more male than I’d expected. I’d seen all his movies, mostly action-adventure flicks, but he’d played the lead in a few romantic comedies for good measure. The big screen didn’t do the man justice. He oozed masculinity and raw sex appeal. I did my best not to let it affect me, but I knew in my heart that the next several days were going to be a terrible, delicious torture. I’d enjoy the private titillation of being so near my silver screen idol.

Climbing back into his rig, I barely got the door closed before he took off again.

I absorbed the Montana scenery as we rode in silence. As a city boy, I’d never seen anything as beautiful, or wild, as the quiet, empty country surrounding me. No wonder Nick Light

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kept a home out here. We crested a hill and his ranch, Rebel Acres, lay before us.

“Stop. I mean...can we stop?”

His lips thinned. He looked unhappy, but the fancy pickup slowed.

“A few shots from this vantage will look good in the photo spread.”

Another grunt.

I grabbed my digital Pentax and started shooting.

The large two-story log house, with its dual chimneys and wrap-around porch, stood on a little knoll with a full southern exposure. Off to the east was the barn and corral, complete with two dark brown horses standing nose to tail, lazily flipping their long black tails. A four-car garage was to the west side of the house, with a connecting breezeway. Behind the breezeway was a wide expanse of flat, green lawn with a large-ish pool. With minimal landscaping, the place blended seamlessly into its surrounding, with the exception of the long, perfectly straight approach I suspected doubled as a runway for small, private aircraft. Pictures saved, I climbed back in the pickup. At least this time I had my seat belt fastened before my host hit the gas pedal.

I wondered why Light called his spread Rebel Acres. Was it a nod to his early Hollywood days when his non-conformist attitudes had gotten him compared to the late James Dean? At least he hadn't christened the place the Ponderosa. If I could get him to relax, maybe I'd find out the reason behind the name.

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By the time Nick parked his fancy rig by the front hitching post, the Montana weather had taken a turn for the worse. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the wind kicked up a notch, thick with portent of the approaching rain.

My host turned to me, his voice gruff. “C’mon. I’ll help you get your gear inside.”

I wondered if he’d warm up to “tolerant” by the time I got the photos and left. I turned on the charm. “Thanks. And thanks for rescuing me. If I’d known I was this close to your place, I’d have been walking in a different direction.”

He snorted, lifting my heaviest equipment case with ease. “City boy. Your first lesson in directions can start after the storm.”

“Hey, I know the sun sets in the west.”

Nick looked at me over his sunglasses. The shock of seeing those deep green eyes up close and personal jolted through me. Hell, I even saw the famous hazel fleck in the left iris. One of his directors had once made him wear a contact lens to disguise it. His fans had howled. Both sexes.

“You see the sun now?”

“Nope. But west is that way.” I pointed.

“Amazing.” He started up the steps. “You hungry?”

Was I ever. I watched the way his body moved, loose and easy, then forced my gaze off his ass before he caught on. More than a few guys had told me that I didn’t vibe as being gay, and I didn’t want to spook Nick Light with the knowledge I was. By virtue of my profession, he already wasn’t happy to have me under his roof for a week. The coffin

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currently housing my career didn't need another nail hammered into it.

"I missed breakfast, so yeah, I guess I'm hungry."

Nick stopped on the porch and turned around, putting one large hand in the middle of my chest. No bolt of lightning from the approaching storm could have singed me more. Suddenly he was flesh-and-blood man to me, not a movie star.

"Hold on a minute, Myles. Let's get one thing straight before you invade my space."

I nodded. Hell, I'd agree to anything he wanted.

"Your equipment stays in the case until I tell you that you can get it out. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Nick opened the door to the house, and I followed him inside. He set the case down in the spacious, two-story foyer and motioned for me to tag along behind him. The hallway opened into the grandest kitchen I'd ever seen. Taking up the entire southwest corner of the house, the room was modern, warm, and inviting. Bay windows with red and white gingham covered cushions on the window seats flanked the massive stone fireplace.

My photographer's eye filled the room with afternoon sunlight. I had a vision of Nick Light sitting at the table in the large bay of windows, in that sunshine, smiling at me. That would be a money shot I'd never share with anyone. His voice, sharp with annoyance, brought me out of my reverie.

"Do you want something to drink, or not?"

I squared my shoulders and replied I'd take a soft drink,

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cola, if he had it. He nodded and pointed at the oak table in the sunny corner breakfast nook.

“Set your notebook up. I want to see your work.”

Nick placed a full lead crystal tumbler down in front of me as my laptop booted. I thanked him and drank, grateful for the cold, dark liquid fizzing its way down my parched throat. He spun the computer to face him, typed in his access code for his wireless connection, and turned it back to me.

I cleared my throat and typed the URL for my website.

“Okay, Mr. Light, here’s a little—”

“Nick. Call me Nick.”

I nodded, and hoped I didn’t stutter when I tried to say his name for the first time. “Nick. I’ll just point out that all my professional information is on the website and move on to the photos.”

“I see you have references. Are they valid?”

Fuck. He *had* heard the stories.

I rolled the cursor over the link and the page opened for him to see. He read the names, then nodded. “I don’t know any of them, so you won’t mind if I call them, right?”

“Sure. Call ’em. Just don’t be surprised if they don’t believe you’re Nick Light.”

He snorted again, the corner of his mouth quirking up in what might actually be a little smile. “I get that a lot, boy.”

I just bet he did.

Lightning stuck so close to the house the hair on my arms rose. I must have jumped because he suddenly grinned at me.

“You’re safe. The buildings have lightning rods.”

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I stared at him. “And that’s supposed to make me feel better—how?”

Nick Light actually laughed. “I don’t care if it makes you feel better or not, but it does me.”

I didn’t answer, just clicked on the slideshow and leaned back to watch it with him. His focus shifted to the screen. I watched him as the pictures scrolled. Every so often, he’d nod or cock his head, but he didn’t speak. We sat there in silence as the clouds slid past the sun and the rain dribbled down the outside of the windows. Finally, he spoke.

“Okay. You’re good. But with your reputation, how’d you get this job?”

I met his gaze. “Don’t believe everything you hear about me.”

His chin lifted. His eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not true.”

Nick crossed his arms over his chest. “Tell me your version of it then.”

My temper flared. “I was hired to do a job—take a photo shoot of your ranch. I have a copy of the contract in my case, and nowhere in that contract does it say I owe you any explanations.”

His response was unexpected. “You want that sandwich now, boy?”

Tired of him referring to me as “boy,” I shot him a look, and froze at the glittering curiosity in his eyes. He studied me, his green gaze a mix of wary caution, grudging respect, and more. I fell into those mystical depths, forgetting to breathe as

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the blood pooled in my groin.

My heart stuttered, then hammered in my chest. I couldn't look away, even as my face grew hot under his scrutiny. My cock swelled, rising as the phantom of my nights stared at me with witchy interest.

Nick Light was gay.

CHAPTER 2

Somehow, I managed to nod. I'd dreamed about the man, imagined meeting him, but never in my hottest fantasies had I ever believed him gay. He'd been an A-list star for almost ten years, and no one had even hinted he was gay.

I wondered how he'd managed to keep word of his sexual orientation out of the press. With all eyes on him, he had to be very careful indulging that part of his life. There was no other way in Tinseltown. People looked for secrets under every rock, and when they found them, sold them to the highest bidder.

Nick Light was, according to his press agent, forty-three, which meant he was likely two years older. He'd been in front

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of the camera for twenty years. I was ten years younger and couldn't imagine a life without sex, but whatever choices he'd made to get that star on Hollywood Boulevard, they were his own.

My choice was to respect his privacy regardless of the fact he lumped me in with the seedier element of the business. Did he blame me for unknown losses, too? I fell back on politeness. It hadn't failed me yet.

"I'd love a sandwich. Can I help with anything?"

"I seriously doubt it." He rose and moved about his kitchen with quiet efficiency. "Ham or turkey?"

Like I cared. My mind spun dark fantasies of touching him, being touched by him, and he went calmly to fix me something to eat? I shook so much I wondered why I didn't vibrate off my chair.

"Whatever you're making for yourself will be more than okay."

He sighed. "Ham, it is. How'd you get to be paparazzi, Myles?"

I knew he was taunting me and chose my words carefully. "First off, call me Asher. Secondly, I'm a trained photographer with a degree from Pacific Northwest, not a shot chaser. Thirdly, I didn't assault anyone."

Nick set fresh cola and a bag of potato chips on the table in front of me, quickly followed by two sandwiches. He almost sat down, hesitated, then grabbed the roll of paper towels off the counter and plopped them down on the table. The man still vibed straight, but that look told a different story. It was

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spooky.

“My version of napkins when I’m out here.” He ate a few bites, then sighed. “Where do you want to start taking pictures?”

“Do I have your permission to take my stuff out of the bags?” I cringed inwardly at the sarcasm that had crept into my voice again. I needed to stay on his good side. Twenty-five thousand dollars would go a long way to getting my life back in order.

“Sure, you do. As you pointed out, there’s a contract.”

We finished our snack in uncomfortable silence. Starving, I tried not to wolf down my food, but I did. Nick noticed and offered a second sandwich. I declined for fear of having it sit like lead in my stomach.

I cleared the table under his watchful eye. He pointed at a drawer, and I stowed the chips. I bent over the sink to wash my hands, then realized the paper towels were still on the table. I was about to ask for them when they appeared at my elbow. Nick leaned over the basin. His hip brushed mine. My pulse spiked, but outwardly, I ignored him.

“Why don’t you give me a preliminary tour of the house? I’ll take a few quick snapshots to get a feel for the light. Tomorrow morning, I can set up properly and begin.”

“Okay. I’ll show you the guest room first. You can spread out. Just remember the professional stager put everything where it’s supposed to be, so no moving stuff without putting it back.”

I nodded and picked up the laptop, careful not to turn it

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off. He'd not given me his connection code, and I'd need the Internet later tonight to check in with the magazine.

Nick helped me carry my cases to the second floor. I climbed the stairs with my gaze plastered on his muscular ass, choking on my curiosity and my questions. At the top of the stairs, he entered the first door on the left. I stepped into a large, masculine room with a four-poster pine bed and matching furniture. The hardwood floor gleamed in the gray light.

"Guest room. Bathroom." He pointed. "Make yourself at home. I'll be in the kitchen when you come back down."

"Thanks," I called to his retreating back.

Nick gave no indication he heard me. I could easily get very pissed off at the man, but didn't dare. Professional redemption was too close at hand.

I made a quick pit stop, then took a few quick snaps of the guest room with my digital. The rain infused the light with a gentle softness, blurring edges and creating a romantic feel that Nick Light fans would love. Instinct told me the test shots from today would probably be better than crisper, sunny ones. I slung my old 35mm Pentax ME over my shoulder for good measure and went down the stairs. Sometimes only real film would do. Nick was in the kitchen, loading the coffee maker. I lifted the digital.

"Hold it."

He froze as I clicked off a few shots, then looked at me. I snapped a few more. Nick frowned. I was already too familiar with that expression.

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"Pictures of me are not part of the deal."

"They will be if you like the finished product, though, won't they?" I snapped back at him.

"You say you're not the fucking paparazzi, yet the first chance you get, you're taking my picture."

I held the digital out to him. "Here. Delete them."

A muscle in his jaw worked as his lips thinned to an angry, straight line. Nick turned away and continued to measure out coffee grounds. "Keep your damn pictures of me. I understand you can use the money."

So he *had* investigated me. That didn't surprise me any more than the knowledge he'd heard the rumors about me. The question was, had he learned the truth? A burst of anger ripped my guts open and my temper bubbled up.

"I'm only going to say this to you once more, Mr. Light. I didn't assault anyone. I was as much a victim as he was."

"It was your name in the paper."

Damn him! Years of frustration and rancor boiled out of me. "My whole fucking identity was stolen. Some slimeball with a criminal mindset forged his picture onto my identification. I've been trying for three years to put my life back together. I've lost everything—my home, car, all my fucking money, my career. But what really hurts is how no one, not the police, not former clients, not even some of my so-called friends, and sure as hell not you, really give a damn about some little pond scum queer like me."

Nick snapped the lid back on the coffee canister, dusted a few errant grounds into his hand and brushed them off into the

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sink. His broad, proud shoulders slumped. “Well, you’re wrong about that last bit.” He turned around and leaned back against the counter. “And don’t lie to me. I saw you that night.”

My heart stopped, then lurched forward. He remembered that little blip in time? I questioned him to be sure. “You saw me—where? Doing what?”

He looked sad. “The night my father died. You were with the paparazzi outside the hospital. I saw you.”

I experienced a flash of memory mixed with old grief. A night I’d gone to Good Samaritan Hospital to say goodbye. My voice didn’t want to work. I forced the words out. “June. Four years ago?”

Light nodded.

I plopped down on a chair, my knees suddenly weak. I stared out the window at the rain. “So just because I happened to be there, you think I’m not telling the truth about running with the paparazzi?”

“If you’re going to lie, Myles, you need to keep better notes.”

The old, familiar pain I thought time had dulled rose up as sharp as ever in my chest. “I was at the hospital, yes, but it had nothing to do with your conceited ass. My twin sister was there, dying.”

His boot heels clicked on the marble tile floor, filling the silence of the house. I looked up at him. Was that compassion on his rugged, star-quality features? The accusation left his voice.

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“I recognize you from that night. I remember you took on a man twice your size. One who shoved a video camera in my face and asked if my father and I had reconciled before he died.”

Ugly in my memory rose the face of one of the smarmier paparazzi, a man little respected due to the tactics he employed to get photos of stars in compromising positions. We quarreled when I'd pushed his camera out of the face of an emotional Nick Light as he left the hospital, overwrought by his father's sudden death. I made it clear it wasn't the time for such an intrusion and gained a serious enemy.

“It didn't seem right to me he did that. I was on my way in, hoping to see my sister, Alicia. The crowd slowed me down. I didn't get to say goodbye to her because of...”

He sat down and looked out the window. His voice was flat. “You didn't get to say goodbye because of me.”

The man had an ego the size of the state he lived in.

“I don't blame you. Everything that happens in the universe isn't all about you, Your Majesty.”

He rubbed his hands over his face. “Sass me all you want, boy. I probably deserve it.”

There wasn't any “probably” in my mind. He didn't trust me. He never would. I was down to getting the best pictures I could, bolting the hell out of here, and finding someone else to fantasize over while exercising my right hand in the middle of the night.

“Look, man, the light is fading. I need to get a few pictures in the can.”

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He nodded. "Go on, then. Any of the rooms you like. The rain has made it damp in the house, so I'll go light the fire in the living room. Come in for a drink when you're done."

I thanked him, surprised at his sudden capitulation. Any room in the house? Even his bedroom? Maybe I would. I lifted the digital and got to work, hoping to lose myself in the familiar play of light and shadow. It helped, up to a point.

One very unhappy man lived in this gorgeous house.

I wandered about the kitchen, snapping long shots of the room as well as a few close-ups. The raindrops on the window glistened, an early harbinger that the sunlight was about to slip under the cloud cover and make the world glow for a few precious minutes. I picked up the pace.

The familiar energy crept into me. My skin tingled as if caressed by a lover, fueling my need to seduce the light. I went from room to room, finding where it waited for me to capture it and make its essence real. Finally, twilight arrived, waking me from my working trance. I capped the lens, switched off the power to save the batteries, and went to locate Nick.

I found him in the living room, where he said he'd be, kneeling in front of the fireplace. A small fire snapped and popped, chasing the chill from the room. Nick held a brandy snifter, swirling the amber liquid absently. He lifted the glass.

"What can I get for you?"

Some little devil danced on my shoulders, gleefully laughing at the idea of *me* having cocktails with *him*. The saner part of my mind hissed a warning. Question and answer

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time was about to begin in earnest. The tension at the back of my neck bloomed into a full-blown headache. “Amaretto over ice, if you have it.”

“Coming right up.”

Within moments, I had the crystal glass in my hand. He motioned at the sofas that flanked the fireplace. I moved to the far one and sat at the end near the fire. Nick sat across from me on the other. I sipped his expensive spirits and waited, but not for long.

“So, Asher, are you going to tell me how you got this job, or let me imagine you blackmailed your way here, or worse?”

I tossed back the expensive liquor, then set the empty glass down on the coffee table. Leaning forward, my arms resting on my knees, I met his curious gaze without flinching.

“Ah, but it *was* blackmail, sort of.”

CHAPTER 3

That got Nick's attention. His eyebrows shot up. He straightened, then downed a healthy swallow of his brandy. "I guess I asked for that, but I know better. And that's why I can't figure out you being here."

I refused to look away. "I'm not lying, Nick. I don't lie."

The firelight danced in his eyes as he stared me, his face impassive, giving me no clue to his thoughts. Whatever was going through his mind, I suspected I came out on the short end of good. I shrugged. "I guess you wanna hear the whole sordid tale, don't you?"

"To say the very least." Nick finished his drink and set his snifter down beside my glass. "Just spit it, Myles."

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It really was blackmail, of a sort. Oh, not the sordid, illegal kind. I didn't do things like that.

"How about another drink before I spill my guts to you?"

Nick snorted. "Double?"

"Why not?"

He stared at me for several heartbeats, then shook his head and pointed his index finger at me. "You can pour this round."

"Whatever." I retrieved both glasses and went to the well-stocked bar. A few bottom shelf mixers were interspersed with the higher quality liquors. Most of the bottles were unopened, probably waiting for guests to descend. Only the brandy bottle was half-empty.

I bet he'd paid plenty for that bottle, but then he could afford the best. I poured a healthy portion into his snifter and handed it to him before I flopped down on my sofa. He watched, that curious interest in his gaze again as I told him my story.

"You know Marcia Conley?"

I knew he did, and he nodded to confirm it. She was the owner and publisher of *Dream Living Magazine*, the publication I contracted with to do the photo shoot. Only Nick's friendship with her had swayed him to let someone into his home. Marcia had been very clear on that when I went to her office to sign the contract.

And if Nick Light really thought I'd blackmailed a friend of his, I'd be in handcuffs and not for fun.

"So she's a friend of yours. I know that now, but I didn't know it then."

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Nick held up his hand, stopping me. “How old will I be by the time you get finished spinning this tale, boy?”

I glared at him. What was his fucking problem that he just kept pushing at me? “Same age as now, whatever that is, unless you keep interrupting me.”

“Okay, okay.” He sipped his brandy and stared into the fire. It occurred to me that Conley had likely already told him all this. He just wanted to see if I’d tell him the same thing.

“Anyway, I was down at Griffith Park, taking in one of the symphonies with a buddy of mine who’s into classical music. We spread out a blanket beside this chick and got all comfy. I started talking to her...you know, just being friendly. Next thing I knew, this fellow sauntered by, snatched her purse, and took off like a bat outta hell. I chased him down and got her bag back.”

“So where’s your superhero cape?”

“You know, Nick, you have a real smart ass attitude.” I sipped the amaretto in my glass, now watered down by melted ice. I wondered what he’d do if I poured it over his head.

“I’d given her my name and business card while we’d been talking. We were standing around with the security guard, waiting for the cops, when my buddy said something stupid like he wondered if I’d know the cops when they showed up. Marcia asked why, and Donny just spilled my whole story out to her.”

“The stolen identity bit, huh?”

God, the man was infuriating! If he didn’t stop baiting me, my head would explode! What sort of perverse joy did he get

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in taunting me? Did he do it just because he could? I snapped. “Yes, motherfucker! The. Stolen. Identity. Thing.”

Good Lord! I’d just called Nick Light a... A little voice inside reminded me he’d asked for it. I swigged the rest of the liquid in my glass and waited for him to throw me out of his house. Instead, his voice was quiet, not raging.

“My apologies, Asher. I’m sure that’s a stressful situation.”

I clamped down on my temper and accepted his apology. My bet was he didn’t give many apologies, to anyone for anything. I took a deep breath and finished my tale.

“Marcia asked if there was anything she could do to help me out. I took a wild shot and told her the only way she could prove her gratitude was to give me some work. And here I am.” I leaned back and glared at him. “But you knew all this from her. Why bother to ask me?”

The man stared at me, silent. He had this uncanny ability for stillness, and it made me fidgety, but I saw his acceptance of my story in his eyes. The tight ball of nerves in the pit of my stomach loosened.

He believed me, but now what happened? Nick downed the last of his brandy, stood and stretched until his shoulders gave off little popping noises. Watching that lean body move, seeing his pelvis flex forward, then back, about undid me. I tore my gaze off the gentle swell of his genitals, safely hidden under a layer of denim, before I got a full-fledged erection. This was as close as I’d ever get to him, and I knew it. He set his empty glass on the bar.

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"I'm going to bed, Asher. I'll be out of the house and out of your way early tomorrow morning. Help yourself to whatever you want for breakfast."

That was it? No questions? No comments? All he had to say was he was going to bed?

"How can I reach you tomorrow if I have any questions?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. His green gaze swept over me. That quick, sharp perusal stole my breath and quickened my pulse with longing. *Damn him.*

"I'll be in the barn. Hiding."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him what he had to hide from. It was his house, after all. I let the moment pass. Besides, I knew.

Nick Light hid from himself.

* * *

I seized the opportunity to pop a few over-the-counter pain killers from the well-stocked medicine cabinet in the guest bathroom, then spent the next several hours going over the snapshots. At least my headache was gone.

Taking Nick at his word, I raided his kitchen and fixed a plate of assorted cheeses with some crackers and pickles to snack on. If he heard me rustling about, going up and down the stairs to refill my soda glass, he didn't come out of his room.

I tried not to dwell on my sense of him being gay. It wasn't a thing of logic, or even something tangible. His body language said straight, but the memory of his eyes, the

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interested, calculating way he watched me, convinced me otherwise. He wasn't the first man to give me that look.

The problem was, I wanted Nick Light. The only solution was to seduce him.

Easier said than done.

No, finishing the job and getting back to Los Angeles was the only intelligent thing to do. I had a chance to make a place for myself at *Dream Living Magazine*, and that had to come before getting laid, even by my fantasy lover come to life.

I set up the folders on my laptop, one for each room, and subfolders coded for the best, mediocre and pass. I'd keep the ones in the pass folder for myself. Maybe I could get a few more pictures of the man to add to the four gigabytes of Nick Light fan stuff I already had stored on the hard drive like some star-struck teenager. Thanks for the memories and all that crap.

Nick's bedroom was in the northeast corner of the house. The images taken of his room depicted a space bathed in twilight, misty. I put them in the mediocre folder. That room, with its massive pine furniture, much like what was in this guest room, needed the morning sun to show off the crisp palette of dark blues and earthy oranges against the softer ivories. Whoever did the interior of the house understood light and how to use it as well as any photographer.

Snapshots sorted and snack finished, I stripped and took a quick shower. I slid between the soft, expensive sheets and tried to settle down to sleep. It didn't work well. Nick's face floated before me in the darkness. I kept seeing those green

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eyes glittering in that first moment of bewitched awareness I'd had of him. I rolled over, uncomfortably aroused. He'd put me at the opposite end of the house for a reason—the long hallway separating the bedrooms. Anyone daring enough to walk that distance in the dark of the night had plenty of time to reconsider and turn around. The grandfather clock in the foyer chimed midnight.

I rolled out of bed and pulled on my jeans, leaving my underwear and socks on the floor. I didn't need them for a fast trip to the bar. A shot of whiskey would relax me enough to sleep. I opened the door, grateful for the subtle lighting on every other riser of the stairs. Halfway down, I heard the rhythmic sound of someone using one of the weight machines in the workout room. Being twelve kinds of fool, I let the noise lure me to its source. I paused in the doorway, unable to force my shaking knees farther.

Nick worked out, shirtless, in form-fitting Lycra workout shorts and trainers, displaying the famous pumped six-pack abs that managed to get a close-up in every movie. The dark hair covering his muscled chest lay plastered wetly to his skin. A line of moisture soaked down his shorts from his navel, staining its way to the soft, rounded bump of his genitals. His powerful, pelted thighs steamed in the cool night air coming in through the opened windows. He stopped in mid-motion and let the weights fall. His rugged face appeared carved of stone, but his piercing gaze rested on mine, hot and wary. Alive.

My skin prickled as sweat broke out under my arms and my cock swelled, eager to embarrass me. I forced my voice to

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work.

“I couldn’t sleep. I was going to get a drink, but I heard...”

Nick stood and walked toward me, never looking away. He stopped a half-step in front of me, and I was enveloped in the enticing scent of wet hair and clean male sweat. Tongues of heat licked my skin as primal male-to-male non-verbal communication arced between us. I licked my lips and his pupils widened. This was a bad idea, but only a nuclear blast would have kept me from it.

In slow motion, his hand skimmed across my bare shoulder and cupped the back of my neck. Disbelief that he’d actually touched me swirled in the back of my mind even as my hands reached for him, coming to rest on his sweat-slippery sides. Fear flickered in the depths of his eyes.

“God help me,” he murmured, his breath warm against my lips.

I didn’t give him the chance to pull away, not when we were this close. I kissed him.

Already aroused, the shock of his lips jolted through me like fire and ice. My pulse pounded hotly through my groin as my cock strained against my zipper. His arms came around me and my back made contact with a wall, hard. Nick’s trembling thighs held mine pinned as his tongue slipped into my mouth. He moaned, a low, desperate sound of longing that seemed to come from his very soul.

I soared as he kissed me, his lips teasing mine, coaxing me into the heat of his mouth, then reclaiming mine. I slipped my hand under his waistband and wrapped my fingers around his

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erection. I barely touched him before he tore his mouth from mine and started kissing his way down my body. Legs suddenly too weak to hold me, I braced myself against the wall. In one quick motion, Nick unzipped my jeans and pulled them off my hips. He dropped to his knees and the heat of his mouth enveloped me.

CHAPTER 4

Having my imaginary lover become flesh-and-blood man before my eyes brought all my fantasies crashing down around me. I wasn't a virgin, or a prude. Three or four lovers a year had coasted in and out of my life for the last fifteen years. Some brought more intense emotions than others. A few had been strictly for fun—a couple of weeks in the sun and the chance to store up memories of a human touch for the dry stretches. One or two had taught me the value of circumspection. None had laid me bare to the bone, until now. I buried my fingers in his wet hair and thrust my hips forward.

I pushed away all thoughts of anything other than his mouth. The moist heat. His soft lips and talented tongue. My

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world plunged into sweet darkness with only the sound of our ragged breathing and his strong hands grasping my ass anchoring me to the here and now. I struggled to stay with him, to prolong my headlong rush to fly. He knew and released me, standing in a smooth motion that showcased his strength, and fixing his dark, glittering gaze to mine. His voice was hoarse.

“I’m clean on everything, Asher.”

That simple statement jerked me off the path to my personal Nirvana. I still wanted him, but something inside me had shifted towards sadness—that he lived without love. I laid my hand along his bristled cheek.

“You’re a real romantic, aren’t you?”

His hand fondled me with rough gentleness. “I can’t afford romance.”

“That’s too bad, Nick. Everyone needs romance.”

He took a ragged breath. “What I need is for you never to mention this. I’ll pay you if I have to.”

That pissed me off, but not so badly I’d walk away from my once-phantom lover. I tapped his cheek with my open palm, not hard, turning the motion into a sliding caress. It got my point across. “I told you. You should forget whatever nastiness you ever heard about me. I’m not like that. I don’t want your money.”

Nick cupped my face. “You need money. You should take what I offer you.”

I could capitulate on one point. “All right. You can pay for the repairs to my car so I can get back to LA.”

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“Asher.” He said my name softly, like maybe he was touched, or even amazed, that I’d want so little from him. I could sell a story about my dick in his mouth to the highest bidder—for millions.

I never would. This was personal. Private.

Cold.

This Nick Light wasn’t the man in my dreams. This one was running on empty. And me? I wasn’t much better, but I wouldn’t walk away.

“For what it’s worth, Nick, I’m, as you so delicately put it, clean on everything, too. But you’d better have protection available, or I’m sleeping alone.”

He nodded. “I have all kinds of protection. Unfortunately, it’s all upstairs.”

Nick moved against me again, kissing me with a more tentative desire than before. Did he crave tenderness? My fantasy lover wanted only to please me, to dance before me, ethereal, as I made love to myself. The real man was complex, having layer after layer that wouldn’t be exposed tonight. I accepted the fact so I could share what passion he could give. He rested his forehead to mine for a moment, then flashed me a look that bordered on hopeful.

“Let’s go upstairs, Asher. To my room.”

I smiled at him. “Don’t you think you should move so I can pull up my pants?”

Nick Light grinned the sexy smile famous for making his fans swoon every time it flashed across the silver screen. And it was all for me. I committed the moment to memory as he

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bent over and tugged up my jeans.

“Seeing how you’re a man without any underwear, I’ll let do your own honors and zip.”

I raised my eyebrow. “You *do* have a sense of humor. I wondered.”

He shook his head. “Go upstairs before I...” He paused and swallowed, hard.

“What, Nick? Lose your nerve?”

He swallowed again, a strange mix of fear and hope on his face. I was right, and knowing it put wings on my feet. I left him to turn off the lights in the workout room and follow me.

The long stretch of dark hall didn’t alter my decision.

I opened the door to his bedroom, softly glowing with incandescent light from a small bedside lamp. Needing something to do, I pulled the covers down on the bed, then Nick was behind me, his hands on my shoulders, lips warm on my neck.

“Asher, you don’t have to do this.”

Reaching back, I cupped him. “So you think giving me half a blowjob and then backing out is acceptable?”

His breath was warm on my neck. “I think I’ve already been a fool and it can’t get any worse.”

I turned around and put my palms on his damp, hairy chest, teasing the flat brown nipples that pebbled under my fingers.

“Maybe I’ll confess more to you, after.” I pulled his hips to mine and kissed him. A whisper of connection rose between us, tentative and unsure, as if it feared to spring to life.

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I didn't force it. I'd had memorable sexual encounters without it. Besides, Nick Light would break my heart if I let him.

"I should shower," he said, his lips brushing mine. I shook my head, liking the smell of honest male sweat, sweeter because he didn't smoke or do drugs. I pushed his shorts down, dropping to my knees in front of him as he had me.

We were the same height and general build, although I didn't workout and was leaner. The similarities didn't stop there. Nick hardened fully under my caress, swelling to about eight inches. Neither of us was cut, something I'd rarely had in common with my sex partners. I slid my mouth down over him and tasted the muskiness of his workout mixed with the saltiness of earlier arousal. He held my head for a moment, then pulled away.

Nick kicked off his trainers and stepped out of his shorts. I unzipped and shucked off my jeans. His hungry gaze swept me from head to toe, and then up again, stopping to rest on my cock. I backed my way to his bed and turned off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

Bolder in the black Montana night, Nick put his hands on me and urged me down onto the soft mattress and cool linens. He followed me, sprawling across me, feverishly finding my mouth. I opened myself to him, and he led me down to where instinct fed on sensation.

Wet with sweat, Nick trembled under my hands like a drowning man who'd just grabbed a lifeline. We touched and kissed each other with halting tenderness, each holding back

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in the uncertainty of what we were to each other—strangers. His need reached out to me and would have choked me if I'd not sensed how profoundly he was affected by my willingness to give him these fleeting moments of touch that his life, so public and fragile, denied him.

Back and forth we went, giving and taking until our breathing echoed off the walls. Nick delved into his nightstand, and I braced myself, not quite ready to trust him and not willing to refuse him.

He surprised me then, rolling us and bringing me over him. His knees slid up my sides to grip my ribs, while his hand fumbled the foil packet into mine. With shaking fingers, I suited up. Nick had the lube and spread it around, being liberal with it. Not willing to wait any longer, I lifted his legs higher and pressed into him. He moaned as his flesh yielded to mine, the sound giving voice to the profound effect my penetration had on him. I found a rhythm and drove him upward. It didn't take long for either of us.

Small moans poured out of him with each thrust and pull of my hips. He arched and thrashed beneath me, his hand between us, moving. I fought for control while he fought the tide, holding back his climax to prolong our pleasure. I wanted my phantom to remember me and did what I could, but in the end, there was no choice but to embrace the fiery wave that engulfed me and burn.

His powerful thighs dropped from my hips. I relinquished the heat of his body and he drew me down into the wet slipperiness cast across his belly. We held each other in the

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aftermath, without speaking. Nick's breathing slowed and the first vestiges of new tension crept back into his body. I rolled away from him and stared up into the blackness.

What, if anything, could I say to him? Did I hope he had words for me?

I had little to offer.

That he'd used me was certain, but I wasn't angry, not with him. I was a little disgusted with myself that I'd allowed it, but I'd get over it. What worried me was if he'd get over it. Nick Light was a man in turmoil. I could tell by his breathing he wasn't asleep. Maybe he'd chat.

"Why did you name the ranch Rebel Acres?"

The mattress dipped as he rolled to face me. "The secret is about to be revealed, so you can be one of the first to know. I wrote a screenplay, which is not something most actors at my level do. I developed the project, got all the backing, did my own casting, and now I'm directing the movie titled *Aries Rising*. Go to sleep."

I sighed. "Why don't you just tell me to shut the fuck up?"

The silence was blacker than the night and darker than the unseen ceiling above me. Just as I decided to give up and see if I could sleep, he spoke.

"Sorry."

"That's it? Sorry?"

"Okay. Let's try this. Want to fuck again?"

I snorted and rolled to face him. "No. You'll think I'm easy."

"I rather hope you are. My opportunities for sex are few,

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Asher.”

It took every ounce of self-control I had not to touch him. I refused to be sucked down into the sorrow he'd lay on my doorstep. Once with my dream lover would have to be enough.

“Pictures are my life, Nick, and I've seen plenty of them with you and all sorts of women. Are you going to tell me you don't boink 'em to improve your Hollywood he-man status?”

“If you twist the sword as you drive it in, it'll make a bigger wound.”

I jabbed my index finger into his ribs. He flinched, then laughed softly. “Yeah. Like that.”

The mattress shook as he fidgeted with his pillows. I did a little rearranging of my own, wondering what real feather pillows cost these days.

“You're right. I've had my share of the fairer sex.” Instead of cocky, he sounded remote, maybe even disappointed.

“So what's that like?”

His damp palm came to rest on my hip. “You've never...”

“Nope. Never.” I didn't feel the need to confess I'd been tempted once, or even three times, by those few special ladies. Nor had he earned the right to know that the fact they were special kept me from doing something hurtful to them in the long run.

“Somehow, it's just not the same. I enjoy some women, but it's more about keeping them happy and not gossiping than anything else.”

“You're a cold motherfucker, Light.”

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“To survive in my world, I gotta be.” His hand moved, seeking me.

I knew in that instant I couldn’t have sex with him again, not tonight. I’d touched my phantom lover once, and it would have to be enough. A second time would bring me too close to the real man, one I’d never be able to keep in my life. An odd hurt swirled around my heart.

“You keep on believing that, Nick, and you’ll always be alone.”

I rolled out of his bed, and walked down the long hall to my own.

CHAPTER 5

Three months later...

I'd thought I was ready to see Nick again. I was wrong. The meeting to go over the pictures of the shoot and choose the dozen or so for inclusion in an upcoming issue of *Dream Living Magazine* was scheduled for eleven o'clock this morning. I sat at a red light, just a few blocks away from Marcia Conley's West Hollywood office, and wondered if I could face him.

I'd left his bed that night and not seen him again. His housekeeper had appeared to look after me, tidying up the rooms for the camera.

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My tired Buick had arrived a day later, with a steam-cleaned engine and a paid service slip detailing a new radiator and a bunch of routine maintenance. The car purred like a happy kitten, making me reluctant to trade it in on something newer until I had a little more money in the bank.

I took pictures during the day and drank Nick's liquor at night. I checked the garage and the fancy black pickup was gone. In the barn, I ran into the housekeeper's husband, singing to the two horses in residence while he mucked stalls. He hadn't seen Mr. Nick at all, this visit. It didn't take a lot of brainpower to conclude the man had fled rather than face me in the morning.

Wouldn't this meeting be just grand? How well did Marcia know him?

For my part, I'd gotten to know her. She was a great boss. I'd been working steadily since my return from Montana. Marcia didn't mention Nick by name, but she did say the "homeowner" had been very pleased with the professional way I took pictures.

As if he would really know.

I certainly wasn't going to expound on that since she'd hired me as a staff photographer. The shoots I did were in interesting locations with fascinating people, and my contracts left me free to roam the different towns and byways to snap my own photos to my heart's content. So why wasn't I?

My un-content heart stuttered as I pulled onto the parking lot and spotted Nick's Montana rig. It looked like a bull elephant sitting among a herd of sleek antelope. I guess that

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made my old Buick the neighborhood hippo. I did wonder when he planned to drive the truck all the way back to Montana. Of course, with his money, he could pay someone to do it for him.

Marcia's administrative assistant greeted me with a smile and told me to go on in to her office. I steeled my nerves to see Nick and opened the door.

He stood by the windows facing the parking lot, looking drop-dead gorgeous in slim-fitting blue jeans and a peach-colored short-sleeved shirt that made his green eyes glow. My mouth went dry with the memory of how he'd tasted as he licked lips.

Had he watched for me so he could make his own preparations? Marcia greeted me with smile and a hug. I bet she even hugged him. She was like that, hugging everyone.

"Asher! It's so good to see you. Dallas must've agreed with you."

"Lady, it's hot in Texas. I loved it." I grinned at her.

She rolled her eyes as she grabbed my arm and hauled my ass in *his* direction. My pictures of Nick's ranch covered her conference table.

Nick extended his right hand, and I braced myself for the shock of touching him again. I shook his hand, his warm palm against my cooler one.

"Asher, good to see you again. I understand you're on permanent staff here now."

I released his hand. "Things couldn't be better. Working for Marcia is a dream come true."

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It was only a small lie. My love life sucked, and not in a gay man's good way. I pulled a chair out for Marcia, seating her at the round table. She'd said a few things, enough I knew she was aware of my sexual orientation, but she loved being treated like a lady so I always acted like a gentleman in her presence. She immediately sorted through the photos.

From over her bent head, my gaze locked with Nick's. He didn't flinch or look away, and, for an instant, he allowed his regret to show. I eased onto a chair, and he sat next to me. Our knees bumped, and I moved away. He followed, touching his leg to mine, burning me through two layers of denim. I couldn't move again and risk Marcia noticing. She flipped out seven snapshots of the kitchen, including the one of Nick at the coffeemaker.

"I think we should use this one, Asher. We've agreed with Nick to publish our article on Rebel Acres the month before *Aries Rising* releases. Nick has agreed to an interview for the issue. It'll be a nice tie-in for both of us."

"When will that be?"

My contract on this shoot had been generous in the extreme. I suspected it was Marcia's way of thanking me because I'd saved her purse with all her credit cards and personal information in it. But the terms of the agreement stated I got the final draw when the magazine hit the stands. I didn't want to wait forever for the last five thousand dollars. That money would finally clear up my old debts to friends and lawyers, and I could breathe again.

"Next year. But don't worry. I have your check on my

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desk. I won't make you wait."

I smiled at her. "Thanks."

She nodded and handed the photo to Nick. He stared at it quietly for a few breaths, then nodded and handed it to me. I put it aside, starting the final pile.

We went through the entire stack of photos, narrowing the options until final choices were made. All the while, Nick's leg burned against mine.

If he thought me willing to hop between the sheets again, he would be disappointed.

Liar.

The sounds he made when he came echoed in my memory, colliding with my recollection of the taste of his skin to torture me without mercy. My underarms were wet with sweat, and I felt sticky all over. I feared my observant boss would notice my lack of composure and astutely put one and one together.

Finally, Marcia flipped over a stack she'd kept lying face down. I knew what they were—the master bedroom shots—and I knew why she'd flipped them over. She sighed.

"These are the only ones I'm not sure about, Asher. They're very different from the rest." She tapped them with a manicured pink fingernail.

"These are technically flawless, but...I don't know...somehow they lack warmth."

I couldn't say to her that "cold" was how I found that particular room the morning after my little romp there.

"Yeah, it's a beautiful room. Great colors, but, somehow, the earthy tones of the oranges overpower the cool blues. I

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used a filter to try and bring down the heat, and it just didn't seem to translate well."

She looked at me, blinked, then sat back in her chair. I prayed she wouldn't comment. Instead, she went one question worse. "Would both of you be willing to re-shoot the room?"

Nick's leg abruptly jerked away from mine. "The shooting schedule on *Aries Rising* is pretty tight. I don't know if I can work in a few days at the ranch. Do you really need pictures of my bedroom for the layout?"

Marcia nodded vigorously. The bedroom shots would be the deciding purchase factor for a lot of his fans. A photo of where Nick Light slept was a good ten thousand extra copies sold. We all knew that. I had no way out, not one legitimate reason to refuse.

"I can do whatever you assign me to do, boss. You and Nick work out the details of when, and off I'll go."

Marcia patted my hand, still looking at me as if she was seeing me for the first time. She made a second attempt to convince Nick.

"What do you say, Nick? You can wrap early on Friday, fly up to the ranch, and be back Sunday afternoon. A day in the Montana air to clear your head?"

"I don't think..."

Strange words suddenly fell from my lips. "Nick, let's go get lunch and discuss it. I'll buy, because without you and Marcia taking a chance on me, I'd be living in my Buick by now. I can call my boss"—I flashed a smile at Marcia—"and let her know the date for the airline ticket."

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Nick looked out the window, then that Celtic green gaze drilled into mine. “Let me call the set, then we can go.” He cocked an eyebrow at me as he flipped open his cell phone. “I’ve seen your car. *I’ll* drive.”

Marcia gave me the thumbs up, grinning ear-to-ear. “I’ll call ahead. Nick? Reservation at The Steakout?”

He nodded, abruptly turning to the window and barking out a few orders to some unfortunate on the other end of the connection.

Marcia mouthed a silent “Bring me your meal receipt” at me. I nodded, although I could at least now afford to buy a decent lunch. Nick concluded his call, and we all rose. Marcia gave Nick a hug and thanked him for considering a re-shoot. When the elevator doors closed, I slumped against the wall, while Nick stood ramrod straight. Tension rolled off him in palpable waves.

“Relax. I’m not going to blow open your closet door.”

He didn’t look at me. “You have no idea the hell I’ve been in the last three months.”

“Directing is that much harder than acting?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

The elevator doors whisked open and I had to move fast to keep up with him. He had his keys out of his pocket, unlocking the pickup with the remote. I bypassed the running board and jumped up into the seat. He engaged the locks as soon as the doors closed. Nick turned to me. “Asher, I’m sorry. I acted like a total asshole.”

“Yeah, you did. Now move on.”

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His hand gripped my knee. “Just like that?”

I shrugged. “You want some queen scene, go piss on someone else. Does this thing have air conditioning?”

Nick stuck his keys in the slot and turned the switch, bringing the smooth-running engine to life. Hot air blasted out the vents, quickly moderating. Desperate to cool down, I undid a few buttons and held my shirt open to catch the artificial breeze. He wasn’t ready to let it go yet.

“You have every right to be angry at me.”

“Who says I’m not? I am, and no apology in the world is enough. So just fucking move on, Nick.”

He glared at me. “I don’t know what to do with that, man. I don’t know what to do about you, either.”

My heart started beating in a strange, uneven rhythm. He leaned toward me, shoulders and palms open. He looked worried, but earnest. Years of sizing up other men based on their body language told me he was being honest with me.

I remembered his heat as I went into him, his strong thighs gripping my sides. That memory trapped me, held me there throughout my days and nights, but I’d sooner have my jailor than his.

His closet door didn’t just protect his Hollywood career...it held him hostage. All his money couldn’t free him.

What did he want with me? And I knew—I knew—he wanted me. I wouldn’t fit in his rich man’s world so where did that leave him? Or me?

Hell, I wasn’t even sure what I wanted with him. I moved in different circles. Poorer circles. People in my world worked

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nine-to-five jobs with paychecks barely stretching one Friday to the next, and didn't give a fuck what the world thought about them.

It was better to forget we'd ever put our hands on each other. We should chalk it up to a moment of foolishness or gross stupidity.

Only, I couldn't rid myself of the memory of him beneath me. At night, in my solitary bed, I could still feel his body so tightly around mine. When I slept, his eyes were there, always waiting for me, his gaze full of desire, hope and wariness.

What did I want, and how far could I push him to get it?

The pickup protected our lower bodies from anyone with a camera. I reached out, laid my hand on his thigh, and slid it up to cup his balls. He stared at me with the witchy look he always gave me in my dreams.

"Just so you know, Nick, there's no halfway with me. It's all in, balls out, or nothing."

He took a deep, ragged breath, and kissed me.

CHAPTER 6

I wasn't fooled by his kiss. He was far from certain about whatever decisions he'd made. If I wanted to know them, I'd have to pry them out of him, one at a time. I kissed him back as tentatively as he kissed me, secretly thrilled he had the nerve to brush his lips to mine at all in a public place. Nick pulled back and straightened, hastily looking around the parking lot. I looked, too, and didn't see anyone. I squeezed his thigh.

"Even if someone were watching, Nick, they'd never see through the window tint."

I was going to have my hands full with him, but he was worth the struggle. *We* would be worth it. Even as I thought it,

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I realized how foolish I was to think I could actually have a relationship with someone like him. He was Nick Light, for God's sake!

Nick looked at me, shaken. "That was incredibly stupid. I can't believe I kissed you in broad daylight in a parking lot."

I patted his leg again, trying to reassure him. "Come on. Drive. It doesn't matter where."

"Yes, it does. Marcia called for a reservation. We're going." He put the pickup in reverse and backed out of the parking space. "What if the restaurant called asking if we were coming?"

"What if they do, Nick? Is it the end of the world? Talk to me. Do you want to spend the rest of your life hiding from something that's such a deep part of who you are?"

He guided the truck into the flow of traffic. "No. I don't. After *Aries Rising*, I'm scaling back on the work. It's not like I need the money. Maybe my ulcer will heal."

"You say that, but if your directing debut is successful, you'll be hot to do another film."

Nick sighed. "I know. But I can't keep living the way I've been."

It was time for some more tough love. "I'm not crawling in the closet for you, or anyone else for that matter. I won't be some dirty little secret you pay to keep happy and quiet."

He slid into the parking lot at the steak house and slammed on the brakes. His fists clenched the steering wheel, and he didn't look at me.

"Don't push at me, Asher. I don't know what you want

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from me. For all I know, you do want money.”

“Listen up, asshole. I don’t know what the fuck I want with you and your fucking insecurities, but money isn’t it! I just got my life back on track. Why should I screw it up with a head case like you?”

Nick looked at me and the panic in his eyes brought me up short. I held my hands up in a submissive gesture. “Alright, alright. I’m backing off.”

“Button your shirt, for God’s sake.”

I yanked my shirt open and thrust my chest at him. The tension in him snapped. He made a sound that was part cough, part choke, part laugh, and rubbed his eyes. I buttoned my shirt, even tucking it in without being told. He observed without comment, his gaze on the bulge my half-hard dick made inside my cotton briefs.

“Okay, Nick, I’ll go easy on you while you find your footing with me.”

“Maybe we should blow off lunch and go someplace private.”

I re-zipped and snapped. “We are not falling into a bed today, Mr. Light. I’m shaking, so I know you are. We need to calm down.”

His voice held a bit of rueful sarcasm. “No, Asher, that is not what I need, but we’ll do it your way.”

“Your dick won’t fall off.”

He mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like “fuck you,” as he exited the truck, slamming the door behind him. My refusal to have a matinee with him hadn’t really

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annoyed him, and I knew it. I grinned and followed him inside.

Now if I could help keep that nervous tension from taking control of him again, we might have a good lunch. I caught up to him in time to see the hostess slip him her phone number. Nick smiled politely and stuck it in his shirt pocket. He flashed me a guarded look to see how I handled it. I shrugged.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he took his seat. “It happens all the time, and there’s nothing that can be done about it.”

I took the chair across from him. I knew his fans wouldn’t miss the opportunity to get his attention. “I understand. So what’s good here?”

We chatted about the menu for a few minutes, and we both ordered sirloins. As we worked on our appetizers, I glanced around the room and noticed a few people watching Nick, star struck. Some even snapped pictures on their cell phones.

When our entrées arrived, I leaned forward, keeping my voice low. “Can you really make it to the ranch this weekend?”

He stabbed a forkful of his baked potato. “You bet. The filming schedule is holding up, so everyone deserves a long weekend. I’ll borrow a jet, and we can fly out Friday. I’ll send a car for you, so be ready.”

“When are you going to tell me about this movie? What it’s about?” The trades had been strangely quiet about the movie. No one had been able to breach the tight security measures the studio had in place. The few sound bites of Nick I’d caught were of him giving a very generic statement of how

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pleased he was with his leading couple, nothing more.

Nick looked pensive. “This weekend.” He dropped another dollop of sour cream on his mangled spud. “Asher, what happens if we go to the ranch and find out all we have is the burning hots for each other?”

“Are you worried I’ll sell my story to some tabloid? I told you before. I’m not after your money. If this is only about sex, well, I guess we get it out of our systems and move quietly along.”

“You make it sound easy.”

I gave him a stern look. “It has to be, for both our sakes.”

We finished our meal in silence after that. I paid for lunch with my almost-brand-new *Dream Living Magazine* corporate card. Twenty minutes later, he pulled up in front of the magazine’s building to drop me off. We’d not spoken during the ride back, except to comment on the bad driving habits of the natives. He hesitated, then put the truck in park.

“Friday’s a long way off, Asher. If you’re not doing anything, come by the studio. I’ll leave your name at the gate.”

I was surprised and pleased he’d made the offer, but I didn’t think he was ready for me to show up on his set. And I wasn’t ready to show up there and get that straight-vibe cold shoulder he’d perfected. I shook my head.

“Someday soon I may do that, but not tomorrow.” I fished a business card out of my wallet and handed it to him. “My cell phone number is on there. Call me later, if you want. I’ll probably answer—if it’s you.”

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He froze, his gaze flicking to mine, then he grinned. "Maybe I should come over?"

"Let's not rush it, okay? Calm, remember?"

"Okay. Calm, it is. I gotta get back." His hand covered mine. "It's really good to reconnect with you, Asher. You can't imagine how relieved I am you even spoke to me."

"Yeah, well, I'm glad you showed for the meeting, too. I hoped you would." I flipped my hand over and wrapped my fingers around his. "You'd better go."

Nick squeezed my hand. "See you Friday."

I hopped out of the pickup, hating I had to let him go, but we both had business we couldn't ignore. I smiled at him, then he was gone, and the glow faded from my world.

* * *

Marcia was delighted when I told her the shoot was on for this coming weekend. When I told her Nick said he'd borrow a jet, she gave me piercing look and told me to be careful I didn't get my heart broken. I didn't see any point in telling her she might be too late with that bit of sage advice.

I wondered how much she knew about Nick, just how close a friendship they shared, but declined to ask. It would be better to find out from him.

My lady boss also handed me an envelope with my next assignment and a hefty expense check to go along with the final payment for Nick's shoot. We sat at her conference table and went over the job. I'd never been to Miami, Florida, although I always thought I'd like to go. Maybe drive down to

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Key West and scope out the Life. Now, with the thing happening with Nick, I wondered if there was a way to get him to come along. A few days on the beach might do him some good, help him relax, but I looked at the dates and knew it wouldn't work for this trip.

Scheduled for the next week, the airline ticket for the Florida shoot was in the envelope. I thanked Marcia once more for taking a chance on me. She'd heard it a few times before, but I didn't think I'd ever stop saying it. Her willingness to stretch her hand out to me had saved my life.

With a little money in the bank, I stopped at my favorite camera shop to look for some new goodies. It had been a while since I could splurge on the latest technologies, and the time had come to indulge. It took me two hours to make up my mind, but I walked out with a new digital and several sleeves of old-fashioned film. I still liked to shoot black-and-white with my old Pentax ME for the ambience.

The mood was on me to do just that, so I wandered about one of the city parks until I'd clicked off six rolls of film. Developing two hundred sixteen prints in my new, but too small, darkroom setup would give me plenty to do tonight and tomorrow. Maybe it would help keep my mind off Nick and the weekend.

I doubted it.

His truck wasn't parked in front of my apartment, which surprised me. Even though he was older than I am, I sensed I was the one with relationship experience. That gave me a lot to consider. I poured a glass of iced tea and retreated to my

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shady patio to read the manual on my new toy and think.

What had been the catalyst for Nick to crack open his closet door with me? He wasn't inexperienced with gay sex, so he had outlets, albeit very discreet ones. Nick Light didn't get caught by the paparazzi running with any unpartnered gays, ever. Even when he was making movies with guys who were out, no one had ever gotten pictures.

He said he planned to cut back on his workload. Being a fan and following along in the trades, I knew he'd purchased the property in Montana three years ago, and the house had taken fifteen months to complete. It wasn't much of a stretch to surmise he'd made a nest to feather with someone out of the public eye.

The shift to directing movies instead of acting in them wasn't an unusual one. Lots of actors did it with great success. And, like a lot of other A-listers, if directing didn't work out, he would not have lost a thing. He could step back into acting, if he chose to, no harm done.

He was at least forty-three and looked five or six years younger, a big plus in an industry that catered to youth. Was he having a mid-life crisis? For a gay man, youth and good looks were important. If your preferences ran to macho, you wanted to nail the most virile and attractive studs, or have them nail you. This I understood all too well.

I wasn't egotistical enough to believe for one moment he'd spied my scrawny ass and lost his mind, no matter how it appeared on the surface.

Everyone needed touch. Was it as simple as he'd denied

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his true nature for too long? If I wanted to be a part of his life—and I wanted that more than I wanted air—I needed to figure out where his head was. Right now, what was best for Nick was best for us. That wasn't going to be easy to reconcile with the excitement I had over my re-blooming career and my renewed passion for my craft.

Twilight brought a few flying insects to my vine-shrouded retreat. I poured the dregs of my tea into a flowerpot, amused that the huge coleus in that crock obviously liked caffeine. The hinges of the back gate creaked. Boot heels clicked on the concrete walk, then stopped just behind me. He stood so close I felt his body heat. I smiled, but didn't turn around.

“What took you so long?”

CHAPTER 7

“Getting up enough nerve to call Marcia and ask for your address, that’s what took so long.” Nick squeezed my shoulder before he dropped into the chair beside me. “And then she didn’t even ask why I wanted to know. Are you alone?”

“Do you see anyone else here?”

“I thought a great looking guy like you would a few admirers hanging around.”

I snorted. “It seems like I do have *one*. You want a beer? Iced tea?”

Nick rose to his feet and started to pace restlessly around the patio. I bet he’d say yes if I asked him if he wanted sex, but I wasn’t going there. I stood and stretched to work out the

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kinks from sitting so long.

"I'll bring you a glass of tea. Don't run off."

He perched on the low block wall surrounding the patio and folded his hands in his lap in a good boy pose. I hoped my neighbors didn't come outside and startle him. They liked to live large and party hearty on the other side of the patio wall. When I brought the tea out, he came back to the table. I needed to get him to talk.

"So tell me about *Aries Rising*. I'm really curious about the name, the meaning behind it."

"Well, I'm an Aries, born April 4."

I grinned at him. "Are you going to tell me the year?"

Humor flashed in his gaze, and I chuckled at his not unexpected answer. It confirmed my suspicions his publicist had shaved off two years.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "You're a Libra, aren't you?"

"I think astrology is a bunch of bull."

"Then you'd be a Taurus, but I know better. You were born the twenty-fourth of September."

Unease crept up my spine. It had little to do with Nick, being more a leftover emotion from the identity theft. The thought of people knowing my personal information made me uncomfortable, and it must have shown on my face. Nick grasped my arm.

"Asher? Hey."

I explained why it bothered me he had obtained that information. It wasn't a secret, but usually a person voluntarily

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shared their birthdays with others as they grew closer.

He squeezed my arm, then let his hand drop away. Certain he knew more—and I didn't want to hear it from him—I steered the conversation back to his directorial debut. Nick looked thoughtful.

“Several themes. Underlying theme—a man on a journey of self-discovery. Obvious theme—man gets the girl. Plot point—the universe works in mysterious ways.”

“So what does the man discover? That he likes boys?”

“Ha. Ha. Not on the big screen from a major studio in this town. No, it's more like he had the inner strength all along to face his demons and conquer them.”

Now I touched him, covering his hand with mine. “And what demons does he conquer?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “The one that told him, all his life, failure is the worst thing that can happen. When he tries to gain what he wants above all else, and he fails, he discovers the victory was in the attempt, not the outcome.”

“A bit autobiographical, there, Nick?”

He looked at me oddly and shook his head. I sensed a great sadness in him, which surprised me. Nick reached out with his free hand and broke off a sprig of the spearmint growing along the edge of the concrete. The minty fragrance filled the air around us.

“It's basically my father's story. More than anything, he wanted to play major league baseball, but he wasn't good enough. Year after year, he watched his buddies get called up to the big league for their shot, while he was stuck in double-A

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ball. He couldn't see his wisdom and discipline inspired those who knew him to try harder and move up. He was almost forty when he met my mother, and she was the one who finally helped him see all he had done for the people who loved and respected him." Nick let out a long sigh.

"I changed the backdrop to a corporate setting, but the story's the same. The guy is so good in his niche, he never gets promoted. Makes him bitter until the girl comes along. I think it will appeal to the ladies. They love to change men and this is a success story for them. My father knew he owed his move to club management to my mother."

It surprised and pleased me Nick had opened up so much about the movie. I'd not expected to get such detail out of him. His father's career in front office management with a major league team was well known. Unlike myself, Nick had grown up in a household where the money had flowed. His father's eventual fame in the sports world, although not as an athlete, had opened doors for Nick when he decided to become an actor.

The tabloids had made much ado over the fact Nick and his father had been estranged when his father died four years ago. Had they reconciled? I asked him.

He shook his head. "No. I told him about me after my mother died. He'd been so proud of his movie star son and then I confessed I liked to have sex with men. On his deathbed, he told me to find a woman and get married. He just couldn't accept his son as a homosexual. It hurt."

I understood that, too. Nick loved his father, enough to tell

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the world his story and make his dad a larger-than-life hero. I thought of my family, all deceased now. My twin sister, Alicia, had known I was gay, but not our parents. They'd been killed in an auto accident when Alicia and I were twenty, and I'd never had the courage to tell them.

Nick jerked his hand out of mine and swatted at the air. "You've got bugs."

"Is that how you try and wrangle your way inside?"

Even in the deepening darkness, I saw the sultry look in his eyes. Sexual energy arced between us. It would be so easy to fall into bed with him again. Nick put his arm over my shoulders and drew me to him. Heat flashed through me as his lips found mine. Before I thought about it, I was sprawled over the chair arm, half in his lap.

His embrace tightened, holding me as he deepened the kiss. I put everything I had into letting him know just how badly I wanted him, then I pulled back. His restless hands caressed my back as I teased his nipple, and his erection pressed against me. I clenched my fists in his shirt to keep from touching him.

"I guess I'd better go, huh?"

I heard the hope in his voice and wished I could let him stay, but I knew it wouldn't be a smart move.

"Yeah. You've got to be on the set in the morning, probably pretty early. I have homework tomorrow to get ready to go to Miami next week."

He tensed. "Miami?"

I dug my fingers into his tight shoulders, massaging. "Yes.

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Marcia is sending me to Miami for a shoot. I've got a checklist and, since I'll be in Montana over the weekend, I need to do it tomorrow."

Nick blew out a long breath. The question came, his voice sharp. "Okay. When were you going to tell me?"

I reined in my temper, reminding myself the man was new at this. I wondered if he'd be surprised to realize how strongly he vibed "relationship" at this moment. My money said it would shock the hell out of him.

"I just did, Nick. I only found out after lunch today."

He kissed me again, and his lips asked for forgiveness. Mine said all was forgiven. I rested my forehead on his, not wanting to let him go. His breath mingled with mine. Such a small thing when I wanted so much more.

"Asher, are you playing hard to get for a reason?"

I was playing for keeps so I leveled with him. "Nick, past the next fuck, I don't know what you want, and you don't know what I want. Don't you think we'd better step back and find out? If it turns out the next fuck is it, I want to know going into it. I don't want to wake up and find you gone."

I didn't said "again," but it hung in the air between us. A fine tremor coursed through him as he took a deep breath. I sensed his anger building. His voice cracked like a whip. "You were the one who left the bed...not me!"

That he had right, and I'd had ample time to regret it. I managed to uncurl myself off the man and the chairs without landing ass-first on the hard concrete. I knelt between his knees, my hands on his thighs.

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“Looking back, I wish I hadn’t. I was...” Finding the right word proved difficult. “I was unsettled.”

He glared down at me out of that peculiar stillness he possessed. “You think I wasn’t?”

I slid my hands to his waist. Through the thin fabric of his shirt, his skin burned my palms, a tangible reminder that, for all his tough Hollywood demeanor, in this, Nick needed to be handled gently.

“I have a lot of questions, Nick. None of them carry accusations or condemnations. They’re just questions. We came at each other way too fast, man. Are you ready to hear a confession, of sorts?”

“Probably not, but if you don’t say it now, I’ll be pissed.”

“You already are, so okay, here goes. Eight years ago, I saw my first Nick Light movie. From then on, it’s been your face I see in the dark above me at night. You know what I mean, so don’t say you don’t. Yeah, I’ve been with the paparazzi when you’ve been on the red carpet, but I never sold a shot. Never posted them on web. Nothing. Nada. They were for me.”

His hands finally reached for me, resting on my shoulders. “I want to believe you, Asher. I really do.”

“I lost my house, Nick, and I still didn’t sell one of those pictures. I owed thousands to a lawyer to clear up the mess of having my identity stolen, and then the culprit committing assault and the police coming after me. Most of those shots are pretty good, if I say so myself. I could’ve gotten enough to end my financial woes. But I didn’t do it.”

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Under my hands, he relaxed, albeit not completely. He looked away, then met my gaze again.

“I don't know what to say to that sort of sacrifice. Why would give up your home for a few pictures?”

“Because of who you are. Because of who I am. It's my choice to make my living honestly, with contracts and agreements and good will. Those pictures were outside of that. Personal.”

His fingers massaged the back of my damp neck. I closed my eyes and savored the warmth radiating out from under his touch. Would taking him to bed tonight be a mistake?

Until he gave me something to make me believe I might be more to him than scratching an itch he couldn't always reach, making love right now felt risky. He started toying with the shaggy locks that touched my collar.

“I'm not sure I'm worthy of a man with principles.”

My opinion differed, but I admit to bias. I needed him to know I'd thought long and hard about the “what ifs” of being with him. I might not have all the answers, but I wouldn't stop looking for them.

“Why aren't you asking me if I'm not simply some poor, star-struck fan with a chance to live out his fantasy with his dream lover?”

His knuckles grazed along my jaw line, over my bristly five o'clock shadow. “I thought about that, and apparently so have you. What conclusions did you draw?”

“I'm not a star-struck kid, but I won't lie and tell you there isn't a pinch of having the fantasy for me, because there is.

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Wanna know the moment you ceased to have that movie star aura with me?"

Nick snorted. "Sure."

"When you planted your hand in the middle of my chest and warned me about invading your space."

Smiling, he pulled me up into his arms. I forgot about my aching knees as he kissed me. Heat licked through my belly, melting my resolve. His embrace tightened as he whispered against my mouth, "Please, Asher."

CHAPTER 8

I knew the risks of falling headlong back to bed with Nick, but I no longer cared. He was here now, and need sank greedy claws in places I couldn't reach alone. I ended the kiss and let him go. His hands dropped away from me.

"You're right. Bad idea. I'll go, for now. But one of these days, you won't say no." Nick rolled to his feet and started for the walk.

I grabbed his arm. "I'm saying 'yes,' Nick. Yes." I tugged him toward the house. "Come inside."

He froze, drilling into my guts with a look that dissolved every coherent thought in my mind except having him.

"Now *I'm* not sure. I don't want to mess this up, Asher."

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I pulled harder, and he moved two steps. “Did I say I was sure? Did you hear me say that?”

“Nope. I didn’t hear you say that.” He started to back me toward the door. I fumbled with the contrary knob, then the door opened.

My little apartment was nothing like his ranch, but it was nice enough, and it had a new, big mattress on my second-hand bed. I laced my fingers through his and led him to my bedroom. I flipped on the small lamp on the one dresser I had. It had been dark at the ranch. I wanted to see him this time, see his face as he came.

Nick slowly unbuttoned my shirt and slipped it off my shoulders, tossing it aside. That uncanny stillness was about him again, all emotion banked down, held in check. I looked at him—really looked at him—and saw a man who knew his youth had faded. He was still handsome, beautiful even, but the years showed, and that was the proverbial kiss of death in his world. The famous green eyes glowed with arousal. I unbuttoned his shirt and hung it on a hook just inside my closet.

Together we reached for each other’s belts. By some unspoken agreement, we didn’t touch yet, not really. We kept caresses above the belt. I kicked off my shoes and stepped out of my jeans as Nick sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his boots. He hung his jeans on the hook with the shirt. Even now, we were both aware he couldn’t walk out of here looking wrinkled.

Finally naked, a sort of shyness was upon both of us, more

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potent than anything I'd ever known. I flipped the covers back on the bed. Nick came to me and put his palm flat against my chest, catching a few curly hairs between his fingers. His voice was husky with desire. "Does this still make me real for you?"

I nodded and echoed his touch, his chest hair crisp under my hand. It pleased me that he'd not waxed his chest like so many other men in Hollywood these days, gay or straight. He grasped my hips and pulled me to him. We stood belly-to-belly, our hands restless on each other with light caresses across shoulders and backs. Nick kept pulling my pelvis to his, and our cocks, heavy between us, rubbed.

Unable to stand the poignancy of the moment any longer, I kissed him. His lips opened, his tongue flicking out to tease mine. The fingers on my hips dug deeper into what little flesh I had over the bone there. The last vestiges of nervousness vaporized as we embraced. Never breaking the kiss, I pulled him down onto the bed, my pulse quickening as his body covered mine.

When it came to sex, I went top, bottom, blowjob, flip me over, tie me up, whatever. Mostly, I was a top, but for Nick, I could become a real just-do-me sort of slut. My sense of Nick was that he was more reserved. I wanted to break through that restraint, to drive him to where he'd feast on me. But tonight was for more important things. We needed to build trust between us. I held back, and knew he did, too.

Where before we'd gone at each other like sex-starved twenty-somethings, now we took the time to explore. His skin

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glowed in the lamplight. I found a spot under his arm where he was ticklish, and the silvery line where a plastic surgeon had removed his appendectomy scar. He kissed the depression on my thigh from a bicycle crash, where the handle bar had carved out a chunk of muscle and I'd needed ten stitches.

I teased his sac and the sensitive area behind it. The tender flesh puckered around my bold finger, but Nick sighed into my mouth. He nuzzled at my chest, suckling at my nipples until it made me fidgety from the shocks it sent to my groin. Slowly, bit-by-bit, we relaxed into each other, trust growing, sexual tension building. I tasted the salt of his dewed skin as I licked my way down his torso, finally taking his rigid cock in my mouth. His thighs vibrated against my arm.

Then his lips were on me, hot, searing. He held my penis lightly, rolling the foreskin and driving me crazy when his tongue teased my glans. I did it to him, and his pelvis surged upward. Back and forth we went, learning what pleased the other most, until Nick slipped a finger inside me. The heat coiled in my belly flared hotly, and a sunburst of light exploded behind my closed eyelids. My muscles clenched and I released him for a moment as the breath clogged in my throat so I couldn't warn him I was coming.

The orgasm hovered on the edge of my senses, then seized me, sending me skyward. I fell back into myself, needing air, and sucked in a deep breath. His hand was on my head, urging me back to him. I caressed his hairy thigh and slid my mouth down over his cock. Nick moaned, an unintelligible syllable that, coupled with his sudden stiffness, gave me just enough

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warning.

Scalding hot semen hit the back of my throat as Nick climaxed. I pleased him until, spent, his head dropped onto my thigh as his hands moved over my ass in a final lingering caress. His sweat-drenched belly quivered under my cheek. I licked a few glistening drops of semen from his nest of dark pubic hair, then kissed my way up his torso to his lips.

Nick was warm and relaxed in my arms. It was good to hold him, to feel all the tension washed out of him. I didn't want him to leave, but he couldn't risk being photographed as he left my place in the morning. He wasn't ready for the world to know his secrets, and *we* weren't ready to face any Hollywood backlash as a couple, but it seemed Nick thought differently. He nuzzled at my neck.

"I am not getting out of this bed. Do you have a shirt I can borrow in the morning?"

"Sure, but do you really want to waltz outta here in the daylight?"

"Just set your alarm for four a.m."

"You're a real pain in the ass, Nick Light." I rolled over him and reached out a long arm to grab the clock and set it before we fell asleep. Task accomplished, I looked down at him. "Thirsty?"

"Yeah, but don't get up. I can't remember when I felt this loose. I just want to sleep."

I wanted to make love some more, but I knew by his breathing he was down for the count. There were so many things I wanted to talk to him about, but I let them go for now.

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He'd taken a big step coming here.

Caution still needed to be my watchword if I wanted him to be a part of my life. If he got spooked, by me or by the media, he'd be gone and I'd never get close to him again. All his money couldn't protect him from one damning photo that would flash around the world in moments with its potential to end his career as he now knew it.

I knew I might end up hurt, but right now, all that mattered slept in my arms. I closed my eyes and committed the feel of his warm, strong body against mine to memory, then I let sleep take me.

* * *

The alarm went off, a claxon sound that brought me crashing out of a dream to find Nick sprawled across me reaching to silence the noise. I smacked his bare ass. He managed to grunt at me, then whine with a sleep raspy voice, "It can't be four already. I just closed my eyes."

I struggled to get him off me so I could breathe. "It is. What kind of masochist gets up at this hour?"

Nick tickled my underarm. I bucked him off and he flopped, face down, into his pillow, mumbling at me. I fumbled with the lamp until I found the switch and turned it on.

"It'll be daylight in an hour. I have to get out of here." He turned his head and I viewed one bloodshot green orb. "How can you wake up and be ready to go?"

"Usually, I can't, but I had this hot stud in my bed last

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night and I'm hoping he's got a little left for me this morning."

"Sure, babe."

I rubbed his back and laughed. "I don't think so because I didn't put coffee on last night. You'll have to stop."

"Fucked and it didn't even feel good," he grouched, referring to the lack of java. He groaned as he sat up. "Bathroom?"

"Next door to the left."

I got up and opened the closet door, looking for a shirt for him to wear, aware the shower was running. We were basically the same size, so the only decision I had to make at this ungodly hour was color. I tossed a sea-green polo that would complement his eyes and show off his broader shoulders onto the bed for him. When he came back to the bedroom, he was damp and smelled like soap. Very sexy on him. I forced myself to stop sniffing his neck and went on my own errand down the hall. He had his jeans on when I got back.

"Have lunch with me today, Asher. Say about one o'clock? I'll leave a press pass for you at the studio gate. They'll direct you to where we are."

I paused, thinking. "Yeah. Okay. Won't a press pass from you raise a few eyebrows?"

"Sure. Would you rather leave your camera at home? One or two pictures from the set will net you some good spending money." He slipped my shirt over his head and tucked it in.

I watched, wondering if he thought he had to pay me for last night. "That's not necessary. I told you I'm not a shot

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chaser, and I meant it.”

Nick came and stood in front of me, his hands on my bare shoulders. “I like you naked, Myles. It makes me horny. Now listen up. Come and take a few pictures of the set. Sell ’em. You make a few bucks, and I get a mention in the Hollywood buzz machine.” One hand slid down my belly to fondle my genitals.

I grinned at him. “I like that, Light. Keep stroking it. All right, I’ll get you some buzz. You tell me where to shoot, and I will.”

His free hand snaked around my waist. His lips stopped an inch from mine. “Don’t shoot in my hand.”

“Just kiss me and go to work, you horny old man. Where *did* you park your truck, by the way?”

“Two blocks over. I hope to hell it’s still there.”

“Me, too.” I knew the neighborhood.

That fancy truck might be a prime target, and not because a lot of people knew it was his. Most people watching for Nick Light watched for his un-star-like choice of cars, a white Monte Carlo.

He closed the distance and brushed his lips to mine.

The kiss was soft, gentle, full of a clinging longing and even sweeter promises. It was easy to believe he’d choose to be with me, now and tomorrow. It was a lot for a poor working schmuck like me to hope for. I pulled away. “Tell me now, Nick, because I won’t ask you this on the set. Will you come back tonight?”

The smile faded from his face and I got a glimpse of the

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dedicated director. “Damned if I know. We’re shutting down filming for the week early, remember? If anything goes wrong today, we’ll be working until midnight. Don’t sit here waiting.”

He was right, and I agreed. Nick kissed me again, almost playfully, smiled and disappeared into the dark hallway. A few seconds later, I heard the backdoor close.

I flopped down on the bed, buried my face in his pillow, and breathed in his scent. He might not make it back tonight, but Friday night we’d be at his ranch.

We’d have two nights to indulge ourselves, and two mornings where we didn’t have to say goodbye.

The possibilities boggled the mind.

CHAPTER 9

I dozed for another hour or so, then put coffee on to brew while I took a shower. The hot water teased me as it ran over my torso, streaming down my turgid penis and keeping alive the memory of Nick's lips sliding over me. It was a great way to start the day. Only actually having sex would have been better.

The checklist for the Miami trip was on the kitchen table. I padded around the apartment, naked, packing all the equipment on the list and deciding it could all go to Montana with me, too. That way, I could repack it all on Sunday and just leave it in the cases until I got to Florida. The only camera I kept out was my favorite little digital. If Nick had the actors

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pose for me today, it would be all I needed.

I prepared for the weekend, too, trying to rein in my excitement, telling myself that what Nick and I had was nowhere near a relationship. Even beyond his wealth, and my lack thereof, our lives were very different, as were our needs. But, damn it, I wanted him. It was more than the fact I'd dreamed about him for years. I liked him, as a man, as a person, maybe even I was falling in love with him. I wasn't sure what to do with that, but I couldn't stop it.

He wasn't Mr. Perfect, and I liked that, too. Nick Light made mistakes, just like everyone else. He had fears and insecurities, and more ego than anyone needed. Talent wasn't enough in Tinseltown, so he had to have mental toughness and a sense of the politic.

But there was a vulnerable Nick Light, too, and I knew very few people were privileged to get close enough to him to see that side of him. I wondered again where he went for sex when women weren't enough. It was one of the things I needed to know. And he needed to know that if he wanted to be with me, he couldn't go there again. I wouldn't share him.

Suitcases and equipment readied, I pulled out the file on the Brewsters of Miami and did the preliminary outline of the shoot. A few snapshots of the exterior of the house were included, and a rough sketch of the floor plan, and that gave me starting points. It took almost two hours to chart the house, but I was satisfied when I finished. Once I arrived, I'd tweak as necessary, but the chart would cut hours off the shoot. Homeowners liked that, and I'd have extra time to enjoy the

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different waters of the Atlantic Ocean. I didn't need much time on the beach, just an hour or two to soak up the east coast flavor and get a souvenir baggie of sand.

Memories of the night were bright inside me. Part of me longed to shout, "He came!" to the world. Another part of me laughed at myself over the schoolboy urge. And yet there was part of me that knew, come Monday, I might never see him again.

Nick Light had garnered awards to back up his acting talent. If he played a role with me, how would I know for sure until the final curtain fell? If he said he cared for me, would I have trust enough in him to believe it? Another reason to take our time and really get to know each other.

Being honest with myself, I didn't trust the feelings I had for him. They were so wild and intense, cutting new paths to parts of my soul I'd never known were there. If I didn't recognize my own heart, how could I trust his?

My cell phone chimed. I silenced the alarm and hurried to dress. I didn't want to be late getting across town. The traffic gods were with me and I arrived at the studio thirty minutes early.

Gate security looked me up and down, twice, before asking for my identification. Then he looked me up and down a third time before handing me a badge and giving me directions to the next security checkpoint. The fourth guard finally pointed at a parking space and the visitor's entrance to Nick's set. I stepped through the door to uproarious laughter. Even the guard inside the door grinned.

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“Stunt gone wrong,” was all he offered me as he walked me across the darkened interior of the warehouse toward the brightly lit set. I heard Nick ask everyone to try and pull it together for one more take. He glanced toward the door and spotted me, but didn’t acknowledge me with a nod or a smile. I wasn’t surprised or disappointed. I’d expected him to be all business.

Turning back to the actors, he clapped his hands and called for order. Everyone settled down and got to their marks. Nick stepped back into the shadows.

“Okay, people. Are we ready?”

A chorus of “Yes,” came back to him. He gestured and the cameras started to roll. “Take a deep breath, and when you’re ready, Ian.”

I recognized Ian Morrison, the leading man in the movie. At twenty-seven, Ian was one of the hottest young actors in Hollywood these days. He rolled his shoulders and nodded at a camera. A second later, he started his lines. I watched, fascinated. I’d never been on a set before. At the appropriate moment, Ian grabbed his leading lady and backed her toward the sofa. She resisted. Ian swept her up in his arms and dropped on the couch with her beneath him. It tipped over backwards, sending the actors rolling, and everyone else to their knees laughing again, including the director.

“Okay! Okay! That’s it! Go to lunch everyone. Be back at three. We’ll get that thing braced up, once and for all, and try it again.”

Nick stood, hands on his hips, as the set cleared. A couple

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of the stagehands righted the sofa and told him they'd brace it before they took a break. Nick thanked them, then turned to the security guard beside me.

"Thanks, Rudy. I'll take care of our guest from here."

The guard nodded and strolled back to his seat by the door. Nick held out his hand. I gave him my best macho handshake. His hand was cold, his touch brief, his voice very businesslike. "Welcome to the set, Asher. Hungry?"

"Thanks for inviting me. Yes, I could eat."

He nodded. "Follow me, then."

Nick's vibe felt very neutral to me, even studied. He kept a wary eye on his surroundings, knowing that cameras lurked everywhere. I took my cues from him and stayed on my best behavior. We joined his personnel at the commissary, settling at a table with one of his assistants, a woman from makeup, and one of the sound guys. His assistant, Leah, a thirty-something woman with an intelligent blue gaze, choked on her lettuce when she saw my press pass. Nick made the introductions.

"Asher is from *Dream Living Magazine*. He's doing the shoot of the ranch and taking a few pictures here for a tie-in article for the magazine."

Leah, gawked at me. "You must be some good for Nick to let you see his ranch, and some better good to make it to his set."

I smiled at her. "I don't know about good, but I do know about contracts. Marcia Conley is a shrewd negotiator. Nick didn't stand a chance."

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Nick snorted. "Marcia caught me in a weak moment. Hey, Asher, why don't you get a shot of me and Leah?"

I kicked him under the table as I slid my chair back and lifted my Pentax. "Lean in closer...now...smile." I snapped the photo. It would be a good one and it gave me the opening we needed. "You know, Nick, if you don't mind, I'd love to get a few shots of the actors on the set."

He looked pensive for a few moments. It had been his idea, but no one would ever guess that from his face. He nodded. "I'd want to approve them, but sure. It's time to leak a few photos, don't you think, Leah?"

"Lord, Nick, I told you that weeks ago." She looked at me. "You really are good, aren't you? Who are you again?"

Nick spoke up before I could answer. "Don't harangue the man, Leah. You'll make him afraid to ask you out."

I held my hands up, making them shake. "I'm already scared to ask her out, Nick."

We all laughed. This time, Nick kicked me under the table. By an unspoken agreement, we finished our lunch and excused ourselves so Nick could show me around the set. It was interesting, and clearly his cast and crew liked him. I took shot after shot of him with this one or that one, and their smiles were genuinely warm.

The pictures of Nick with Ian were money shots. Nick warned his leading man that I planned to sell them and get some Internet buzz going for *Aries Rising*. Ian flashed Nick a strange look, and, in that moment I sensed Ian was gay, and he and Nick shared a more personal relationship. Jealousy

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streaked through me, dark and ugly. Had Nick been with him? Was Ian someone Nick turned to when he was hard up?

I fiddled with my camera so they couldn't see my face. Ian excused himself. Nick's voice was so low I barely heard him. "The answer is not for the last three months, Asher."

I glanced up at his grim face. "But you have."

"Not today."

God, I felt stupid. Stupid that I thought it. Stupid that he confirmed it. Stupid that I wanted to believe him that he wasn't interested in Ian. The anger in his clipped voice brought me back to reality. "Don't do this here."

I grinned at him. "Do what?"

"That's better. Remember it." With that warning, he motioned for me to follow him. We strolled around and kept our comments strictly to business. I finally got a grip on my emotions and calmed down.

"I'm sorry, Nick. I thought I was prepared for something like that. Obviously, I'm not."

"Just don't say anything else. Not here, because I can't do it, Asher." He stopped and turned to me, his voice cool. "When we get back to the set, I'll tell you what pictures to take and then, my friend, you will leave."

My only option was to agree. I'd promised to keep my cool and I'd blown it. Nick had every right to be angry.

"All right. I blew it. Come over tonight so we can talk about it."

"I don't think so. We're going to be here until at least eight, and tomorrow we need to burn through a few things.

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You just be ready at noon when the limo will pick you up.”

My hands itched to touch him, but I didn’t dare. He wasn’t in the mood to let his anger pass, and that hurt more than I ever could imagine it would.

“I’ll be ready. May I say something? Just one thing?”

He stared at me, his gorgeous green eyes dark with his displeasure. “Make it good.”

This wasn’t the place or the time, but I was sick to my soul in the face of his carefully controlled wrath. I had to say it and hope he understood. “I’ve got it bad for you, Nick Light.”

A muscle worked in his jaw. He looked away, then drew a slow, deep breath before he wrapped his hand around the back of his neck and grimaced as he rolled his head around. “Stow it, Myles. We’ll talk about this at the ranch.”

Nick stalked off, leaving me queasy at how close I’d come to doing the unforgivable in his eyes, and with relief he hadn’t thrown me off his set. I took a deep breath and caught up to him. I had a Hollywood buzz to create before noon tomorrow.

CHAPTER 10

The online tabloids gobbled up the set photos less than ten minutes after I sent the emails. I did a little judicious sorting into five packets, each one containing six photos. Each had the same money shot of Nick and Ian, and a random assortment of five different photos so each buyer could claim they had exclusive photos.

I decided I'd not asked for enough money for the photos. Payments were too prompt. It plumped my business account nicely, but the money didn't make up for the fact I'd blown it with Nick his afternoon.

Never had I ever experienced such a surge of jealousy as I had today. I recognized the potential for disaster it held if I

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didn't get over it. Nick wouldn't tolerate it. He couldn't risk me, or anyone, losing control of his emotions in public. If he were outed in such a fashion, he'd never forgive whoever did it. Never.

Nick would come out, and probably sooner than later. I sensed he wanted it over with so he could lead a more normal life, but the man had a deep need to control the moment.

I wandered about my small apartment, restless, finally deciding to call my buddy Donny and go grab some food. I owed him a decent dinner. He'd loaned me money when I was one step away from living in my car, at a time when he was short on funds for his own needs. I'd paid him back, with a little interest, and I knew I'd always be grateful to him. Plus, Donny was straight as an arrow and when Nick learned I'd gone to dinner, he wouldn't get in a sweat over it.

We settled in the corner booth at our favorite restaurant, one that served authentic Mexican cuisine. Over guacamole and beer, I told him I'd scored with some set photos, at the invitation of Nick Light, no less, and he told me he'd landed a new ad account. We toasted our successful days. It was a good way to spend a few hours, settle down, and hopefully tire myself out enough to get a good night's sleep. Donny dropped me off at my door about eleven-thirty.

I stepped onto my patio and fear shot through me. I about pissed myself, but I realized just in time it wasn't a stranger sitting at my little table, waiting to mug me. It was Nick, glowering. His soft voice was laden with tightly controlled anger. "And where have you been, Mr. Myles?"

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If ever I had to tread carefully, it was now. He was spoiling for a fight. My chest tightened, squeezing my heart painfully. “I went to dinner with a friend. A straight friend, if that matters.”

“Oh, that certainly does.”

I eased down on the chair next to his. Last evening we’d shared hope, but what did we share now? A collective ignorance about the people who mattered in our lives?

“Nick, I’m sorry. I knew you had to have ‘friends,’ outlets. I didn’t think I’d run into one so quickly.”

“I know.”

That wasn’t reassuring in the least. “I got ten grand for five sets of photos.”

“Why’d you sell them so cheap?”

Well, crap. I *knew* I’d under priced them. “Stupidity?”

Nick didn’t reply for the space of several breaths, just long enough for me break a sweat. His dry wit tempered the anger in his voice. I wished I could see his face, but he had carefully placed his chair in a dark shadow.

“Well, you did say you weren’t paparazzi. I guess that proves it.”

“Don’t tell me what I could’ve gotten. I might queen out on you and slit my wrists.”

“I ran a search on them to see what photos you’d sold. The next batch, Mary, ask for at least three times that.”

My heart stuttered at his words. *The next time*. The weight lifted from my chest. I reached out and took his hand. His strong fingers closed around mine.

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“Nick, I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

He sighed. “You’ve said that about a dozen times. Okay, I accept your apologies, so don’t say it again.”

I changed the subject...fast. “I’m glad you came.”

He snorted. “Are you happy enough to take me inside?”

My skin prickled with anticipation—and caution. Had he come to see me just for sex? Nick lifted my hand to his lips and proved to me that he was psychic.

“Asher, I can hear you thinking. I’m not here just for your gorgeous, sexy body with its tight ass.” He leaned forward, finally moving out of the shadow. “I gave everyone a full three-day weekend. They earned it. I can spend the night or we can call for the limo now and head for the hills.”

I didn’t hesitate. I needed to be skin-to-skin with him, to show him I regretted my actions today, and to feel in his kiss and his touch that he forgave me.

“We can’t ask some poor limo driver to get out of bed at midnight. Stay.”

“I knew you’d say that. Come closer. I want to tell you something before we go to bed.”

My curiosity soared and I dutifully moved my chair even with his. Nick draped his arm across my shoulders.

“Here’s the story on Ian Morrison and me. Yeah, we went to bed and did the nasty.” He sighed. “Only five people working in Hollywood know for sure I’m gay. You make six. What anyone else may suspect, I can’t speak to. The press have never asked me, or printed any speculation, for which I’m grateful.”

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“Does Marcia Conley know?”

“I never confirmed it, but she’s one of those people whose path crosses mine in unexpected places, which is how we got to be friends. I think she’s of the opinion I am, but being a lady, she never asked.”

I didn’t have the nerve to tell him Marcia knew about me and had quickly put two and two together that something was going on between her movie star homeowner and her new photographer.

He pulled my head over and kissed my hair. I sensed he worried about my reaction to what he planned to say next.

“Asher, there are some very well-known men in Hollywood who are deep closet. No surprise. You know how it works. We manage to find each other, and when we do, we keep things quiet. We make ourselves available to each other. If that sounds like hustling, it is. It’s hustling sanity.”

“You’re right. That’s not a surprise, and I don’t need to know who they are. But I’ll be honest and say I don’t want to share you. Is Morrison one you see a lot of?”

It was a tough question for him to answer. If he confirmed my suspicion, he betrayed a trust. But I sensed he wanted to trust me, too. He sighed again, sounding tired. “Yes. Ian and I have been together three or four times in the last year or so. It’s not a big romantic thing, Asher, but there *is* friendship there. Even if we didn’t end up in bed, just spending time with someone I can relax all the way with...well, I need that from time to time. Everyone does.”

I understood, being on friendly terms with a few of my ex-

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lovers. Only, I didn't continue to have sex with them once we'd met other people and moved on. However, what Nick described wasn't like that. It was bargain basement sex, and it saddened me that he and the other men he described felt they had to resort to it to maintain the Hollywood illusion.

I took a deep breath and let it go. I couldn't fix it for anyone but Nick, and then only if he wanted to be with me and we figured out how to live as a couple. *If* we ended up a couple. I still wasn't sure if he wanted that.

"We all need friends, Nick. Anything else you need to tell me before we go inside?"

He looked at me, his gaze dark and enigmatic. "I'm tired. Can it wait until we get to the ranch?"

"The curiosity may kill me, but yes. By the way, whose jet did you borrow?"

Sheepish was the only word to describe what his expression morphed to. He looked away. I groaned. It was Ian's jet.

I plucked my keys off the table and unlocked the door. Nick followed me inside, and I heard the deadbolt snick closed as I flipped on the lights. I shivered with anticipation, wanting to feel his arms around me, but instead of coming to me, he nosed around at my camera cases.

"All this to re-shoot one room?"

"No. I packed for the Miami job, too. It's a shame you can't go along as my assistant. We'd spend an afternoon at the beach, doing nothing."

Nick grabbed my belt loops and pulled me to him. "Maybe

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after *Aries Rising* wraps, we can take in some sun.”

My spirit soared at his easy words. I hoped he meant it, that he could see us together in the future. Damn, but seducing Nick Light into a relationship was going to drive me crazy...or give me better control at keeping my mouth closed than I ever had before in my life. I slipped my arms around his waist. “You want a drink?”

He shook his head. “Maybe after we make love.”

Maybe my self-control needed more work because the question fell out of my mouth before I thought about it. “Is that what I am to you? Making love?”

Nick took a deep breath and swallowed. My heart stopped at the naked look he gave me, all barriers dropped, allowing me to glimpse his uncertainty over the course he was on.

“Yeah, Asher. I think you are.”

“I’m glad, Nick, because that’s how it feels to me.” I pulled his lips to mine and tasted his desire for me, the passion mixed with caring.

He sucked on my lower lip, then thrust his tongue into my mouth, only to withdraw. Then he did it again. I got the message. Tonight, he would drive me into that white heat, reaching deep within me to spark into life that bright flame. My knees threatened to give way as lust quivered through me. His arms tightened around me, his voice soft in my ear. “Asher? Are you okay?”

I drew a ragged breath. “Let’s go to bed.”

Not waiting for him to say yes or no, I pulled him down the hall. He didn’t protest. Our shirts flew. He tripped over my

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shoe, and I lost my balance yanking off his right boot. Somehow, we ended up in the middle of the bed, both of us naked and breathless. I rolled over, pulled a shoebox from under the bed, and flipped condoms and lube at Nick. He slipped them under a pillow to keep them handy before he twisted around to lick my belly. I urged him to go lower. He did.

With his index finger and thumb, he rolled my foreskin back, then forward, keeping his touch maddeningly light as his tongue licked the flat mushroom of my glans, catlike. My pelvis refused to lie still, rising and falling, silently begging him for more. Nick refused my pleas. I clawed my way over the linens to him, taking his foreskin as he had mine. His body jerked under my tongue, his rhythm faltering.

“God, Asher!” His hand came down with some force on my ass. I relished the sting and dug my nails into his rock hard flanks.

He changed tactics, sucking on my balls. I was past waiting. I needed him, his hardness and his heat. I released him, rolling onto my back and urging him to come to me. Nick reached for the lube. I tore open the foil packet and sheathed him. I jumped as he inserted a slick finger into me. With his other hand, he caressed my thigh.

“Been a while, Asher?”

“Yeah. I top, mostly.”

His finger was driving me crazy, sliding in and out, applying delicious pressure. A smile teased as the corner of his mouth. “You probably thought you’d never get this, the way I

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rolled on my back for you.”

I would have grinned at him, but I was trying not to moan. He’d slipped in a second finger.

He continued to speak, low and soft, eyes sparkling in the dim light. “I don’t get to bottom often, and, well, you know how it can be. I needed to go there, and you sent me flying better than I ever remember.”

Speech was nearly impossible, but I managed to gasp out a single word. “Flatterer.”

“No. Truth.”

He moved then, and my knees slid up along his sides as he came over me. The tip of his cock nudged at my lube-slicked flesh, then he was that first bit inside me. All those tiny muscles I was never aware until penetrated twitched in a riotous dance of burning pleasure, bringing him deep within me. I moaned, even as he did. Then he moved, and I became undone by sensation as he pulled back, and pushed deep again.

There was no hurry in him. He took me slowly, with great skill, and I abandoned my whole being to his care. Bent double beneath him, I was aware only of where he laid claim to my body.

His fingertips teased the back of my thighs, my belly, as I burned from the inside out. I reached up and touched his cheek. He turned his head and kissed my palm. His gaze met mine in a moment of perfect understanding. I shivered, caught in the power of forbidden male intimacy.

Many in the straight world perceived our act as one of dominance and submission, but it wasn’t. It was a melding of

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male strength—the courage to accept your own needs, as well as the will to meet those of another man. What Nick gave me was more than he took from me, and I embraced it fully.

Pressed tightly to the bed, his lips on mine, I reached for the moment of climax. Nick slipped his hand between our sweat-slicked bodies and stroked my cock. I fell over the edge, vaguely aware of him urging me on. I burst into the dark bliss, full of starlight and scalding heat, with the tang of my own spent semen rising around me.

I barely snatched a deep breath before Nick's mouth came down on mine, hard, and his pelvis surged forward, jerking into me. His body shook with his release, his breath short, gasping sobs against my neck as he stilled. I eased my legs down to the bed. Nick moaned, a long, ragged sound as his body went limp on mine. His face buried in my neck, and my pulse pounding in my ears, I almost didn't hear his whispered words.

"I'm sorry for my temper, Asher. I don't want to be like that with you."

"I blew it this afternoon, Nick, and I'm sorry."

He gave up my body with a groan and fell to the bed beside me. In the darkness, his hand squeezed mine.

CHAPTER 11

The next morning, we overslept and rushed to get ready, falling over each other in my small apartment and snapping with tension. Grim-faced, Nick threw himself into the back seat of the limo, cursing. I took the seat across from him for the ride to Daugherty Field, where Ian's light jet waited.

We'd fly from Long Beach to Denver, re-fuel, then go on to the ranch. Nick explained the stop was to insure the plane could get back to Long Beach, non-stop. He casually mentioned the pilot had a busy weekend, flying Ian to his home in Phoenix later in the day, then he fell silent, a pensive look on his face. Privately, I surmised Nick was tighter with Ian than he'd admitted, but decided to let go of my worry for

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the weekend. I wouldn't dictate who his friends could be, no matter their history.

I smiled at Nick as the limo joined the flow of traffic. "Not a morning person at all, are you?"

His foot nudged mine. "I had such big plans for dawn." He cupped his genitals. "Big plans, Asher. Big."

I laughed, and he finally smiled. The next thing I knew he nudged me awake as we reached the airport. His green eyes sparkled with mischief as he lifted a large cup of coffee in salute and tossed my question back at me. "Not a morning person at all, are you?"

I sniffed the aroma wafting on the ventilation system. I glared at him. "No fair. Where'd you get that?"

He pointed to the console at my left. A large coffee sat there. I groaned in gratitude as I lifted it to my lips.

Airport personnel were available to load our bags, and I watched nervously as my equipment was stowed. Within fifteen minutes, we were airborne. In about three hours, we'd be at the ranch.

We sprawled out on the long bench seat to finish our coffees, close and comfortable, my hand resting on his thigh. Nick sat with that remarkable stillness he possessed, gazing out the window. My fantasy of making love on a plane and joining the mile-high club would have to wait. The small jet gave up privacy for speed.

I suspected he worried about the limo parked outside my house for ninety minutes attracting unwanted attention, but it was done. My plan, if asked, would be simply to ignore any

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questions. Nick leaned over and tossed his empty coffee cup in the trash. “Do you mind if I do some work?”

Shaking my head, I reached for my own briefcase and removed my laptop. My memories of the ranch were clear, but I figured I should turn a critical eye on the master bedroom shots. Marcia was correct. Technically, the composition and lighting was fine, but the photos lacked life.

I looked at Nick, his strong profile against the mountains framed in the plane’s window. Tomorrow morning I knew I’d have a new, warmer perspective on the room. The pilot called back to us to fasten our seatbelts.

We landed at the smaller Front Range Airport, near Denver, to refuel. Nick and I took the opportunity to scrounge for more coffee. Her pretty, brown eyes wide and adoring, the girl at the café handed Nick two large coffees to go—right after she asked for his autograph and gave him her cell phone number. I used her cell phone to snap a photo as he leaned over the counter and kissed her cheek. She was one giddy teenager when we left her standing there, gawking, clutching her phone.

It seemed we barely gained altitude before we descended again, setting down on the long, flat approach to the ranch. Nick confirmed that some day, when he was able to spend more time in Montana, he planned to get his pilot’s license and his own plane. It had taken him two days to drive back to Los Angeles in the pickup. He said he hoped he never had to do it alone again. His housekeeper and her husband were flying back on the jet to bring the truck home.

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I thought it best not to comment on the reason behind that vehicle ending up in the city, and that having a staff certainly made life easier.

We stood side-by-side and watched the plane lift back into the air. I blocked the sun with my hand, observing the play of light on the mountains. I turned to find Nick's gaze on me and I held out my hand to him.

"What?"

He shrugged. "You. Me. Alone. Why aren't we naked?"

I snorted. "You're too eager, I'm hungry, and I gotta piss."

"Well, I'm not holding it for you, Myles." He grabbed his briefcase and two of my camera cases and trudged up the stairs. I slung a few bags over my shoulder and followed him.

"Put my stuff in the guest room, Nick."

He stopped dead in his tracks and turned slowly, an incredulous look darkening his face.

"I don't fucking think so. Not this time, Asher."

I'd not thought him nervous about the weekend, but it seemed I misjudged that.

"Now listen to me. I bet your housekeeper has your room staged perfectly, same as she was told to do before. We can sleep in the guest room tonight, shoot the photos in the mornings, and then mess up your room."

Nick straightened, taking a quick breath. "Okay, that makes sense. Now are you ready to get naked or not?"

Before I could agree, he disappeared into the room. Grinning, I followed him in and slung my bags onto a corner. Hands free, I grabbed his belt and yanked him to me, holding

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us in each other's heat. "Naked works. Go get the lube."

Nick's eyes lit with his inner fire, and the warmth I saw there spread to my belly.

"What happened to you being hungry?"

On cue, my stomach growled, and we laughed. Nick slipped his arms around my waist, grinning at me. "Okay, Asher, let's eat. We'll need fuel, and I can wait that long."

"I can't." I buried my fingers in his shaggy, dark hair and kissed him, holding him in a long, deep embrace that left us both breathless.

The basic problem of him being Nick Light, movie star, and me, a man who worked for a living and made do on a budget, hadn't been resolved. Nor had we even come close to discussing the bottom line of what moving into a relationship would mean for his career. The questions plagued me, but I pushed them aside. Now was for making love, for letting our bodies and our hearts talk to each other.

Pulling my shirt over my head, I slipped into the bathroom. To my surprise, he followed and turned on the shower. The steam rose as he disappeared out the door on his errand. I finished the business at hand, stripped, and stepped into the shower, lifting my face to the spray. Large, male hands caressed my wet shoulder blades.

Without a word, Nick turned me to face him. His lips claimed mine with a forceful gentleness that tightened my groin as it lengthened my cock. I dipped my hand between us and stroked his hard shaft as I kissed along his jaw line.

"How clean do you need to be, Nick?"

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His hips jerked against my hand. “This has nothing to do with clean.”

“Ah, I see. Turn around.”

Obedient, he did as asked, while I lathered a washcloth and then scrubbed his back. Between the hot water and my hands, the last bit of tension bled out of him. I closed the faucets. He tossed me a towel. I followed his lead, drying off quickly. He walked to the far side of the bed and opened the drapes to the sunny Montana day. Then he flipped the covers back and knelt on the sheet, waiting for me to join him.

I was more eager for his touch now than I had been that first time three months ago. The newness of being with him mingled with the memories of our few nights together and sent my arousal soaring. His gaze dropped to my erection as I mirrored his pose. His warm hands cupped my face.

“I never thought I’d have this, Asher.”

My heart stuttered on the wave of hope that rolled through me. I sucked in a deep breath, telling myself maybe he didn’t mean the chance at a permanent relationship. He could mean a chance for a sex-filled weekend with me, although I didn’t think that was it. I wrapped my hand around his wrists. “What do you want, Nick?”

He grinned with one of those lightning mood shifts he had. “You. On your back.”

“You’re not working hard enough for it.”

Growling with fake menace, he wrapped his arms around me and threw us both down on the bed. We rolled about, pitting strength against will, but careful enough of our knees

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and elbows with two stiff dicks bobbing about. Soon our sweating skin glowed in the afternoon sunlight spilling in through the open curtains.

At one point, I straddled him, my knees gripping his sides as I stroked myself, while his tongue teased the tip of my penis. Then the momentum shifted and I lay face down, Nick's warm, wet tongue licking my spine.

I rolled over, snagged the lube and squirted a few drops onto his belly. With slick fingers, we teased each other, delving into deep, hidden places and savoring the low moans we traded. I ached, wanting to go into him, but it was he who finally pressed me down into the bed, rising over me with the light behind him. Impaled beneath him, I could do little save try to breathe through the vise grip of pleasure that seized me.

He cried out as he pushed into me, hoarse sounds a man knows out of his own moonless nights. And when he could breathe again, his mouth claimed my aching flesh, wet and hot, knowing everything about my shadowy fantasies, and taking the scalding proof of my passion without faltering.

I stroked the dark, sweaty head resting on my thigh. Nick's hand moved on me, a gentle caress that made my cock twitch and brought a slight smile to his face. It was too much trouble to move. The sweet inertia of the moment seemed unbreakable to me, but Nick's hand glided down my inner thigh, to my knee, and back up.

"Would you like a drink, babe?"

The bar seemed a long walk for my shaky legs, but he'd asked so maybe he wanted one. My stomach gurgled, and

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Nick lifted his head, gazing at me with sleepy eyes.

Yeah, I was hungry and thirsty, but a nap in my lover's arms beat out anything else I thought I might like. I wiggled my way onto a pillow and patted the spot beside me. "Come up here, you."

He crawled up across my body and settled warmly against my side, his head resting on my shoulder, his arm flung over my chest.

I closed my eyes and listened to his breathing deepen. Premonition flickered within me that this peaceful weekend idyll would have a devastating ending. Once recognized, the awareness grew, sending gooseflesh over my skin and choking me even as I held him close.

It would be ridiculous to let absurd fears for the future ruin the few short days we had to share. Tonight, after we had dinner, I'd see if he were emotionally up to plotting a strategy to fit our lives together. That would ease my fears, and likely his, too.

Nick jerked in his sleep, then settled again.

I stared uneasily at the ceiling, the soothing balm of sleep out of my reach.

CHAPTER 12

“Why so pensive, babe?”

I glanced up at Nick, into his curious gaze. We lounged on the back deck, steaks and foil-wrapped potatoes on the grill. I lifted my penis and examined it again, not liking what I saw. Those stories about letting it all hang out never mentioned this.

“I think my dick’s getting sunburned. It’s that or skinny-dipping has embarrassed the little guy and he’s blushing.”

He snorted and tossed me one of the towels that hung over the railing. I spread it over my lap and gave him a little advice. “If I were you, I wouldn’t make noises at me until I looked at my ass in the mirror.”

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Nick ignored me, turning his attention back to the steaks. I stretched until my joints made little popping noises.

God, to live like this all the time would be decadent. Make love all afternoon, swim in the buff, sunbathe naked on the deck—with an SPF sun block that had a very high protection rating, of course. I picked up my camera and clicked off a few shots of my grillmaster's naked, rosy butt for my private files.

"Hey, Nick, ya think we're bare-assed on some country's spy satellite?"

"Nah. Go grab the salads out of the fridge. Steaks are done."

I rolled to my feet to discharge my orders, fastening the towel around my waist as I went. I put the greens and two beers on a tray with the sour cream, steak sauce, silverware, etc., and carried it outside. Nick put the plates with the sirloins and the potatoes on the table.

"Smells great. I'm starving." I popped the cap off his beer and handed it to him.

He handed me the steak sauce, then we traded the salad dressing and the pepper. It felt very domestic. Apparently, it struck him much the same.

"So, Asher, are we having a 'relationship'?"

At least he'd waited until I swallowed the bite of sirloin in my mouth, or I'd have choked. I stared at him, caught off guard that he was the one to begin this conversation. "Feels that way to me, Nick. How do you really feel about that?"

He played with a cherry tomato in his salad for a moment, then looked at me. "Scared. I'm not ready to come out. I may

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never be ready, even though I know it will happen someday and I should just get it over with. And you've already said you don't live in the closet."

His honesty meant a lot, and I respected it. It was hard to imagine living with him only behind closed doors, but the alternative, living totally without him, was harder. I'd have to be the one to give on this, and I accepted it. "One day at a time, Nick. That's all anybody has. We'll use it to our advantage."

He held out his hand to me, palm up. "Yeah, babe, but I know that in the long run, you won't be happy."

Insightful as it was, it saddened me he saw that so clearly. It fast-forwarded us to the end of things. I held his hand tightly. "That's one possible scenario, Nick. There are others, and those are the ones we work at."

"Asher, it's going to be hard on you. You'll doubt me every time some picture of me surfaces with Ian, or someone else you suspect has been a part of my inner circle."

"Give me a little more credit than that." The fork fell from my hand as a cold shockwave hit me. "You're tired of me already? Is this the prelude to the brush-off?"

The stunned look on his face made my joints go weak. He didn't have to say my fear was unfounded. I could see it on him; see the wound I'd left in him. Nick looked out across the long valley, then closed his eyes as if he'd seen something he couldn't bear. He spoke out of that self-imposed darkness, his voice hoarse. "Now you give me some credit, Asher."

I left my chair and went to my knees beside him. His gaze

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met mine, guarded yes, but full of unvoiced longing. Nothing I could say would take away his fear of coming out. It would take being with him, showing him his own strength, and mine, for him to even consider it.

Many times in my life I'd wished for wealth, enough to live on and never do without. Power, I'd not cared about. It seemed silly to me, some perception of humankind that had no place in my life. In front of me sat a man who had both, and it had not made the inner, spiritual being happy. Instead, the need to maintain it had driven him to hide his true nature at great personal cost.

"Nick, I want to be with you. I want you. Not your money or your power. It's yours and you can keep it. I want the man, and I'm willing to make adjustments to my life to get him."

He licked his lips, opened his mouth to speak, then looked away. I drew our clasped hands to my chest and lay my other hand on his bare thigh. "Look at me, Nick."

"I can't talk about this anymore, Asher. I'm sorry."

A fine tremor vibrated through him and his eyes had a red-rimmed look to them. I stretched up and put my lips against his cold, spiritless ones until they tentatively moved, pressing to mine. I kissed him then, letting him taste how much I cared about him and his struggle. He pulled away. I cupped his cheek and forced him to look at me with his glassy eyes.

"It will be okay, Nick, but it's going to take a long time. I'm in this for the long haul, if that's what you want."

Nick took a quick, short breath. "I want you."

I let it go, respecting him too much to push him to

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elaborate on those three little words right now. It was foolish to think we wouldn't experience rough moments on the road to wherever we were headed.

Reaching up, I put my arms around him as much as the chair allowed. He leaned forward and hugged me back, his body stiff with tightly held self-control. When he released me, I reclaimed my chair and picked up my fork. Nick looked at me like he wanted to say something else, then he followed my lead and began eating again.

A few minutes later, he broke the silence. "Do you ride?"

I grinned at him. "Only you, darling."

"Yeah, I asked for that." He grinned back. "I'd like to take the horses out tomorrow. Think you can manage that, city boy?"

"If it'll make you happy," I replied dryly. I'd never been on a horse. Likely I'd fall off and break my neck.

"You'll be happy. Take a couple of cameras along 'cause I'm gonna take you where you can get some fantastic shots."

Finished with my meal, I pushed my plate away, leaned back and rubbed my belly. "God, that was good. Is that your cell phone ringing?"

He cocked his head, listening. "Yep. Be right back."

Nick hopped up and went in the house. I busied myself with loading the tray to take everything back inside. When I entered the kitchen, I heard him shouting, unmistakable anger in his voice. Domesticity seemed my best course of action, so I washed the plates and silverware and put everything away. By that time, the house was silent. I found Nick in the living

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room face down on the sofa. He grunted when I smacked his bare ass.

“My fucking agent.” Nick sat up, elbows resting on his knees. “I told him, just twenty-four hours ago, mind you, that after *Aries Rising*, I needed a good, long vacation.”

“I take it he didn’t listen?”

Nick shook his head. “There’s this property that’s been making the rounds. The novel was a blockbuster.” He mentioned the title. I’d read it.

“God, Asher, I’d love to do it. Go out on that edge. Haul it in. That’s what a lot of actors crave, you know. That one role that makes you reach down inside and tear out your guts to fucking nail it to the wall.” He pumped his fist in that universal gesture of male power.

“You’re perfect for the part. What’s the problem?”

He looked at me, sort of helplessly. “You.”

Taken about, I stared at him. “Me? When did I ask you to give up your career, Nick?”

“You didn’t, okay? But I need some time with you.”

I stilled the urge to shake him. “And you think the only place we can have that time is here in Montana?”

“I don’t know what the fuck I think.”

I thought plenty, but knew enough to keep my mouth shut at this juncture. I offered him the only thing I could. “So stop thinking and come over here and kiss me.”

He did.

* * *

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That evening, after we finally put our pants back on, Nick checked on the horses and secured the barn for the night while I set up my equipment in the master bedroom. After sundown, he lit a small fire in the living room and we once again sat across from each other on the sofas while nursing our drinks.

“Tell me about your sister.”

I looked up sharply from the dancing firelight reflected in the fancy lead crystal tumbler I held. It wouldn’t cause me pain to tell him. I’d slain this demon long ago.

“What do you want to know?”

“How’d she die? She was young.”

“After our parents were killed, she...well, Alicia was in a lot of pain. She and Mom were so close; it just tore her open when Mom died. Nothing helped until she found heroin, and it killed her.”

Nick looked at me, compassion in his green gaze, his voice soft and tender. “I’m sorry, Asher. I know she was your twin.”

I nodded. “We never had that twin bond, though. If we had, maybe I’d have known in time to save her. It started with booze, then pills. I’d talk to her, and she’d swear she was getting help, but I know now it was a lie. She managed to hide the smack until it was too late. I found out from an emergency room physician it caused an infection in the lining of her heart. It had progressed too far and it killed her.”

“The first time I saw you, you looked so sad. Yet you stood up to Munch Wallace when he shoved a camera in my face.”

I took a sip of my drink. The last thing I wanted him to

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know was Wallace might have been the person who stole my identity, just for spite, over that incident. My lawyers investigated him within the limits of the law, but didn't come up with legal proof. My gut said if they'd gone outside the law, they'd have found whatever they needed, but I never asked them to do that. Wallace had someone bigger than me to answer to at the end of his days.

But Nick had money, enough to hire someone to look into the possibility. As tempting as that was to ask for the favor, I didn't want him doing that for me. I wasn't interested in his money, or having it spent on me. I needed a certain amount of independence.

"I'd have done that for anyone, Nick."

He leaned forward. "I found out who you were, that you were a photographer, which sort of surprised me considering what you did. I guess your legal troubles hadn't started then."

I knew it—he'd checked me out! The little shithead. "So when Marcia Conley gave you my name, you...what?"

Nick grinned. "Choked, babe. I fucking choked."

"You knew I was gay?"

"Hell, yeah. I about jumped out of my skin. She told me you'd been way down on your luck and needed a helping hand."

"And you couldn't say no because of Munch Wallace."

He nodded and stretched his arm out along the back of the sofa. "I couldn't say no because you looked so sexy taking down Wallace."

I swallowed the rest of my drink and moved to his couch,

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settling in against his side. He smiled at me. “Doesn’t look like I’ll be telling you no to anything tonight, either.”

“Tease.”

“Tell me about your life, Asher. You’ve not said much.”

Anger flashed through me, but I lacked the energy to sustain it. He’d had me investigated. What more did he want to know? Did he still wonder if I found his money attractive? Or did he want insights on how the lower-middle class lived for fodder for some screen role?

I looked at him and realized his desire to know more went deeper. I opened up possibilities for a happier future he’d ever dared look for. I cast my own doubts aside and began to talk.

We sat on the sofa watching the fire die to embers. As the darkness closed in around us, I traversed the long trail of my life for him. Nick listened quietly, interjecting only the occasional comment or question. From time-to-time, his fingers played with my hair, or he went so far as to lay his head against mine, but mostly he allowed me to talk. Maybe he thought knowing all this about me would help. Maybe he was relieved I told him my secrets first, so he could be brave and tell me his. I didn’t know, and didn’t think it mattered too much.

My mother had been pregnant when she and my father married. My father worked as a machinist, and my mother stayed home with “the twins.” We had what we needed, but toys and clothes were often second-hand. My father purchased my first camera at the neighborhood pawnshop. I still had a special affinity for that Pentax ME.

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I'd mowed lawns and shoveled snow to earn money for film and developing. I even painted an entire barn one spring. I swore off painting after that.

While Alicia and I were in our teens, one by one, our grandparents died. My paternal grandmother was in a nursing facility, and the financial drain on my parents was horrendous. I got to college on scholarships and grants, but had to flip burgers for rent money. Alicia went straight into a secretarial job. In her anger at not being able to get to college, she didn't speak or write to me for almost two years. Her silence ended that terrible night she called me at school to tell me our parents were gone.

To my total embarrassment, I wept when I told Nick about that call. He held me until I regained my composure, but inside I was raw. Maybe a person never stopped grieving the loss of their parents, but it surprised me I still felt it so strongly after fifteen years.

Then Alicia was gone, and Nick knew the rest of my story. I didn't repeat it. Worn out, I lay my head on Nick's shoulder and soaked up his scent. His voice smoothed out a few of my raw nerves. "You've not had an easy life."

"Sure I have. It's just not on a par with yours. I didn't get a silver spoon, but there was a lot of love in my family, although that might've been different if they knew I was gay."

Nick looked at me, his eyes solemn. "How old were you when you had your first?"

"Fifteen. With a school chum. We 'messed around' for two years, then he ran away. Never came home." I didn't tell him

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Lenny ran away because his father beat him. I saw no point in dredging all that up. “How old were you?”

“Twenty-two. I’d just made *Lunar Moonshine*. The star of that movie invited me to dinner, and I ended up in his bed.”

Damn. I stared at him. “Um, Nick, he’s like, you know, at the top of the A-list’s A-list.”

“Hmm. Does that bother you?”

I wondered how often they went to dinner these days, but didn’t ask. If Nick and I mapped out a future together, their evenings would be about the food, not the after-dinner entertainment.

“No. I’m just a little surprised to learn he’s gay.”

He laughed softly, then kissed me. I melted into him, merging my heat to his as I worked his zipper down far enough to slide my fingers inside and stroke his penis. His cock moved, swelling under my light touch. I pulled back and looked into his smoky green gaze.

“We’re wasting the night, lover.”

Nick stood and held out his hand to me.

CHAPTER 13

I went upstairs, while Nick detoured to the kitchen for two bottles of water. I wondered why he didn't have a small refrigerator tucked in a linen closet in one of the second-floor bathrooms. There were three of them and plenty of room. I stripped and flopped on the bed to wait for him. When he came in, I asked him. The interested look on his face told me he'd never thought of it.

Nick set the bottles down and moved to stand by the window. "We'll be asleep by the time the moon shows on this side of the house."

"Maybe."

He grinned at me over his shoulder before pulling his shirt

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off over his head without unbuttoning it. Sometimes it seemed he had more boy left in him than I did. I envied him that, and wondered if it was because he never worried about not having a roof over his head.

Nick unsnapped his jeans, letting them ride low on his hips as he prowled around the room. "I've never spent the night in this room." He finally let his pants fall to the floor, clicked off the bedside lamp, and climbed into bed, rolling on his side to face me. "You're worn out."

"That doesn't mean I'm not feeling frisky."

His fingers teased my sac, making it draw up close to my body.

"What if I'm feeling sorta mellow, Asher?"

I rolled to face him and rested my hand on his hip. "Mellow, huh? Mellow is good."

He kissed me then, sneaking his tongue past mine, pulling me closer. My passion for him, banked down and waiting for his spark, flared hotly. He urged me to lie still while he kissed me all over.

I delighted in the sharp jolts that shot out from under his mouth as he suckled at my nipples. Those flat brown discs had always been sensitive to a lover's caress, but with Nick, the intensity of those searing bolts streaking to my groin left me breathless. Lower his kisses traveled, across my belly, down my thighs. Back up to my straining cock.

Moaning, my hands fisted in the sheets as Nick ran the tip of his tongue the length of my swollen shaft. His hand slipped between my spread thighs, his fingers teasing the dark curls

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behind my balls. His mouth, warm and wet, covered me. Slowly, he tortured me, plunging me into a world of darkness where only his lips, tongue and fingertips touched me. I climbed, step by slow step, until I hung on the edge. Nick held me there for long moments, while lights danced in my vision, then drove me home.

I lay panting beneath him as he straddled my hips, jerking himself off over me. His hot semen splashed over my heart as his groans filled my ears. Nick toppled to the bed beside me. I rolled over and kissed him. The taste of my semen was still on his lips.

“That was not mellow,” I whispered in his ear. I sensed he smiled.

The next thing I knew, it was morning, and Nick was shouting into his cell phone again.

My heart sank as I eavesdropped. The lead in the hot property he’d told me about last night was his if he wanted it. Filming would start in five months, well after *Aries Rising* wrapped. Listening carefully between all the expletives falling from my lover’s mouth, I gathered his acting contract would guarantee him whatever time needed to deal with post-production directorial issues. The yelling stopped and Nick slunk back into the bedroom carrying two steaming coffee mugs. He slipped between the sheets.

“I’m awake, Nick.”

“Fuck. Sorry. I wanted to be all romantic and wake you up.”

I snickered. “Oh, you did. I learned new ways to use old

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words.”

“Yeah? Want your coffee before it gets cold?”

I levered up on my elbow, leaned over and kissed him. Coffee in bed sounded great. We jostled about, getting the pillows just right, then he handed me a mug.

“When are you shooting the room, Asher?”

I checked my watch. “I need to get started in about thirty minutes. Wanna help me setup?”

Nick shrugged. “If you’re sure I won’t be in your way.”

He probably would be, but it didn’t matter. If I didn’t get the shot I wanted this morning, I’d leave my equipment out and we could sleep in the guest room again. I explained to him how I planned to work the room, setting up several different cameras on various tripods at different heights. Then I’d snap my way around the room, from those spots, every fifteen minutes for an hour to catch the changing light. After that, I’d move all the tripods and shoot every fifteen minutes for another hour or so. By noon, I should have what I needed.

“Good plan. Then we can have lunch and go for our ride.”

I’d never been on a horse and found the prospect both daunting and thrilling. It didn’t look too difficult on the silver screen, but no one got saddle-sore in the movies. When I told him that, Nick grinned, shook his head in amusement, and sipped his java.

“I’m worried about being saddle-sore and then making love.”

“Nice try, *amigo*, but I’m not buying it. Horses don’t usually bite. Relax.”

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I groaned and stretched. He was right. I needed to chill out and enjoy the weekend. I smacked his hip. “C’mon. Time to set up.” I swung my legs out of the bed without waiting for his reply. Grabbing my jeans, I headed for the bathroom. Nick had his pants on, too, when I came out.

He made a pretty fair assistant. I set up four cameras and clicked off twelve shoots each. Then I used the Pentax ME to take a few black-and-whites on film. While the clock ticked, we dressed for our ride. Another set of shots, and Nick brought up more coffee.

We shared a companionable silence while I worked, refining angles, shutter speeds, adding a filter for a different effect. I slid into that place where the light spoke to me in intimate whispers. Nick watched with obvious interest. Just before noon, the light changed dramatically as the sun moved overhead. The colors of the room deepened, and I got the shot I’d been waiting on.

I asked Nick to sit in the wing chair by the window. He agreed. It was the photo that would sell the magazine. The hold the light had on me broke and I smiled at him.

“We’re done. You fix lunch and I’ll have a quick look at the shots. If they’re as good as I think, we can pack everything up after our ride.”

He agreed, giving me a kiss and quick fondle on his way downstairs. Nick made a great helper. I really wished he could go to Miami with me, but there would be other locations and other times our schedules permitted him to be with me.

By virtue of a lot of practice, I had my cases packed and

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locked in about thirty minutes, then stowed them in the guest room. It was very quiet downstairs. I grabbed my little digital and went to see if I could help in the kitchen. Nick wasn't there, so I poked my head in his office, the one room I'd not entered before. He sat at his desk, unmoving. The hostility in his arctic gaze froze me in the doorway.

"What's wrong, Nick?"

The ice in his voice cut like glass. "You set me up, didn't you?"

I took a deep breath, forcing my lungs to expand. I'd heard people speak of lives flashing in front of their eyes in an instant, but for me, it was a future with him I'd never experience. I saw it in the depths of his gaze, in his stony countenance. He was done with me, no matter what I said, but I deserved to know what the hell had come so decisively between us. I gathered my dignity.

"I have no clue what you're talking about."

"This, you motherfucker!" He swung his monitor around so fast a few desk accessories crashed to the floor.

On the screen was a blurry picture of me sitting in Nick's truck, shirt gaping open. You couldn't tell for sure, but it didn't take much to imagine that my hand was in his crotch. Splashed across the photo, in red, was the headline, "Nick's Big Secret."

His money couldn't fix this. Nothing could.

"I had nothing to do with that photo being taken, Nick. Nothing."

"I don't believe you."

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“Then you’re a fool.”

“They want money to keep that photo off the web. A lot of money.”

I risked further wrath and walked up to his desk, picking up spilled pens and paper as I went. My hands itched to reach out to him, but I didn’t dare. “Who took the photo?”

His palms slammed down on his desk, the echoing around the room. I jumped, startled at the violence of the action.

“Who the fuck do you think, Myles? Your buddy Munch Wallace.”

Hearing the man’s name was akin to throwing cold water on me. I shivered, shaking my head. “He’s not *my* friend. You’ve got to believe me on that. Wallace is probably the person who stole my identity, not that I can prove it, and my lawyers tried.”

“Right. Lie to me. The email says I can give *you* fifty thousand dollars to deliver, and the picture will be destroyed.”

The acid in my stomach bubbled up and burned my chest from the inside, leaving a queasy roiling in its wake. How could I get him to listen to me? To believe me? Munch Wallace was scum, but he’d blundered upon an opportunity he couldn’t pass up. He could blackmail Nick and hurt me again at the same time. He’d probably soiled his pants with excitement.

“You can’t pay him. You know that. He’s got more than one shot. If you start giving him hush money, he’ll milk you dry.” I put my hands on his desk. “I had nothing to do with this, Nick. I swear to you.”

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I straightened and looked down at him. “I will not deliver any money for you. It’s not your money he wants, and you know it. He wants to control you and keep hurting me. You pay him and he’ll sit back and laugh at both of us. I won’t be a party to it.”

He licked his lips, ones I’d never taste again. The pain ripped through me. Nick ended everything that could have been, his voice flat. “Get your shit packed. Ian’s sending the jet. You’ll be on it when it leaves.”

His course was set. I could abandon my pride and beg him to reconsider, but he wouldn’t. He’d never hear me again. I held his gaze without breaking.

“You’re making a mistake, Nick. I didn’t betray you.” I turned and left the room, retreating to the guest room to wait.

I left at dusk without seeing Nick again, without ever telling him I loved him.

CHAPTER 14

I gazed out the plane's window as it approached Miami, Florida. From the sky, the beautiful city gleamed in the sunshine reflecting off the water. It was easy to see why people flocked here. I buckled my seat belt and closed my eyes. Flying was fine, but I hated the landings.

Retrieving my bags and getting through the airport took about an hour. I exited the busy terminal and looked for my driver, spotting him a few limos up the row. Mr. Perez seemed more than anxious to help me get everything in the trunk, while inviting me to share some of the Miami nightlife with him in a flowing mix of English and Spanish. I passed on his invitation. Seeing the sights no longer appealed to me. My

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whole being ached with loss.

I asked him to stop the car on the street in front of the Brewster mansion while I took a series of shots of the impressive wrought-iron fence. Then much to his consternation, I walked up the long drive, snapping in all directions as I went. At the front of the magnificent house, I posed him with his limo and promised him copies. He beamed and thanked me with that blended speech he possessed. I never learned his first name.

Mrs. Brewster, a lovely, fit, sixty-something woman, greeted me warmly on the front steps of her Bal Harbor home. I listened through a dull fog as she asked Mr. Perez to get me settled in the guesthouse and deliver my lunch in an hour. I informed her I'd set up for late afternoon and evening shots today. I hoped to finish the shoot quickly and not intrude too greatly on her hospitality.

She smiled and gave me free rein to the pool, hot tub, and gym. I thanked her, but knew in my heart that I'd not avail myself of the opportunities. Even the thought of walking down to the beach and collecting my much-desired baggie of Atlantic Ocean sand seemed pointless. A spiritual exhaustion dragged me down.

Getting over Nick Light seemed an impossible task. I'd fallen in love for the first time in my life, and I'd lost. I already knew I didn't want to go through this again.

What was he doing? It was only eleven o'clock in Hollywood. He'd be on the set, burying his anger in his work. Did he think of me, or had he pushed all recollections of me

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behind him? I wish I could do that with my memories of him.

Mr. Perez arrived with my lunch and plenty of fresh towels in case I went to the pool. Then he asked me if I'd recognize an alligator if I saw one.

Fuck, yeah, I would.

I scouted out higher ground around the estate, and found several big trees to my liking.

After lunch, I made my trip down to the beach and strolled barefoot in the white sand for a while before collecting my little bag of the east coast turf. I sealed the bag tightly for the flight home.

The fresh air cleared my head, and the afternoon shoot came off without a hitch, lifting my spirits a bit more. The stagers had been there. The rooms were immaculate and the areas for my tripods clear of throw rugs and planters. I took the bulk of my equipment to the arboretum to set up for tomorrow. I'd shoot the space much the same as I had Nick's bedroom, taking shots from the same locations over a period of a few hours.

Mrs. Brewster invited me to dinner on the veranda, and she was so charming, I smiled my way through it. I had all the digital shots loaded on my laptop for her to view. She loved the long shots of the house from the different spots along the driveway, and I promised to send her a few after Marcia had a chance to pick the ones she wanted for *Dream Living Magazine*.

It was late by the time I turned in for the night. Sleep eluded me. How long would it be before the bed, any bed,

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stopping feeling too big and lonely without Nick? Had he turned to Ian for comfort? Finally, I drifted off to restless sleep and the dreams that waited for me.

The image of Nick and Ian together took form and substance to taunt me. I was the photographer, busy taking pictures while they sprawled across a white linen lawn, their bodies tanned and strong. I was there when Nick rose over Ian, capturing the taut lines of his body, hearing Ian's moans of pleasure. Then it was Nick writhing beneath Ian, seized by orgasm and telling Ian how much he loved him when he should have been saying it to me. The Pentax ME shattered in my hands—the last link to my past, gone.

I woke, sick to my soul and stomach, gagging and sweating as I staggered to the bathroom to throw up. I stood under the hot shower spray until the water cooled in the vain attempt to cleanse the smell of my vomit out of my nose.

So went the three nights I spent in Miami.

My flight home lifted off at the ungodly hour of seven-fourteen in the morning. I looked forward to getting my Pacific time zone biorhythms back on track. After touching down on my beloved California soil, I tossed all my bags in the trunk of my Buick and went home, grateful all I had to do for the remainder of the day was feed myself. I called for a delivery pizza before unloading the car.

One more thing, I corrected myself as I walked into my bedroom. I stripped the bed of the sheets Nick and I had lain on, locked in new passion, one week ago. I'd not been able to part with his scent before my trip. Now I knew I had to.

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So, home again, with the sheets in the dryer, and pizza and beer for dinner, I settled down on my patio to look over the shots of the Brewster's home. I'd barely gotten started when a car pulled in and parked beside mine, and Marcia Conley stepped through my back gate.

"Asher, may I join you?"

What did she think I would say? I didn't exactly have a lot of options.

"Of course. Would you like a beer? Slice of pizza?"

She smiled at me, but I saw the reserve in her level gaze and knew from where it sprang. Nick had spoken to her.

Ever the lady, she accepted my offer of such meager hospitality. I brought her a brew and a plate, and we looked at my photos while we ate. She wanted to see the ones from Montana first. I hesitated, as I'd not sorted through them yet, but went ahead and opened the file for her.

I waited for the axe to fall, raw with nerves, alternating between sweating and shivering. She saw, but didn't comment. Sooner or later, she would.

She came to the three pictures of Nick standing at the grill, the twin white globes of his muscular buttocks splendidly bare beneath the blue Montana sky. Her eyebrows lifted, but she remained quiet. I waited for her to pull the plug on me, on my career. If she fired me, I would be working beside Munch Wallace so I could eat. Finally, she looked at me.

"Asher, I know it's none of my business, but what happened between you and Nick?"

My stomach clenched. Why didn't she just fire me and get

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it over with? “Didn’t he tell you? Didn’t he say you couldn’t trust me after all?”

Her slender, elegant hand covered mine. “He said there was a problem, and he would deal with it.”

I pulled away from her and rubbed my face with both hands, sure Nick had suggested she’d do better without me. “Marcia, you’re a true lady so I hope you’ll understand when I tell you I can’t discuss it. It’s between me and Nick.”

“Asher, I know you and Nick are gay. I assume you and he... Well, you know. I hope you were both careful.”

I considered stonewalling her, but she’d been good to me. I trusted her even if she didn’t trust me. “We were careful.”

“Nick said I might want to give you a closer look because of some of your associates. What did he mean by that?”

“He’s upset over something that happened, but I was not involved. I didn’t betray him. I wouldn’t.”

She grabbed my wrist. “Tell me, damn it! Nick won’t. He’s Mister Stubborn. He drops some warning about you on me and hangs up the phone! Please, Asher. You’re so good at what you do. Give me a reason to ignore my old friend and trust you, because you’re my friend, too.”

My resolve caved in on itself. I gauged the level of his anger by the fact he’d cut Marcia short. Well, he’d have to be even angrier. I owed Marcia, and I needed my job. I told her what he couldn’t.

“Last week, a paparazzi managed to get a picture of me and Nick in his pickup. Now he’s blackmailing Nick with it. Nick is so paranoid about people in Hollywood knowing he’s

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gay, he's willing to pay."

Marcia sat back, clearly aghast. "How much?"

I stared at her. "What the fuck does it matter how much! Okay, so he has money. Okay, he can afford to pay it. That's not the fucking point!"

"I think I know the point, Asher. Just what were you and he doing that makes the photo so damning?"

"Nothing overly pornographic, but enough to fuel even limited imaginations. After the meeting with Nick in your office, I left in a sweat, literally. I got in Nick's truck, opened my shirt and plastered my chest to the air conditioning vents to cool down. Somewhere in the conversation, I leaned over toward him. You can't see my hand, but it looks...bad. It looks like my hand is just where it was."

I blew out a long breath. "Marcia, what did Nick say about me?"

She shook her head, then took my hand again. "I promised, Asher. Do you trust me?"

"Am I fired?"

"No," she replied quietly. "You're not. I meant it when I said you're good. You're the best photographer I've ever had on staff. I'm salivating thinking what you can do for the magazine's numbers. Do you have something to occupy your mind for the next week?"

I looked away, afraid even to think of the long, lonely days ahead. "I'll find something to take pictures of. Check the ads and see if anything I've got in reserve matches requests. Develop some film I shot a week ago."

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“Good. Keep next Friday evening open. I may need you to go with me to a little cocktail party.” Marcia leaned over and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “I may be launching a new magazine.” She patted my knee. “More work for you, my friend.”

“Congratulations! But aren’t you busy enough?”

She laughed. “I’m backing it, but I won’t be part of the day-to-day operations. We might need you to shoot our first covers. How do you feel about recreational vehicles?”

I stared at her. “You jest?”

I leaned back as she shook her head.

“You don’t jest.” I sighed. “I suddenly have a huge interest in those big silver things people tow behind their cars.”

Marcia kissed my cheek, startling me. She was going to stick by me regardless of whatever it was Nick told her. I was surprised and grateful.

Standing, she squeezed my shoulder. “Thanks for the pizza and beer. Sort those photos and drop them off at the office one day next week. I assume the butt shots are for your own personal viewing pleasure?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can I have one just for me?”

“No, ma’am. That’s all I need—for Nick to find out you’ve seen his tushy.”

Her laughter had a nice, honest ring to it. If I were straight, I’d make a play for her. She squeezed my shoulder again. “Keep next Friday night open.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

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“Get some sleep, Asher. I’ll see you whatever day you come in next week.” She turned and left, her measured steps fading until I heard the creak of the back gate hinges.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said to the ceiling.

It wasn’t lost on me that no matter her assurances and praise, she’d not given me a new assignment. I’d seen the schedule and knew there were a few loose assignments dangling for the photographic department. Either she’d not been truthful or, and I decided this more likely, she thought she had to baby me. I’d rather have gone straight to another job and kept busy.

The next day, I wondered if she’d had some inside information. Splashed across the front page of a major Hollywood rag sheet was the damning photo of me with my shirt open and my hand on Nick Light’s balls.

CHAPTER 15

I was proud of Nick that he'd not paid Munch Wallace blackmail money, not that I called and told him. It was some consolation to me that he was safe behind the security of the studio during the day, and his own when he went home in the evening. I wasn't as fortunate. Ten or eleven paparazzi met me at my door.

They took my picture and shouted questions at me. Was I involved with Nick Light? Was Nick Light gay? Did I have any comment?

I most certainly did not have any comments. No way in hell would I utter a peep to confirm or deny. My only protection was my silence, and before the day was over, it

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would be my silence *and* a new safe.

They did disburse when I requested, out of professional courtesy, so they didn't get me thrown out of my apartment. Munch Wallace wasn't in the group.

No wonder Nick had such animosity toward them. They were truly annoying.

Worry about Nick kept me company as I shopped for a decent safe. In light of my connection to Nick becoming public, I needed to be more careful with my archives, maybe even rent a safety deposit box. Massive amounts of files could now be stored on a simple memory stick and carried wherever I went, but I'd need to download every picture, every day. Their interest in me wouldn't wane anytime soon, not now that they scented fresh blood.

I didn't spot any lurkers when I arrived home to wrestle my new security measure inside. I pulled all the cards out of the cameras and put them in the safe, along with my laptop. It would have to do for now, and it would, at least until Wallace leaked another picture.

On a whim, I called my friend Donny and invited myself to stay at his place for the weekend. I needed the company and conversation to keep me from doing the unforgivable and calling Nick.

* * *

Donny and I did stupid things together, like go to the beach and lust after the couples walking by. I didn't quite understand his fascination with women in thongs, and he

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didn't quite understand mine with men in thongs. It worked to our viewing advantage.

When I arrived at his apartment, he slapped a copy of the tabloid in front of me and asked me to autograph it. The way he explained it, I'd fucked Nick Light, who had fucked some major Hollywood actresses, and since he was my best friend, some of that starlet-screwing prowess had to rub off on him.

I stared at him, speechless at the way his mind worked. Then I signed the copy for him. What the hell? He just wanted to get me to laugh, which I didn't. Donny rolled his eyes and tossed the magazine in the trash.

Then he dragged me out to a few clubs, got me drunk, let me sleep all day Saturday, and fed me health food and vitamins on Sunday before he sent me home.

Just before I left, he urged me to go talk to someone before I got seriously depressed, not after. It might have been good advice, but it wasn't something I would do. Talking to a professional wouldn't heal the rift with Nick. Nothing would do that, not even time. I didn't care that I was suddenly more adrift than I'd ever been.

I tried to remember if the death of my parents had left me this numb, so rudderless. At the time, I had a pretty heavy class load, trying to get my degree in three years to cut my expenses as much as I could. I'd buried my grief in schoolwork, honoring them by doing the very best I could.

When I lost Alicia, I was sad, but we'd drifted so far apart, and her drug use had been so heavy, that I suspected I mourned for her long before she actually died. I'd seen it

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coming, bit-by-bit, and couldn't stop it. She wouldn't hear me.

Nick wouldn't hear me, either.

How did one grieve the loss of a future only imagined? Or survive it?

* * *

Monday came and I begged Marcia for something to do. She shoved me in an empty office that housed a barely adequate old computer with instructions to go through the archived photos and find her any and all photos that had recreational vehicles in them. My grandmother's words echoed in my head as I got to work.

Be careful what you ask for...

Wednesday afternoon, I was pleased to present her with about fifty snaps and a newly indexed photo filing system. She nodded, told me what to wear Friday night, and shoved me out the door with instructions to be ready when her driver called for me at seven o'clock.

Being busy had helped, but I thought of Nick constantly. No more photos had surfaced, and I fervently prayed that was the one and only picture Wallace had gotten. I was sure Nick lived under diligent surveillance.

Nights were bad. Since coming home from Miami, I'd yet to sleep in my bed, preferring to crash on the sofa. I didn't seem to dream if I camped out on the couch, or at least I didn't remember them.

The truth was, I didn't want to remember any dream, especially the one I'd touched and held and loved. The one I'd

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lost.

I told myself I was handling losing Nick, but I wasn't. I felt detached from everything. Even the magic of light and shadow couldn't lure me to capture it, to freeze it in time and make it last forever.

Inside, the fracture lines widened. Soon, I wouldn't be able to put myself back together the way I'd been. Would I know myself when my soul finished bleeding out?

Late Friday afternoon, I dressed in my almost-new chocolate brown suit. I'd worn it once, to my "official" interview at the magazine. At seven sharp, I slid into the backseat of a black Lincoln Town Car and was whisked away to meet my date.

It's a shame the cocktail party is a bit dated. Yes, they seem staid, and even boring, when compared to the current mixer craze, but I found the polite atmosphere comfortable. No loud music, no television blaring in another room, people at cocktail parties still practiced the art of conversation. As soon as I walked in the room, I knew one person I wouldn't be talking to. Nick stood at the bar, accepting something clear over ice with a lime twist.

I felt like I'd been suckered punched in the gut. My "date" looked at me, smiled, and didn't try to weasel out from under my accusation.

"You knew."

"I asked him to meet me here, and no, I didn't tell him you were my escort."

Nick turned and froze, his gaze locked with mine. I'd been

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wrong to think just seeing him was a punch to the stomach. Seeing those cold green eyes was worse. My guts lay exposed for him to hack at some more.

He held my gaze as he walked over to us, greeting Marcia with a kiss on the cheek and extending his hand to me. We managed a very civilized handshake. When he spoke, he didn't attempt to keep his voice down.

I knew instinctively, it was the right way to approach the situation. Everyone in this room watched us. Marcia could have warned me this party was damage control for Nick.

"Did you see the picture, Asher?" Nick steered us toward the bar.

I nodded and hoped my voice worked. His scent flooded me with aching memories of the soft skin of his neck against my face. "Didn't the whole town?"

"Every shopper in every supermarket across the country saw it." He sipped his drink, his glass held firmly by long fingers that had caressed me so intimately. "Great publicity for the movie. You can't buy a buzz like that."

"That's the best way to look at it. The pictures of the final shoot at your ranch turned out better than I'd hoped." I turned to Marcia. "What do you want to drink?"

"Seltzer with lime." I held two fingers up at the bartender. He handed both drinks to me, and I passed one to Marcia.

Nick looked at me, his voice softer now. "We need to talk. Privately."

I shook my head. "I'm not ready to talk to you... *privately*."

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Another attendee joined us and we made small talk. The man looked at Nick, at me, then back to Nick. I kept a bland look on my face. Nick seemed oblivious to the curious perusal we were under. Mr. Nicholas Light did have a shelf full of acting awards.

“How’s the production schedule holding up, Nick?”

Nick beamed. “I’m working with an amazing bunch of professionals, Harry. They’re making it easy and keeping me on track. We should wrap a couple of days early.” He looked at me. “I’m hopeful Asher will agree to come by the set again and do the official cast photos for the website.”

Harry looked ready to choke on his apple martini. I knew the feeling.

I smiled. “I still have the press pass, Nick. Just let me know what days are good, and I’ll fit you in.”

Harry took his leave, hustling over to another group, doubtless to tell them Nick and I did seem to be friends. Nick put his arm around Marcia, letting his hand drift to her hip. He leaned in close to her ear and whispered something. She nodded, then left his side, joining a group talking shop about magazines. Nick looked at me coolly.

“It’s good to see you.”

Good to see me? He’d thrown me out of his house like he would any stray dog. Did he want a trick tonight? I doubted I could say no to him.

“Don’t do this to me, Nick. I don’t know your ground rules for tonight.”

He took a quick, short breath. “That makes two of us. I’m

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winging it. Come home with me.”

I responded before I thought about it. “I’ll think about it. Ask me in an hour.”

“Okay. I will. There’s someone you should meet. That’s Lucy Lawford. She owns—”

“I know Lucy,” I interrupted. “Even us poor boys get around, Nick.”

The dig was uncalled for. He shot me strange look. I backpedaled.

“Sorry. I’m a little nervous, standing here with you. Can’t you hear people whispering, ‘Is that the fellow in the photo with Nick?’”

“Yeah, I hear ’em. Makes me nervous, too. Let’s go convince Lucy she needs to give your photos a show.” He drilled me with that green gaze, his voice dripping sarcasm. “You can make enough money off one show at her gallery to stop being fidgety around me.”

I wished we were alone so I could knock him flat on his ass.

“What’s money got you? You happy?”

“It’s got me a big house where you’re going to spend the night.”

“I don’t think so.”

Nick moved to stand in front of me, his back to the room. Only I could see the actor’s face disappear to reveal the man I loved. Hope and resignation warred on his handsome features. I wavered in my resolve to get over him.

“And if I beg, Asher? Will you come?”

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His voice shook. I stared at him, unsure.

“I’m begging. Please.”

We’d arrived at our last chance, and he put the decision on me.

I made the only choice I could.

CHAPTER 16

The party dragged on for another two hours. Nick and I mingled separately, wandering in and out of each other's orbit every quarter hour or so, and ignoring the curious glances. Lucy Lawford sought me out, pecked my cheek warmly with a gleam in her obsidian eyes. After the pleasant greeting, she leaned close and asked me about Nick.

"So, are you and Nick Light an item?"

"Saw the photo, did you? Do you know Marcia Conley? I'm on staff with *Dream Living Magazine* now."

"All right, Asher, I'll mind my own business. How would you like to have a show at the gallery?"

We talked a little shop and I agreed to forty-eight black-

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and-white urban pieces. I probably had that many good ones already on file. She didn't have a slot open for eight months, so I had time to take a few walks and shoot some extra film.

I refused to dwell on the fact she was betting on my connection to Nick to draw in clients, especially if he and I ended up together. That's the way things worked and I didn't need to make myself crazy over it. Her ulterior motives didn't matter much if she offered up little prayers for Nick and me.

Marcia drifted past and asked me if I were ready to go. I nodded, and we took our leave of our host. As I walked through the door, I turned. Nick watched from the far side of the room, his green eyes full of questions. I kept walking, tucking Marcia's hand in at my elbow as we waltzed down the front steps like Rhett and Scarlett. My meeting with Nick would be later tonight, after my date saw me home.

I hunched in my corner of the back seat of the Town Car, vibrating with nerves over my upcoming meeting with Nick. Under my fancy clothes, I was uncomfortable, sticky with sweat. Across from me, Marcia watched me with an equal mix of compassion and curiosity.

"Asher, I hope you know what you're doing."

I looked out the window. "I've got to give this one more chance."

"Why?"

"I like the punishment."

She stared at me. "Let me ask you point blank. Is any of this about his money?"

Her question pissed me off and I forgot to mind my

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manners with her. “No fucking way, lady. I don’t give a rat’s ass about his money, and he knows it. His money is in the way, Marcia. He’s a prisoner to the way he earns it.” I barely paused for a breath.

“And furthermore, my recent money problems were not of my making. It pisses me off to have people thinking I created the mess I was in. I didn’t! And hey, guess what? I survived it, didn’t I?”

Marcia fell silent after that, not speaking until the car pulled up in front of my building. She put her hand on my forearm. “Nick’s a good person. He has a lot of talent, but he also has the arrogance that goes with it. For what it’s worth, I hope you and he can work things out, if that’s what you both really want.”

I managed to fall back on my manners, thanking her for the evening and the opportunity it had afforded me with Lucy. I watched her car pull away, wondering what she hadn’t said. There wasn’t time to speculate. I rushed to get changed and meet Nick at his place.

What would I do if he asked me to have sex again? I wanted him. Dear God, how I wanted him! But I couldn’t stand to touch him again, to feel his hands and lips on my skin, if it wasn’t for keeps this time.

I slid behind the wheel of my Buick and turned the key. Nothing. The surprise paralyzed me for several seconds. I hit the ignition again. It didn’t even click at me. The car wouldn’t start, but the headlights came on, bright as normal, so I suspected asking the neighbors for a jumpstart would be

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pointless. What I didn't know about cars would fill volumes. My choices were few, and I seized the only one that had any hope of working. Nick answered the call to his cell phone promptly. It was in his voice that he expected me to say I'd changed my mind.

"Asher."

"Nick." My voice stopped working, my mind refusing to process anything except I couldn't get to him on my own.

"Asher? What's wrong?" He paused, and I heard him take a deep breath. Instead of the angry edge I expected to hear in his voice, there was uncertainty. "Please don't tell me you've reconsidered talking this out."

"Come get me, Nick. My car won't start."

"Oh, Lord." He breathed in my ear for a moment. "You're joking, right? I'm going to start smoking again if this keeps up."

"No, you're not. I'm serious, Nick. The Buick won't start."

"Okay. I'm coming. Your place?"

"Where else? Hurry, Nick. I need you."

There was a slight pause. "I need you, too, Asher. I'll change clothes and be right over."

The connection went dead. Curiously exhausted, I pocketed my cell phone and rested my forehead on the steering wheel. The rest of the night had to go better. I didn't even bother to lock the Buick before I retreated to the darkest corner of my patio to wait for him, hoping my rowdy neighbors' Friday night revelry wouldn't scare him off.

It didn't take Nick long to arrive, his boot heels clicking on

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the walkway. The glow of the lights from next door lit his eyes as he looked at me. I stood and led him inside, away from the noise. He reached for me as the door closed, but I batted his hand away and kept him at arm's length.

"Don't. We need to have a serious talk, Nick, not fall into bed and start this little drama all over again."

Nick stared me down for the longest five seconds of my life, then dropped gracelessly onto a chair. I sat at the table across from him, needing to have a little distance between us. If he were close enough to touch, my resolve would crumble. He watched me, waiting for me to say something. He was here, and I wasn't sure where to start, so I went back to the photo.

"Listen, Nick, I had nothing to do with that photo being taken. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Looking back, I wish I'd kept my shirt buttoned and my hands to myself, but I can't change that."

He glanced away. "I'm sorry, too, Asher. I accused you wrongly. I know that now."

My temper spiked, and I shot off my mouth before I considered my words. "So your money bought you the same information I gave you, but you believed the money."

It was clear he didn't like my statement, but it was true. He'd paid people to investigate the photo and who was behind it, and they'd corroborated my statement that I'd not been involved. I didn't care if he knew I was pissed off that he'd not believed me.

"I should've trusted you. I can't believe I didn't."

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“I can. Who am I, huh? No one.” I leaned forward. “And you’re Nick Light. Do you like being him?”

Nick rested his head in his hand and rubbed his temple, sighing audibly. “I used to, and then I met you.”

“Sorry I ruined it for you.”

He glared at me, but underneath the spike of his anger, I glimpsed a great tiredness. “Are we going to talk, or are you going to keeping cutting me so you can watch me bleed?”

Nick was right. I needed to stop pushing him, but one last dig fell out of my mouth before I could reel it back in. “I’m tired of bleeding alone.”

His shoulders slumped tiredly, but his green gaze burned into mine, fever-bright. “I’ve never loved anyone before, Asher, and if this is what it’s like, I don’t want it.”

My heart stuttered, then pounded wildly in my chest. He loved me. I saw the crack in his composure begin. I’d cut him, but now I desperately needed to stop that fracture from widening. “Nick, I would never betray you.”

“I do know that.” He looked at me, his eyes suddenly red-rimmed. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life. Letting you walk away that first night was a big one, but not as big as throwing you out. If I could take that back, I would.”

It was one of the true things he had to offer me, and I recognized it as such. I gathered my courage to tell him my truth. “I love you, Nick. God help me, I love you so much. But I can’t... Your life is so different from mine. I can’t see my way clear to you.”

He paled. “Don’t say that! I’m right here, Asher.” He

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stretched his hand out to me, and I grabbed it like it was a lifeline in a raging storm. His fingers closed around mine, gripping tightly. “Yeah, I have money, and my life is high profile. And yes, God knows I’ve treated you like a dirty little secret and expected you to accept it.”

Nick looked at me, suddenly stripped of everything that protected his heart and letting me see how vulnerable he really was. “I’m not proud to admit this to you, Asher. I thought you’d be like other men I’ve had little flings with. You know, we’d have a good time for a few weeks on my money, I’d give you a nice parting gift, and you’d keep quiet.” Without releasing my hand, he knelt beside me. It shocked me to see a single tear overflow and streak down his face.

“I never expected to fall in love with you.” Nick’s free hand shook at he swiped at this cheek. His breath hitched in his throat. “Damn, I hate turning all weepy queen.”

I managed a small smile for him while I tried to decide if I’d really heard what I thought I heard, or if I’d started to lose my mind. “I like rugged-looking queens in cowboy boots.”

“Asher, I need a little help here, ’cause I don’t know what to do next.”

Nick loved me. Crying seemed like a good idea to me, but I held it together, more for his sake than mine. My mind couldn’t keep up with my soaring heart. *He loves me.* Suddenly we were standing, falling against the refrigerator as we clutched each other like two drowning men.

How long we stood there, chests heaving as we both struggled to get our breathing under control, I didn’t know, or

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care. I'd lost hope of ever holding him again, of breathing in his scent and his arms holding me. It wasn't a sexual thing. It went deeper.

If Nick wasn't a part of my life, I'd only be half-alive. I buried my face in the soft skin of his neck and shook. His hand, warm and comforting, cradled the back of my head as his warm breath teased my ear, until I eased my grip on him.

"Better?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Let's sit down again before we fall over. Wanna drink?"

His arms tightened around me. "Sure. Do I have to let go of you?"

"Yep. I'll come back, though." I squeezed him, then let my hands slide to his hips. He pulled away and looked at me, searching my face. A new, poignant longing wove delicate tendrils around us.

Admitting we loved each other didn't mean we could find a way to stay together. I stepped back before he tried to kiss me and the potent sexual energy we shared flared to move us in a direction neither of us was prepared for. I got my bottle of old-fashioned American bourbon out of the fridge and fixed two glasses, over ice. Nick moved restlessly around the kitchen, sipping. I reclaimed my chair, savoring the whiskey warmth that spread from my belly to my joints. Nick finally rejoined me at the table, looking at me with his dark, serious gaze.

"Don't snap my head off, but will you move in with me, Asher?"

SEDUCING LIGHT

“So you can support me?”

Nick pointed his finger at me. “I said don’t snap at me. Isn’t this complicated enough? Yeah, so I can support you. So you don’t have to worry about the rent, a car that won’t start, and a darkroom that you can’t really expect to accomplish much in. So you can pursue your career freely. So you can take me to Miami, or wherever, next time.”

Relief broke free inside me. *Maybe...*

“What about the gossip, Nick? You fucking freaked over that photo. That’s only the start of it when people figure out we’re a couple.”

He reached for my hand again, and I gave it to him. “You know what, babe? I don’t care. I’m tired of hiding and worrying. I’m taking a page out of your book.”

“My book?”

“Yeah. I heard how you handled the questions tossed at you tonight.” He made a rude noise that sounded like the old Nick. “People were afraid to ask me about the photo, so they went to you. You just politely ignored them, and they accepted it was none of their business.”

I told him what he already knew, not so much because he needed to hear it—he didn’t—but to have it in the open between us. This was something we’d both have to deal with, singularly and as a couple.

“Nick, it won’t always be like that. Those folks are friendly with you and Marcia, and just generally curious about me. The tabloid press will be brutal when they get the scent of your blood.”

SEDUCING LIGHT

He nodded. "I know. Truthfully, it's a small miracle I've not been outed long before now. I think my stress level will go down if I just get it over with."

He reached out his other hand to mine. There we sat, holding hands, staring at each other across my kitchen table. I tried to swallow the hope threatening to catapult me into his life before I'd said all the words I needed to say and been given the assurances I needed to receive. I wanted that life, but I feared it, too. Nick looked as determined as I'd ever seen him.

"An open relationship with me means you could lose roles, and income, if we go public before the movie comes out."

Nick's gaze dropped to our joined hands. "Okay, that's true. The money doesn't matter, Asher, I swear. I've got plenty put back and invested. The house here in Los Angeles and the ranch are both paid for. But *Aries Rising* getting a good draw does matter. Other people have invested in the movie and they deserve a good payoff. Do you think we can manage to be very low-key until after the movie plays? After that, it's our life and we live it."

It was a very small concession to make, much smaller than I was prepared to give for his career, if necessary. Besides, low-key would never work, and he knew it. We'd have to be downright stealthy until the premiere, and that probably wouldn't work either.

"Absolutely."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Any old boyfriends lurking about?"

SEDUCING LIGHT

I raised my eyebrow. “I should be asking you that question, but no. And your ‘inner circle’ is off-limits, Nick. I’m not into sharing you.”

“You won’t be. I swear. That picture put the stop to those men ever coming near me again.” He licked his lips. “Listen, maybe I should go home. We both need a good night’s sleep. Maybe, sorta get ourselves calmed down.”

Nick was right about that. Emotional exhaustion, coupled with three fingers of whiskey had me ready to keel over. But sleeping alone wasn’t what I wanted, and I knew he didn’t really want to leave.

Tonight of all nights, we needed the comfort of the other. It wasn’t so much a need for sex, although that was on my mind, but more a need to have his physical presence beside me. He held my hand as we made our way to the bedroom.

CHAPTER 17

We undressed slowly, not speaking. I sneaked a few glances at his half-hard penis, and caught him checking mine out in the same fashion. He grinned and shrugged, saying he was merely curious. I shook my head and rolled my eyes, and the tension between us eased more. Nick slipped between the clean sheets I'd put on the bed days ago and flipped the edge back for me. I held up my hand, to indicate I'd be a moment and stepped into the bathroom to get the only candle I had.

He watched as I set it on the dresser and lit it. The dry wick made the fire flicker wildly before beginning to burn with a steady flame as I sank down into Nick's open arms.

I didn't want to cling to him—I wasn't like that by

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nature—but I held him as tightly as he held me. He shifted his hips, letting me know he wanted to make love.

Nick kissed along my jaw line, coaxing me to come to him. I hesitated a moment too long.

“Asher?”

“What, Nick?”

He sighed. “Talk to me.”

I closed my eyes. I wouldn’t blame him if he’d gone off on his own and done something foolish and violent, but I wanted to know. He wasn’t going to like this, but it was important. “I have to know what you did about Munch Wallace.”

“Why? The son-of-a-bitch whore tried to blackmail me on top of what he did to you! What do you think I did?”

“Well, if I knew, I wouldn’t have asked, now would I? Just tell me you didn’t track him down and beat the snot out of him!” I lifted my head and looked at him. “Snapped at you, huh? Sorry.”

“We’ll be better with each other in the morning, after a good night’s sleep, so don’t worry about it.” He guided my head back down to his shoulder. “That piece of scum isn’t worth jail time. I went easy on him. I called my lawyers. They called the authorities and informed them that not only did Wallace attempt to blackmail me, he hacked his way into my email. I did keep the email, so there’s proof and a cyber trail. I also happened to mention your recent problems.”

Any investigation now wouldn’t help me, but if it got Wallace the jail time he so royally deserved, it was okay. I’d help in any way I could.

SEDUCING LIGHT

“You know, Nick, I could be upset, knowing that because of your money and your visibility the authorities will take the charge seriously now.”

His arms tightened around me. “Christ, Asher, don’t go there. Not tonight. I have no control over what the cops will do now that they didn’t do before.”

“I know that. I don’t want to keep things from you. It crossed my mind. I shared it.”

“Okay, then, let me share this. I want you. Tonight. Tomorrow.” He drew my hand down to his cock. “See?”

I gave him a little squeeze and a stroke. “Not see. Feel.”

“Yeah? Well that ‘feeled’ good.” He let out a short, explosive breath. “Babe, I can’t do much to make you more comfortable about how much money I have. I earned it legally. I can tell you that you’ll get used to it. Honest.”

My hand stilled as my darkest fear about a life with him crouched before me. Only with Nick’s help could I slay the beast and fully accept a future with him. “Nick, I could get used to life with you. But I keep wondering what happens if it all crashes down on top of me. I’m worried about losing myself to your world. And it’s not that your world is bad, but I have friends who matter to me that come with me, part and parcel. I’m used to fighting to keep my head above water. I don’t want to forget that I have what it takes to do that.”

He lay still, his breathing steady and reassuring. Finally, he took a deep breath and slowly blew it out. “I had you investigated. You know that. I’m proud of the way you fought to get your name cleared and pay your legitimate debts. Even

SEDUCING LIGHT

when the fight wasn't going your way, you never gave up. You never sold out. It takes a strong person to make some of the decisions you made."

With the practiced ease of a street fighter, he rolled me beneath him. Propping up on his elbows, he cupped my face. "You made it through all that, babe. If I don't keep my act together with you, you'll kick my ass all the way back to Montana."

Nick looked and sounded so serious it made me smile. "I will, too, Nick Light, so you'd better remember it."

His features underwent a swift change, from serious to cautious hope. "Asher? Is that a yes?"

Without warning, my eyes flooded. I nodded. What the hell was wrong with me? I never cried and now this was the second time I'd boo-hooed all over him. Nick didn't seem to mind, just held me until I got a grip on myself.

All my fears suddenly seemed so trivial, and I saw with a new clarity that my concerns over his wealth were merely a subconscious ploy to shield me from the real problem.

"Nick, as much as I want you, and I do, and I have right from the very first, I think I've been, you know, afraid, because you're a strong person, too. In the ways that count, we're equals. I think maybe I don't know what to do with that."

"Would you like a suggestion?"

The low, rich timbre of his voice sent shivers up and down my legs, shivers that settled in my groin. The last thing it made me was cold. "Sure. Enlighten me."

SEDUCING LIGHT

His knuckles caressed my cheek. I wondered if my eyes looked as black as his did in the candlelight. "Relax, Asher. You'd like everything solved and tied up in a happy ending tonight, like on the silver screen, and maybe our life together won't always be like that. Gay couples don't always get the happily ever after either."

But maybe we would. We were both a little older and knew ourselves, what we needed, what we wanted.

"Maybe we will, Nick. I did just get the action hero on the white horse."

Nick laughed softly. "Yeah, I guess you did."

I looked up at him. He seemed so comfortable lying on top of me I wondered if he planned to sleep there. I'd let him, but there was one more thing I wanted from him tonight. The huskiness of my own voice surprised me. "Are you going to kiss me?"

His smile faded. "I'd like to do more than kiss you."

I wrapped my legs around his thighs and rolled us as Nick's hands gripped my hips. Trapped between our bellies, his cock swelled, keeping pace with mine. An aching tenderness suffused me. We'd made love before, but this was suddenly different. Fine tremors coursed through me.

To touch him now, knowing he loved me, brought me to a place of shy boldness. His hands on my skin felt different, the energy flowing out of him into my being while drawing me to him so he could hold me in the safety of his embrace. I touched every inch of him with a new poignancy, an emotion that ran deeper than sexual desire and attraction.

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He arched and stretched under my hands, flexing muscles, cat-like, until I'd stroked every inch of him with this new touch that murmured softly, over and over, "I love you." Even as I spoke this new language to him, his hands reaffirmed what his heart said to me, that he loved me.

I don't know how long we caressed each other in the ebbing candlelight. Maybe it was only a few minutes. It could have been much longer. There was no hurry in either of us, as we shared a willing, loving passivity, each with the other. Even when his lips brushed my thighs, my belly, I felt no immediate urgency. That would come; I sensed it building in him. Nick suckled at my chest with moist lips and the first stirrings flowed through me. Finally, he gave me his mouth.

How many times had we kissed each other in preparation for this moment? A hundred? Only a few dozen? Those kisses were nothing like this. I felt virgin again, kissed for the first time by someone I knew loved me, by someone who knew I loved him. And even with the intimate knowledge I had of this man, the floodgate of passion for him that his lips on mine unleashed was beyond my experience. His tongue licked into mine and all coherent thought ceased.

By some unspoken agreement, we'd kept our hands and lips off each other's genitals, caressing only muscled buttocks, not delving between to that most intimate flesh. Now I was eager to taste the unique male muskiness of his cock, to sink into him and hear his moans of pleasure. My own cock, turgid while we basked in touch, hardened, swelling rapidly into his coaxing hand.

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Nick's kiss held me captive as he stroked my shaft, melding memories of my own hand on my erection, and of his hand those times before, with this new touch that caressed me in passionate love. I reached for him and found his cock equally hard, a drop of moisture at the tip. He moaned into my mouth, and I pulled away, curling down to lap up that bead and sliding my lips over his length. I took him in, and his hips surged up to meet me.

Then his mouth was on me, hot and wet, drenching me in his urgency. He licked around the rim, then sucked on my glans. New shocks of arousal struck through me, rushing me along when I wanted to savor every flick of his tongue. Nick needed more.

His hands and lips urged me to catch up to him in the climb. Muscles tensed, skin sweet with salty sweat, he moved restlessly against me. His cock throbbed, pulsing with each rapid beat of his heart, while his panting breath blew across my damp belly. Suddenly, he released me.

I raised my head to see why and watched as his shaking fingers fumbled with the condom wrapper. His gaze met mine, then he sheathed me. I'd not known, until this moment, where his need would take him. Had he known this was mine?

Eyes gleaming with anticipation, he stretched out as I knelt between his spread thighs. His knees rose, gripping my hips. Nick squirted a generous blob of lube on his belly. I dipped my fingertips in it and carefully touched tender flesh, coating him inside and out, even as he applied the remaining gel over the latex. His eyelids fluttered as my fingers teased him, then

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opened wide as the tip of my cock slipped into him. Nick's legs rose higher as I buried myself in his heat.

Bent beneath me, Nick held me at his shoulder as I moved strongly within him. My moans of pleasure met his, joining in the air around us until he cried out my name. I rose above him, braced against his knees to keep my rhythm, struggled to hold back my climax as I watched him pump his cock with rapid strokes. He tensed, his body bowing, a low, sharp gasp on his lips as he came, his semen pooling on the famous six-pack abdomen.

Nick's shoulders fell back on the pillows. He lay panting, the sexual tension gone. His hands reached for mine as his soft voice lifted me to a powerful orgasm.

"Come to me, Asher."

I reached for my own climax, falling into it as it seared my pounding blood, and blinded me with a flash of white heat that ripped inarticulate sounds from my very soul. The scalding heat of my own release enveloped me, sheathed as I was. I wanted to pump that hot life into his very being and wash away his memories of every other lover he'd ever had.

I sucked in a deep breath as my lungs demanded air. My head cleared as the dancing lights faded from my vision. Nick watched me, his eyes luminous in the dim light. I groaned as I gave up his body, stripping off the condom as I withdrew. His hands pulled me down into his arms, into a kiss to last a sweet lifetime.

EPILOGUE

Twenty months later...

“Crap! Where the fuck is my green shirt? Did it get laundered?”

I smiled, or at least my face smiled. Inside, I was having a difficult time refraining from shaking Nick and ordering him to calm down. The Los Angeles premiere of *Aries Rising* was tonight, and my lover had a bad case of nerves.

“Your shirt is right where you left it. Clean, in the closet, on its hanger. Now sit down and eat your bagel.”

Twin green orbs glared at me. “How can you be so calm?”

“It’s a gift.” I stood and picked up the breakfast tray.

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“C’mon. Let’s go out by the pool and see if the frog came back and needs to be netted out of the skimmer again.”

“Fuck the damn frog,” Nick muttered as he rose and trudged dutifully behind me. “What’s he doing swimming in a chlorinated pool, anyway?”

“Who knows? But he is entertaining, you must admit.” He opened the door for me. Heat like a blast furnace hit me in the face. I’d be happy to have this week over so we could finally retreat to the ranch and enjoy what was left of the Montana summer. We had a whole six weeks set aside with nothing to do but eat, sleep, and fuck our brains out.

The movie had premiered in London a month ago, and we’d been there making the prerequisite appearances. Then it was on to New York where we did it all over again. Radio shows, talk shows, interviews, photo shoots—and with me occasionally captured on the other side of the lens beside him.

People noticed we were together, and we were happy. Lord, we were so happy together. It couldn’t help but show. Nick took a deep breath and turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to all the speculation and gossip. He had more offers for roles now than he did before, but he remained firm in his commitment to scale back on the work.

Tonight was the final premiere, with the movie opening everywhere tomorrow. *Aries Rising* had been a critical and, so far, a box office success. What had Nick worked up was the red carpet tonight. He was very protective of me when people started tossing questions my direction, always stepping in to smile and wave, but never really giving answers.

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I picked a spot in the shade and set the tray down. This vantage also gave us the best view of the beautiful garden beyond the pool. Nick had been correct. I'd settled in comfortably to the lifestyle his money provided. His willingness to compromise helped.

At first he'd wanted to shower me with material things, including a dark room I couldn't say no to. He insisted I allow him to buy me a decent vehicle. He settled for letting me have his old car and getting a new one for himself.

To entice me to stay on at the magazine, Marcia Conley had agreed to let me pick and choose my assignments. I chose my work around Nick's schedule so he could be my assistant. The magazine took his traveling expenses out of my fee. Nick had to agree to that, or I didn't allow him to tag along and set up my tripods.

Nick had accepted the acting lead he'd wanted so badly. Filming had started the week after *Aries Rising* wrapped. The emotional role had exhausted him, but I made sure he got the quiet he needed when he finally made it home in the evenings. We locked the door, turned off all phones, and practiced varied relaxation techniques on each other.

He looked like he needed something inventive right now. Maybe I should toss him in the pool and then dry him off.

It wouldn't take much. My lover was checking the skimmers for the frog he refused to admit caring about. One little shove and he'd be wet.

Ah, but I couldn't do that to him.

Nick jumped, and I knew he'd found the frog. He lifted it

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from the trap and it hopped under a nearby shrub, where it spent its days, probably planning its escape from the city. Smiling, he straightened and walked toward me, his gaze never leaving mine.

My body responded to the sight of his long, easy gait. It always did. Nick knew it, too, as he grinned at me, the premiere forgotten for a little while. He snatched up the bagel I'd just put cream cheese on.

"What say we scrap breakfast in this heat and go back to our air conditioned bedroom until it's time to get showered?"

Needing a little fuel for what he likely had in mind, I quickly smeared the spread on a second bagel. "I'm right behind you."

He chuckled wickedly. "Oh, no, lover. I think I'm behind you."

That would mellow him out for a while.

We both laughed on our way back inside. I dropped the tray on the counter and grabbed two mugs. Nick grabbed the coffee carafe, and we ran up the stairs like overeager schoolboys, not grown men who knew each other very well.

Nick could seduce me with a look, a smile, or a soft kiss on the back of my neck. And I could seduce him with a brush of my hand, or the click of a shutter when only he and I could hear it.

He'd come to me, eager to see the play of sun and shadow that I'd seen. And he knew my hands would reach for him to seduce the light on his skin.

Was our life together all roses? Not by a long shot. We

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worked at being a couple, every day. Our trust in each other was hard won, and we were both careful not to strain it. In everything we did, we struggled to find a place where neither of us always led, or always followed. The rewards meant we'd be together a long time.

Maybe even be two old men sitting on the porch, watching a Montana sunset.

KC KENDRICKS

Best-selling author KC Kendrick makes her home in Maryland. A 2008 Amber Heat Wave Winner, and a 2008 CAPA nominee, KC writes contemporary gay romances that while are adult in nature, celebrate love and hope for mature readers.

Writing more traditional romance under a pseudonym, the author is a two-time EPPIE Finalist, and a 2005 CAPA nominee. With one contemporary title a #1 bestseller, several other top-ten list titles, and a few more recommended reads, the author has established herself as a storyteller that delivers rich, satisfying romantic stories that feature strong themes of love, hope, and redemption with positive, upbeat endings.

* * *

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