



BRING THE HEAT

M. L. RHODES

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...“Why didn’t you call me?”

Riley closed his eyes and groaned again because between Dane’s attention to his ear and the slow gyration he was doing against Riley’s groin, it was all he could do to pull together a coherent thought. “B-because I thought it was just a game to you, th-thought you were playing me. I didn’t know if you were for real,” Riley admitted.

“How about this...?” Dane curved a hand around Riley’s neck and pulled him into another kiss, this one more all-consuming than the first. By the time he eased away again, Riley’s body thrummed, his lips felt swollen, and his dick ached against the zipper of his jeans. “Does that feel real?”

“Yes,” Riley gasped.

“What about this?” He grasped Riley’s hand and brought it to his crotch.

Oh, God. That’s definitely real. Riley almost came at the feel of the other man’s thick bulge encased in tight, faded denim beneath his palm, obvious evidence the attraction was two-sided. Out of pure instinct, he squeezed, and was rewarded with a low groan and Dane’s eyelids fluttering closed. His head tilted back, and the long, sexy line of his throat made Riley’s mouth water...almost as much as the stiff cock responding to his touch.

Jesus. He wanted to touch him. Really touch him. With no barriers between them.

But before he could take action, Dane’s eyes opened and he was kissing Riley again.

This time there was no holding back. Riley didn't know what the hell was happening to him, what effect this man had on him. He just knew that he wanted him, needed him, with a driving passion and boldness that shocked him...

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BRING THE HEAT
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CHAPTER 1

Grimacing at how easily he'd broken his promise to himself, Police Detective Riley Ellison pushed through the glass door that led into the bustling rush of The Java Pit coffeehouse.

The rich aroma of coffee beans, and the shop's warmth and bright gold and red décor hit, him with a jolt of cheerful comfort, making him instantly forget the damp, gray chill of the fall morning outside. It was only mid-September, but it seemed autumn was determined to come early to upstate New York this year. He'd even had to crank up the heat in his car this morning. Of course that was nothing compared to the completely different type of heat already twining through him in eager anticipation for his daily fix.

A fix that had nothing to do with coffee or caffeine.

"What the hell am I doing?" he muttered under his breath, even

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as his gaze automatically searched the crowd in line to buy beverages, then skimmed over the figures seated at the small tables and in the overstuffed chairs gathered in conversation groups around the shop.

Honestly, this was getting ridiculous, these early morning forays to a coffeehouse that wasn't even on his way to work. He had no idea why he continued to give in to the urge to come here. It wasn't like him at all.

This would be the last day, he told himself, trying not to think about the fact he'd promised the same thing yesterday. But this time he meant it. This was it. The. Last. Day. He wasn't a teenager, hadn't been for a long time. *So get your shit together, Ellison, and act like a grown man instead of some hormonal geek with a crush.*

And yet, the stern words didn't stop him from scanning the shop for what he sought as he joined the queue to order coffee.

He sighed and shook his head. *Make that a hopeless geek.*

He could blame his sister for this. If he were the type to play pass the buck—which he wasn't. But if he were...

None of this would have started if Carol's car hadn't been in the garage for repairs three weeks ago. Since she was currently living alone after her most recent divorce, she'd finagled him into picking her up and taking her to work several days—a chore he would have avoided if he could have. It wasn't that he didn't love his sister and want to help her out. It was just that when she was between men, she had a tendency to glom onto Riley and use him as her bestest best friend and confidante. She had no qualms about sharing intimate details of her life with him, things he'd rather not *ever* know about his older sister, thank you very much. It was because of that very habit of hers he'd found himself here in The Java Pit in the first place. Carol's place was nearby, and she always

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ran late for everything, while Riley was always early. After the first morning, rather than listening to her regale him with tales of her private life while she finished primping, he'd stopped in here to get coffee while he waited for her.

And so it had begun...

A heavysset man shuffled forward in line just then, and in the gap left behind him, Riley had a view of the tables on the other side of the shop he hadn't been able to see before. In that split second, the people surrounding him, the conversations, and even the speaker system playing classical music became nothing but background clutter as his attention fell on the familiar dark-haired head bent over an open paperback novel.

As if he knew the moment Riley had found him, the man looked up, and those mischievous gray-green eyes that had begun to haunt Riley's every waking hour, and sometimes his sleeping ones as well, settled on him. The faintest of knowing smirks curved the man's too-sensual-to-be-true lips. And just like that, a rush of lust—sweaty, gut-tightening, ball-aching lust—swept through Riley.

Shit. He glanced away, realizing he'd been staring too long. And yet he could still feel that hot gaze on him.

Riley had never been good at cruising. Over the years he'd avoided it and the many venues gay men haunted as much as possible so he wouldn't have to play the game. He liked order, routine, clear-cut rules to follow, which was why he made a damn good cop. To his way of thinking, picking up strange men, or being picked up by them, was too fraught with unpredictability.

Which was why he couldn't figure out for the life of him why this guy had gotten under his skin. Hell, they'd never even spoken, had barely made eye contact because every time the man caught

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him looking Riley bailed rather than meet his sizzling gaze for longer than a second or two. So why, several mornings each week—whenever he wasn't on call working a case—had he driven blocks out of his way just to get a glimpse of a man who was not remotely his type?

He liked conservative, sedate, *safe* men, not edgy hunks whose almost-black hair fell rakishly over sexy eyes, who wore snakeskin cowboy boots, jeans that clung to sinfully long legs like a second skin, tight long-sleeved T-shirts that defined every significant ripple and bulge, earrings in both ears, and nail polish, for God's sake. Black nail polish that should have appeared juvenile delinquent or rock-star-wannabe, yet on this man, whom Riley pegged to be around his age—early thirties or so—it looked good. Spectacular. Hot as fucking hell, just like the rest of him.

Riley shuffled forward in line, only a couple of customers away from the counter now, and he used the movement as a chance to cast another subtle glance the man's way.

Fuck. That teasing gaze still watched him...and caught him looking. The man's lips curved up another notch and his eyes sparked with flirtatious heat.

Riley's throat went dry.

He didn't get it—guys like that never flirted with men like him. In spite of the fact he was a cop, which he liked to hope had given him a little bit of visible macho cool after eight years on the job, his sister still said his looks and style were “nerd meets librarian,” which to him meant he was about as bland as they came. Not exactly a balm to his ego. The man sprawled out in the chair over his right shoulder, however, didn't have a bland bone in his come-on-baby-you-know-you-want-to-fuck-me body. The words “delectable” and “decadent” came to Riley's mind. If the man had

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a flavor, it would be something like dark chocolate raspberry cheesecake swirl. With whipped cream. And nuts. And a cherry.

A sudden vision of Mr. Long Legged-n-Sexy in the buff, his hair tousled, his eyes heavy with lust, stretched out across Riley's bed, covered in whipped cream and cherries, and Riley licking it off his ripped abs and his stiff dick suddenly blazed into Riley's brain and straight to the growing bulge behind the zipper of his jeans.

Holy mother of God...

If Riley hadn't been on fire before, he sure as hell was now.

Shit. Just get it over with and go talk to the guy. You'll probably discover he's far less interesting than your dick wants to believe, and then you can get on with life.

But that was the thing...he'd never been good at picking up men. As a general rule he was pretty damned unflappable, able to deal with most anything with a calm head and cool intellect. Give him a witness to question on a case or a suspect to interrogate and he was deadly with words. But make it personal and having to do with hooking up with a man for pleasure, and he might as well dig himself a hole right now—it would be less humiliating that way.

The lady in front of him placed her order and moved away to the pick-up counter, but it took a frazzled, “Can I help you?” from the red-headed college-girl clerk to snap Riley from his thoughts.

“Sorry. Can I get a large black regular coffee?”

She paused, hand poised above the cash register, and studied him. Then a smile lit her face. “Oh! You're him, aren't you?”

Riley cocked an eyebrow at her. “I'm sorry? *Him?*”

She leaned over the counter and gave him a slow once-over from head to foot, briefly glanced over his shoulder, then met his gaze again with a grin. “Yeah. The, and I quote, ‘cute blond with

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the serious expression and ocean blue eyes, who'll be wearing jeans, Converse tennis shoes, a sport coat and tie.”

Riley stared at her. “Say what?”

She giggled and pulled a large paper cup out from under the counter and passed it to the barista next to her. “This one’s Arabian mocha spice,” she told the dreadlocked young man working with her.

“Um...I ordered regular coffee with nothing in it,” Riley corrected.

“He said you’d say that,” the clerk said, still grinning, as if she were party to a special secret, “but today you’re getting the Arabian mocha blend because he already bought it for you. He said you needed a little spice in your life.”

Something fluttered in Riley’s stomach. “He? He who?” But even as the girl pointed, Riley knew. Still, he glanced back at the object of his recent fascination, and the flutter became a full-out sweet, aching clench when the hunk lifted his own cup in salute and gave Riley a sexy, come-hither smile.

Riley’s breath caught. Hot, tingling jolts of electricity shot through him. He nodded, acknowledging the gesture, finding himself lost for a moment in the man’s raw, sexual aura. The hunk’s smile widened in a blatant teasing come-on, as if he knew exactly what Riley was thinking.

With a start, Riley wrenched his gaze away and turned back to the clerk, who seemed to be enjoying this whole thing way too much. He pulled out his wallet to pay before the girl reminded him it had already been taken care of. Shoving his wallet back in his pocket, he moved stiffly down the counter to the pick-up area, wanting to look back at the man again, but fighting not to because he was so out of his depth.

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He sucked at this game and never knew how to respond—no matter what he did, it was bound to be the wrong thing. Suddenly, he felt like he was back in high school and once again the shy, awkward geek who'd been far more comfortable with his head stuck in a book than trying to understand the confusing and downright contradictory rules of flirting and dating. Maybe part of the confusion back then had been because most guys his age were into girls and he wasn't but hadn't yet openly faced that fact. So the whole ritual had been a minefield of embarrassment for him. A minefield, it seemed, he still hadn't conquered, which irked the hell out of him.

He stood waiting for his coffee—mocha something-or-other—that the hunk had picked out for him because he thought he “needed a little spice in his life.” The guy had him pegged and they'd never even met, which was more than a little embarrassing, and also a bit disturbing. Was he that obvious and predictable and *bland* that someone could figure him out just by seeing him from a distance in a coffee shop a few times? His hands clenched in his jacket pockets.

“Here you go...one large Arabian mocha spice,” the barista said, pushing the cup toward him over the red Formica countertop. Instead of putting the protective paper sleeve on the cup like they usually did here, the barista passed him one separately, and immediately turned back to his work.

Riley picked up the sleeve and the cup to take care of it himself, but then he spied the writing on the cup in magic marker. And it wasn't the usual chicken scratch the clerks added telling the barista the specifics of the order—the bold purple ink and artsy-looking drawn heart were the giveaway.

Taking a closer look, shock rippled through him. Next to the

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heart was a local phone number. And above it, a name...Dane.

Oh, shit. Was this for real?

His pulse racing, Riley turned to look at the hunk again. But the table where he'd been sitting was empty. A probing glance around the store revealed nothing but humdrum clientele with no sight of the striking man who'd captured Riley's attention.

What the hell?

"Did you see where he went?" he asked the girl at the register.

She was swamped with customers, but gave a quick look around the store, then turned back to him. She shook her head and mouthed, "Sorry," to him, as an older businessman rattled off his order.

"Damn."

Two customers behind him, who were waiting for their drinks, crowded him out, so Riley stepped away from the counter, slipping the sleeve over his cup and watching as it partially covered the phone number. The name, however—*Dane*—stood out against the white background of the cup in plain sight, making sure he could see it and wouldn't forget it. *Purple magic marker.* Riley grinned.

Maybe the man had stepped outside and was waiting to talk to Riley when he left.

The thought caused his pulse to skip a beat. But the moment Riley exited the shop, he knew no one was waiting. Rain fell harder now, and the sidewalk was empty.

"Well, hell."

Trying to avoid getting soaked, he jogged to his car, a twenty-year-old Camaro parked parallel on the street, and slid behind the wheel. He cranked the engine, but didn't pull out yet. Instead, with his gaze focused on the rearview mirror, which gave him a direct view of The Java Pit's door in case he'd missed the man inside, he

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took a sip of the new coffee, not sure what to expect.

The flavor was bolder than he was used to, with a sweet spicy bite to it that lingered on his tongue. *Not bad.* He sipped again. Not bad at all...if you were in the mood for something exotic.

Was that supposed to be the point? Was it a test to see if Riley was willing to expand his horizons? How the hell had the man—*Dane*, he corrected, since the fantasy now apparently had a name—known that Riley was a regular black coffee kind of guy?

He probably overheard you order one of these mornings.

Or...he took one look at you and saw you as boring, and what else would a boring guy order?

Riley groaned and stared at the cup.

The big question, though, was why would this Dane have set up the whole thing, put his name and number on the cup, then taken off? Didn't that sort of defeat the purpose if he wanted to meet Riley? He didn't seem the type to shy away from contact. Or maybe it was all just meant to be a tease because he'd noticed how often Riley had been coming in ogling him like a fan boy. Maybe the number was fake and if Riley called it, he'd get a dog grooming parlor or the Price Chopper or some old grandpa.

Damn, he couldn't reiterate enough how much he *hated* these kinds of games.

A quick glance at his Timex Expedition put an end to Riley's musing. He had to get to work. As he pulled out onto the street, all he could infer was that if the name and number, by some miracle, *were* legit, Dane's departure probably meant the next move, whatever it might be, was up to Riley.

Which left him with a faintly sick feeling in the pit of his stomach because he wasn't sure if he wanted to pursue something with a cocky stranger who wasn't remotely his type and who might

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very well be playing him anyway. But also because even if he did want to pursue it—and he couldn't deny the man's sex appeal alone was enough to drive any self-respecting gay man to distraction—Riley's track record when it came to making the *correct* next move with potential lovers...was pretty much nil.

* * *

The next move.

When he'd left the Java Pit Thursday morning Riley had been unable to think of anything else. But when he'd gotten to the police department, his unit was short-staffed, so he'd found more than his usual pile of reports and paperwork and leads to follow up on. He'd been so busy he'd pulled a late night to make a dent in the work. Friday was much the same. Then he'd been on call Saturday and Sunday, which had kept him hopping with a homicide—an upper middle class family man strangled in his own car outside his house in suburbia.

When Riley had finally managed to find time to ponder the hunk from the Java Pit—mostly at night where he ended up doing more tossing and turning than sleeping—his thoughts and emotions had been all over the place. He'd found himself endlessly fantasizing about the guy—to the point last night he'd ended up jacking off, pretending the whole time that Dane-the-sex-god had been the one touching him. When that hadn't fully relieved his tension, Riley had resorted to a cold shower in hopes of purging the man from his mind and finally getting some sleep.

It hadn't helped.

“What the hell's gotten into you, Ri?” his friend and fellow detective Jefferson Carver asked him Monday morning, slapping a

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hand on his shoulder, before parking himself on the corner of Riley's desk. "You're working like a demon and it's not even seven-thirty yet. Come to think of it, you're in the same spot you were in when I left you yesterday afternoon. Did you even bother to go home last night?"

Great. Did he look *that* bad? Riley blinked his gritty eyes and self-consciously scuffed a hand over a couple of days worth of stubble which he'd shaped into a goatee this morning. The department had begun allowing men to wear beards and goatees a few months ago as long as they kept them neatly trimmed, and as he'd stood in front of the mirror about to shave this morning, he'd decided to go for it. *Yeah, and why was that? Oh, right, because you hope it'll make you look less vanilla and more...what? Studly? Sexy? So Dane Whatshisname will see that you're capable of having a little spice in your life?*

Jesus. He couldn't believe how lame that sounded now.

Trying not to groan out loud, he lifted his head to face his friend. Which only made Riley feel even more lacking. In contrast to Riley, Jeff looked like the poster child for bright-and-shiny *GQ* perfect with his handsome, square-jawed face freshly shaven, his short brown hair sleeked back with every strand in place, his dark suit dry-cleaner crisp, and the white shirt he wore beneath it even more so. Hell, even his red power tie looked perky.

"Do you ever roll out of bed looking anything but fucking perfect?" Riley grouched, tossing down his black-framed reading glasses and grabbing up the chipped mug of too-strong black coffee that sat on his desk. He slugged down several gulps, then grimaced as the lukewarm bitterness slid down his throat and settled like a leaden lump in his stomach.

"Damn, what nasty thing crawled up your ass and died this

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morning?” Jeff said, laughing. “I know the cases have been crap the past few days, but you look like hell, my friend.”

“Gee, thanks. Whatever would I do without your scintillating and oh-so-uplifting compliments?”

Jeff grinned his thousand watt smile. “Just trying to keep you grounded. What kind of friend would I be if I left your ass dangling in the breeze with you thinking you’re all that?”

“Yeah, ’cause I have such a huge ego and all.” Riley finished off the coffee and grimaced again. A sudden craving for the sweet spicy flavor of the fancy stuff from the Java Pit hit him. Which, naturally, brought a vision of Dane Whateverhisnamewas directly to center stage of his mind, complete with a sexy quirk of lips, taunting eyes, and a body that just wouldn’t quit. “Fuck,” Riley muttered under his breath. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He squeezed his eyes closed and pressed his fingers against them, trying to blot out the sight.

“You know, the last time I saw you like this it wasn’t work related,” Jeff said. “You were avoiding going to your sister’s third—or was it her fourth?—wedding ’cause the best man kept grabbing your ass every time he saw you.”

“Her third,” Riley mumbled, dropping his hands. “And he was a perv who smelled like beer 24/7. At the rehearsal dinner I had to threaten to cuff him if he didn’t keep his hands to himself. Which he took to mean I wanted to get kinky with him.” Riley shuddered and sagged back into his chair.

Jeff laughed. “So who wants to get kinky with you this time? Or...dare I ask? Could it be that *you’ve* found someone *you* want to get kinky with?”

The whipped cream and cherries scene played out again in Riley’s mind before he could stop it—in great, glorious detail.

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Hell, he could even feel the texture of the man's dick and taste his flavor on his tongue. *Good God...* this had to stop!

"None of your damn business," he growled, but managed to keep his tone light. "I don't ask what you and Susanna get up to at home, so you don't get to speculate on my personal life."

"So there is someone! I knew it! I'm so damn good I can hardly stand it."

A smile—the first of the day—teased at Riley's lips. "Piss off. You're not my therapist or my confessor. I don't have to share anything with you."

"Fine, play it cool. But sooner or later you'll tell me who he is." Jeff preened.

Not bloody likely.

Riley wasn't exactly closeted at work, but he wasn't exactly out either. Mostly he just minded his own business and didn't share details of his private life with his co-workers. But he'd spent enough time with Jeff and Jeff's wife Susanna outside of work that they'd become real friends over the years. He trusted them both, and they fully respected who he was. That didn't mean, however, that he was going to give Jeff a play-by-play of his intimate life. There'd never been any weirdness between him and Jeff like there had been with other straight cop acquaintances who'd realized he was gay. Still, some things were sacred, and he wasn't going to start now freaking out his best friend with too much information. Of course the no-weirdness factor could, in part, be based on the fact Riley had never told Jeff that he'd spent the first year they worked together totally drooling over the man. He'd known Jeff was straight, of course, but Jeff was also everything Riley had ever imagined in his "perfect" man—good-looking, dedicated to his job, steady and financially secure. Safe.

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That word again. Ugh. *Safe*. That had always been Riley's watchword when it came to potential lovers. Hell, maybe that was why he'd really been attracted to Jeff in the beginning, because he was about as safe as they came—he was straight, which meant he was unattainable, which meant he was no real threat to Riley's emotions.

Oh, that was just rich, that little epiphany. *Way to go, Ellison.*

"Hello! What the hell is up with you?" Jeff waved a hand in front of Riley's face. "Christ, man, come back to earth."

"Sorry. Haven't had much sleep the past few nights."

"I hope your lack of sleep has something to do with an upswing in your love life."

Riley snorted.

"You know...Susanna's cousin Bob is single again."

"Oh, God." Riley buried his face in his hands. "No. Hell no. I am not letting you and Susanna set me up with Cousin Bob." Cousin Bob who was "single again" no doubt because from what Riley had heard, he ran through men like a drunk ran through booze. Yeah, that was exactly the type of guy Riley needed in his life. Not.

How do you know your Java Pit hunk Dane isn't exactly the same?

He didn't. Which was why he hadn't knocked himself out to call the number on the cup—if it was even a real number. Hell, Riley was almost ashamed to admit he still actually had the empty cup—it sat right now in the cup holder in his car.

"Don't you have work to do?" Riley asked. "It's not like we're not swamped here with Petrelli on vacation the next two weeks and Gibson gone for a family emergency."

"Ah, hell. I didn't know about Gibson. Her dad?"

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"Yeah, they found him on the floor of the bathroom late last night. Another heart attack. They're doing bypass surgery today."

Jeff shook his head. "That's tough after everything else they've been through this year, with losing her mom, and her dad already ill to start with."

"I know. They deserve a break, not more crap. The lieutenant told her to take as long as she needs."

"Which means you and I get to hold down the fort in our little unit until further notice, eh?"

"You got it."

"I'm starting to better understand the he-man scruff you haven't shaved, and those alluring dark circles under your eyes," Jeff said with a grin. "Very charming."

Riley gave him the finger. "We can't all be metrosexual fashion plates, wise ass. Some of us actually have to work for a living rather than depend on pretty smiles and expensive suits to get ahead."

Jeff slapped a hand over his heart. "I'm mortally wounded."

"My heart bleeds for you," Riley said with a chuckle. "Now get your ass off my desk and go sit at your own. We've got work to do."

"Slave driver."

"If that's what it takes to shut you up."

Jeff's laugh followed him into the next cubicle.

But Riley had barely gotten back to the files he was looking over when the lieutenant, Leo Koslowski, informed him and Jeff there'd been another homicide.

"The body was found this morning outside the backdoor of the Sable Den." Leo told them.

Jeff, who'd returned to Riley's cube and now leaned

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negligently against the wall, his hands in his pants pockets, said, "The gay strip club?"

"That's the one. The victim was male, twenty-four years old. One of the dancers at the club. There could be a connection with the murder victim this weekend. Both men were strangled."

"A connection between a stripper at a gay club and a suburban husband and father... Does that seem like a strange choice by the killer if the two are related?" Jeff said

"Why do you say that?" Riley asked, trying to follow his friend's thoughts.

"I just mean a seemingly happy, upper-middle class, forty-year-old, married father of two and a twenty-something gay dancer? What would be the killer's motivation?"

"Not all dancers at gay clubs are gay," Riley said. "Some are straight and only gay for pay. So we can't make any assumptions." Not that Riley hung out at gay clubs. He'd only ever been in two in his life and both times had been humiliating experiences for him. But he remembered a friend telling him quite a few straight guys were more than happy to play gay for a few hours on stage because it was good money. Apparently, gay men were far more generous tippers than women. Who would've thought.

"I guess we've been in this business long enough to know that anything's possible."

"Too true. Let's go check it out," he said to Jeff as he rose from his desk.

Two hours later, after their initial look at the body and the crime scene, the two cases did show similarities. Hopefully forensics would tell them more.

But, for the moment, Riley and Jeff were left to dig into the newest victim's—Miguel Morales's—life, habits, friends and

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acquaintances, and find out who he'd talked to and spent time with last night. The coroner placed the time of death around 2:30 A.M., which would have been shortly after the club closed.

They spoke with the Sable Den's manager and procured a list of all club employees, along with notations of who'd been working last night. The "Den" as the manager called it, was a sizeable establishment and employed close to forty people, between kitchen workers, bartenders, wait staff, bouncers and dancers, but only nineteen had been scheduled last night and, as far as the manager knew, they'd all shown up. It was going to take time to touch base and speak with all of them, but it had to be done. After returning to the department, Jeff and Riley split the list of remaining potential witnesses from the Den's staff list and each of them took half the names to contact.

"This ought to be a fun day," Jeff said as they parted ways.

Riley sighed. "Yeah, another in a long line of fun ones."

"Well, there's always O'Furry's to look forward to tonight. A few shots of Jack and all will be well with the world."

O'Furry's was the bar a few blocks from the police department that the local cops haunted in their downtime. The detectives in the Person Crimes Division had a standing Monday night date at the bar for those who were able to make it.

Jeff slapped him on the shoulder, gave him a grin, and sauntered out to the department lot to get the unmarked unit he'd checked out earlier in the day.

Riley followed and slid behind the wheel of the Chevy Impala unmarked cruiser he'd been assigned.

Another day in paradise. I'm going to definitely need some more coffee.

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* * *

By six in the evening, Riley was done in. He'd only been able to speak with five out of the ten employees on his list so far and none of them had noticed anything out of the ordinary during club hours, didn't seem to know Miguel Morales well because he'd been fairly new at the club, and hadn't seen him after work.

Riley's lack of sleep paired with way too much coffee on an empty stomach throughout the day had caught up to him, leaving him somewhere between downright exhausted and unpleasantly wired. He felt, and figured he probably looked, like something his next door neighbor's cat had dragged in. His head ached, something painful gnawed in his gut, and his feet moved like lead as he climbed the stairs to the third floor apartment where the final name on his list lived.

The building was a dark brick affair that had originally been built for commercial use in what was an older section of town. But, as with many buildings in this particular area, it had been converted into apartments. Thirty or forty years ago the residences had probably been considered fairly high-end. Now, the building was showing its age and had an air of casual neglect to it. It still held a quirky charm, though, with its wide, old-fashioned floral carpeted hallways and curved wood banisters on the stairs. From the outside he'd seen that each apartment had its own iron railed balcony.

Not a bad place to live, he mused. It certainly had more character than his generic, you've-seen-one-you've-seen-them-all townhome complex.

He traversed the hallway and stopped in front of the door marked 312. If this employee—one of the dancers at the Sable

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Den—was true to form and hadn't seen or noticed anything like everyone else, Riley figured he could be in and out of here in ten minutes or so. Then instead of going back to the station to get his own car and making an appearance at O'Furry's, he'd get his car, head to the nearest fast food joint, grab a burger, go home, watch a couple of MythBusters episodes he'd TiVoed, then get some sleep.

Even better, maybe this employee wouldn't be home and he'd be out of here in a flat minute and on his way even sooner.

Stop. That's bad. It'd be better for the case if he is here and I can check his name off my list.

"Let's get it over with then," he murmured. He lifted his hand and knocked on the dark wood.

As he waited, he thought he heard the faint strains of music coming from the other side of the door...which meant someone probably was home. Resigning himself to doing yet another interview, he readied his badge in his hand.

When the door opened and the soulful sound of Etta James singing "At Last" rippled out around him, Riley held up his badge and the words were out of his mouth by rote before he even registered a look at the tall man standing in the doorway. "Daniel Scott? I'm Police Detective Riley Ellison. I'd like to ask you a few ques..."

His voice choked off as he realized just who, exactly, had opened the door.

"Oh, fuck," Riley whispered. "You have got to be kidding me."

CHAPTER 2

The sight of the cute blond hunk from the coffeehouse standing in Dane's doorway—brandishing his badge, nonetheless—sent ripples of surprise and a hefty dose of sizzling awareness through him.

Sweet Jesus, he's even sexier up close. But what the hell is he doing here?

From the look on the man's face, he was even more surprised than Dane was. Which meant he hadn't been expecting Dane to open the door. Now wasn't that interesting?

"You don't call, you skip our regular morning coffee date for days, and now you show up on my doorstep?" Dane said with a grin. "Not that I'm complaining, but to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

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The man—Riley, he'd said his name was, *Police Detective Riley Ellison*—blushed, actually blushed, and looked even more adorably flustered than he'd been moments before.

"The real question, though," Dane continued, leaning casually against the door frame and crossing his arms over his chest, "is how you found me based on only a first name and a phone number. Of course, I guess that wouldn't be hard for a police detective."

Dane had already suspected the object of his desire over the past few weeks was a cop—when he'd had a seat by the window and could see Riley arrive at the Java Pit, most of the time Riley had been driving an older blue Camaro. But a couple of times Dane had watched him get out of and into a sedan so nondescript it could only be an unmarked police car. Once he'd seen that, he'd checked Riley over even more closely than usual and realized the jackets he wore everyday were to hide his gun from view. He'd noticed the faint telltale bulge once he knew what he was looking for.

"I didn't find you," Riley was saying. "I mean...I wasn't *looking* for you, I..." His cheeks turned an even more appealing shade of red, causing Dane to chuckle. But then Riley took a deep breath and put on what Dane could only suspect was his "game" face.

Which reminded Dane all over again why he'd found him so damned irresistible from the very first time he'd seen him in the Java Pit. The man was a fascinating contradiction—part strong, rugged, serious-eyed hero, and part shy, unassuming boy next door. It didn't seem possible to find both in one package, and yet here he stood. It was a package Dane, after too many years of working around and, unfortunately, dating shallow men who thought the world revolved around them and who didn't give a

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damn about anything but their looks and their own needs, found incredibly appealing.

"I'm here in an official capacity," Riley said, his voice husky but now filled with steady conviction. "I had no idea you were the person I was coming to see. You are Daniel Scott, yes?"

"According to my birth certificate and driver's license."

"And you're employed at the Sable Den?"

"A few nights a week, yeah."

"I have some questions."

A quick stab of fear caused Dane's pulse to race. *Shit. Here we go again.* Hadn't he been through enough of this when he lived in Manhattan? But as Riley continued and said, "It's about a man you work with at the Sable Den..." he let out a soft breath of relief and uttered a silent prayer of thanks that, for once, he might not have to clean up any messes.

"Something serious going on?"

"Yes."

For the first time, Dane noticed the weary lines around Riley's—that name *so* fit him—eyes and mouth, and the tired slump of his shoulders, though he could tell he was trying not to let it show. He looked like he'd been raked over the coals today and was dead on his feet. The sight caused something to tighten in Dane's chest and he felt the sudden urge to pull the man into his arms and offer solace. He added "strong but vulnerable" to the list of things about Riley Ellison that fascinated and lured him in.

Dane stepped back into his apartment. "Why don't you come in."

"Thanks."

Their shoulders and arms brushed as Riley passed, and a crackling jolt of raw sexual tension seared through Dane at the

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contact, catching him off guard with its intensity.

Good fucking God. He hadn't felt anything like that with a man he was attracted to in...well, hell, maybe ever.

Riley had felt it, too. He stiffened and then let out a slow, shaky breath and what almost sounded like a faint moan before easing past Dane.

Well, well.

A smile tugged at Dane's lips. So all these past weeks of fleeting glances *had* meant something more to the skittish detective than he'd let on. He may not have called Dane and had avoided the Java Pit for the past few days, but it certainly wasn't from lack of interest. That much was clear. The realization filled Dane with a heady sense of satisfaction. He'd known putting his name and number on that cup was a risk—knew there was a real possibility he'd scare Riley off with the move. But after watching him all those mornings in the coffeehouse, he'd decided that approaching him directly would have scared him away even faster. He didn't know what it was, or why, he just knew in his gut Riley Ellison wasn't a man who'd allow a stranger to pick him up. By doing the name and number indirectly, Dane had hoped like hell it would intrigue Riley enough to get him to make the next move. He couldn't deny he'd been disappointed when he'd neither heard from nor seen the man since. But it seemed as if fate had decided to take a hand in the matter and shine a little ray of sunshine into Dane's life.

Maybe tonight would be the chance he needed to convince Detective Riley Ellison they didn't have to stay strangers.

Once Riley had entered, Dane shut the door and led him into the living room, his bare feet padding silently on the hardwood floor, then the Oriental rug. He crossed to his sound system and

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cranked down the volume. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No. Thanks. I’m fine,” he said absently as his gaze roamed, checking out Dane’s home. “That’s...a lot of books,” he murmured, his eyes widening in appreciation as he studied the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that covered two walls.

Ah...another book lover. Dane smirked. Another thing to add to his list of reasons to get to know the sexy detective better.

“What can I say? I like to read,” he said. “Have a seat.”

Riley sat in the wine-colored leather arm chair. Dane wondered if he’d chosen the chair over the couch to be sure Dane couldn’t get within touching distance again. Or it could be a self-protective cop instinct thing so no one could get too close. Or maybe some of both. Dane wasn’t going to let a little detail like that stop him, however. Now that he knew their attraction wasn’t just mutual, it was damn near volcanic, he sank into the matching couch on the end closest to the chair, which left them only a few feet apart. With a smile at the other man, he stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles, his feet only a few inches shy of Riley’s.

Trying to shuffle his feet in closer to the chair, then realizing there was nowhere for them to go, Riley cleared his throat and instead edged slightly farther away by leaning in the opposite direction from Dane.

You can avoid it all you want, baby, but I’ve got your number now. You want me as bad as I want you.

He had to give the man props for staying on task, though. Riley reached into his tan corduroy sport coat, pulled out a small notebook, and didn’t waste any time getting down to business—a man on a mission. Which didn’t surprise Dane. He’d been able to tell just from watching him in the Java Pit that Riley liked order. It

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was in the way he showed up at exactly the same time each morning, the way he counted out precisely the correct amount of cash and change to pay for his coffee.

“Do you know Miguel Montoya?” Riley asked.

“Sure. He’s one of the dancers at the Den.”

“He was found murdered this morning.”

Whoa. The words instantly sobered Dane. “Where?” he asked softly, thinking of the sensual young man who’d quickly become a favorite with customers.

“His body was found outside the backdoor of the club, in the alley.”

That news shook Dane even more. “Jesus. Right where we work? How did it happen?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out.” Riley’s blue eyes, so changeable, like the sea they were the color of, now had turned piercing and bore into Dane with a fierce intelligence. “How well did you know Miguel?”

“Not well. He hadn’t worked there long—a few weeks, maybe a month. He seemed nice enough, but didn’t really talk much to any of us he worked with.”

“Did you see him last night?”

“Yeah, he did the last show.”

“Did you notice anything different about him? Did you see him talk to anyone, any customers? Did you see him leave?”

“No to everything. As I said, he kept to himself with staff. He was popular with customers, though, and did interact with them during shows. Not sure about afterward. Some of the guys do.”

“Do?”

“Get together with customers after shows, have a drink with them, leave with them from time to time. The gay guys anyway.

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The straight guys usually leave as soon as they're off stage."

"Was Miguel gay or straight?"

"Definitely gay."

"When you say the gay dancers *leave* with customers, do you mean for sex?"

"Sometimes. Men come in, like a particular entertainer they see, and it's natural to want more. If the dancer's agreeable, they hook up."

For some reason that seemed to unsettle the detective and Dane wondered why.

"And so you...the *dancers*, I mean...accommodate these customers?"

Ah, so that's it. If Dane had thought it even remotely appropriate, he would have laughed. As it was, he had trouble keeping a smile off his face. It almost sounded as if the good detective worried that *he* "accommodated" customers? The thought that Riley didn't like the idea of him being with a customer pleased Dane more than it should. "Sometimes. If a customer is appealing, sure. Why not? And before you go off on a tangent and assume there's money involved and it's prostitution, most of the time it's about mutual need to get off with a warm body rather than paid tricks. At least on club property."

"I don't go off on *tangents*, Mr. Scott. It's my job to get the facts," he said stiffly. "Whatever they might be."

"And I'm giving you the facts, Detective Ellison." Again Dane fought a smile. He added "prickly when he's uncomfortable" to his list of intriguing tidbits about Riley Ellison. "All I'm saying is that sometimes dancers hook up with customers. But I don't know if Miguel did."

"At any time, or last night?"

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“Either. I tend to mind my own business at the club. What the other guys do in their personal time isn’t really on my radar.”

“Do you know of anyone who might have had a grudge against Miguel? Or who didn’t get along with him?”

“I feel like I’m repeating myself here, but like I mentioned before, I never saw him talk much to anyone on staff, and he never said more than a handful of words to me since he started. Just ‘hi’ and ‘bye’ and ‘how’s it going’ kind of stuff. So, no, I really can’t tell you anything else about him.”

Riley gave him a shuttered look, then wrote in his notebook.

He was a lefty, Dane noted, finding the way he held his ballpoint pen oddly sexy.

Jeez... He had to laugh at himself. He had it bad if just the way the man wrote had the ability to turn him on. That along with everything else about him—the way his jeans and dark-blue button-up shirt and even the out-of-fashion corduroy jacket actually worked on him, the way he squinted slightly when he wrote, as if he needed or usually wore reading glasses but couldn’t be bothered to put them on, the way he bit his lower lip in concentration, the dimple on his cheek, and even the two or three days worth of light brown stubble on his chin that was a new addition since the last time Dane had seen him. And he wasn’t even going to get started on his other attributes because he’d never be able to sit here and talk to the man with any kind of cool if he let his thoughts or his gaze linger on the way Riley’s jeans hugged his groin, giving an enticing hint of what lay beneath. *No, not going there.*

At least not yet.

“What time did you leave the club last night?” Riley asked, looking up again.

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"I'd say shortly after two."

"And did you come straight home?"

"Yes."

"Anyone here in your apartment building see you come in?"

"At two-thirty in the morning? Not likely."

"Were you...alone?"

Now Dane did laugh. "If you're asking if I brought a customer home with me, no."

"I didn't necessarily mean a customer. I just meant was there someone with you—a friend, a lover—who could verify that you were here?"

Dane sat forward and rested his arms on his knees as he leaned closer to him. "Are you fishing for information about me for professional reasons or personal ones, Detective?"

Riley had the grace to blush again. Faintly this time, but it was there in the slow creep of red up his cheeks. "Professional, of course."

But his raspy voice implied otherwise. On the surface the detective's reasons might be professional, but he was damned interested for personal ones as well.

With a smile Dane said, "For the record, no. There was no one with me. I came home alone and went to bed alone. Would you like me to tell you what I did when I got in bed?" *Like how I fantasized about you and what you look like without your clothes, and how many ways I could dream up to please you and make you beg for more?*

If Dane didn't know better, he'd almost swear Riley had overheard his thoughts because the calm police detective disappeared and the flustered boy next door was back.

"No, I...I don't need to know that."

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“Are you sure?”

Riley shoved the notebook back into his inside jacket pocket and suddenly wouldn't meet his gaze. His muscles bunched as if he were on the verge of standing.

He's about to bolt. Dane recognized the signs, having seen Riley do it several times at the Java Pit when Dane had caught him looking at him and sent him a teasing smile. *But not this time.* He finally had the man right where he'd been wanting him all along, and didn't intend to lose him that easily.

“Since you put your notebook away, are we still on the record or are we off now?” he asked.

Riley shifted in the chair. “I guess I don't have any other official questions for now.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a business card, and laid it on the coffee table. “But if you think of anything else, let me know.”

Oh, Dane could think of several other things he'd like to share with the detective, but none of them had to do with police business. He bent closer to the man. “So, we're off the record then?”

“I...yes. Okay.”

“Then I'd like to ask you a question.”

Riley took what appeared to be an uncomfortable swallow, but gave a hesitant nod. He looked a bit like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, and damned if even that wasn't cute as hell.

Dane smiled. “When was the last time you had anything to eat?”

Riley's eyes widened, and Dane almost laughed again. The detective had obviously been expecting a far different question. *Something naughty, perhaps?*

“I... What?”

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“You look suspiciously like you’ve been living off caffeine all day and could use a decent meal. Why don’t you let me make you some dinner?”

“Oh. I... I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Because?”

Riley blinked at him, then sighed. “Because a) I don’t really know you. And b) you’re a potential witness on a case.”

Dane slid off the couch onto the floor and knelt between Riley’s legs. He set his hands on the arms of the chair, not touching the other man, but close...so close the heat off Riley’s thighs damn near scorched him.

Riley seemed to stop breathing, until a long, slow, stuttered breath finally escaped his parted lips. But he didn’t push Dane away or try to escape, Dane noted.

“Now why don’t you let me tell you the reasons why it *is* a good idea,” Dane said.

Riley hands clenched against his jean-clad thighs.

“A) if you stay you’ll have a chance to get to know me better. I don’t actually bite, you know? Well...unless you want me to.”

Riley sucked in another shaky breath and Dane smiled.

“B) I already told you, I don’t know anything about your case, which makes your second argument a moot point, doesn’t it?”

Dane brushed his fingertips over the back of one of Riley’s hands. Riley’s hand twitched and flexed beneath the touch, and another trembling breath hitched his chest.

“And c),” Dane continued, “even police detectives have to go off duty sometime, and they have to eat.” He let his hand slide down onto Riley’s thigh and watched as Riley caught his lower lip between his teeth and his eyelids flickered closed, then slowly opened again in a move so innocently sexual it almost made Dane

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lose it. "Dinner when you're off duty wouldn't be breaking any rules, now would it?" he murmured. "Which means...unless you can come up with another reason real fast..." His hand stroked along Riley's hard thigh.

"Oh, God," Riley whispered.

"Does that mean you'll stay?"

"You're not going to take no for an answer are you?" His voice was little more than a soft rasp.

Dane's hand ventured higher, squeezing his thigh and letting his thumb brush along the man's fly. He leaned in until their lips were only inches apart. "Not unless you give me a damn good reason to."

"I..." Another soft huff of warm breath and blue eyes needy with desire filled Dane's senses. "I suddenly can't come up with one."

"I thought you might not," Dane breathed against his lips. Then he kissed him.

CHAPTER 3

How in the hell had this happened? Riley wondered. Some sensible part of him knew he shouldn't be letting it continue, but the longer Dane kissed him, the less significant that sensible side seemed.

He's part of a case now—you came here on duty, remember? And he's a stripper, for God's sake! He takes off his clothes and flaunts himself to horny men. He's all wrong for you.

But nothing about Dane felt wrong right now. Nothing at all. Everything felt too damned right. And suddenly all Riley cared about was that instead of a fantasy in his head—which he'd gotten outrageously proficient at conjuring these past weeks—the gorgeous hunk from the coffeehouse was real, and pressed against him, and kissing him.

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His mouth skated over Riley's, lightly at first, but quickly daring more. When Riley parted his lips and lifted a tentative hand to the back of the man's head, Dane deepened the kiss, teasing his tongue against Riley's, sucking on it, stroking it again until Riley moaned into his mouth.

When Dane pulled back, Riley mumbled, "This doesn't feel like dinner."

One of those mischievous, knee-weakening smiles curved Dane's lips. He caressed Riley's cheek, and again his touch just felt too damned good. Like Christmas good.

"Do you want to stop?" Dane asked. "Do you *really* want me to stop, Riley? Would you rather have dinner right now?" He pressed his groin against Riley's and rubbed in a slow circle, then whispered into his ear, "Or would you rather have dessert first?"

Riley groaned. "So many questions. I thought that was my job."

Dane's low chuckle sent new shivers through him. "You'll find I'm full of questions. I want to know everything about you, Riley Ellison. What you hate, what you like, what you love. What turns you on, what makes you tick. Does it bother you to have me do the asking?"

"I'm not sure yet." Dane teased a tongue into his ear, making Riley's mind blank for a moment. "I guess...it depends...on the question."

"Well, how about this one? Why didn't you call me?"

"Why did you leave, after I got the coffee with your name and number?"

"Ah, counter question. Very clever of you."

"I thought so."

"Leaving wasn't my intention, believe me. Just as you got up to

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the counter I had an urgent call on my cell that I had to take. It was noisy in the store, so I went onto the patio out back where they have some tables for summertime, but in the rain, of course, they were empty. It was quiet and I could hear out there. When I came back in, you were already gone.”

“Damn. I didn’t even think about the back patio,” Riley murmured.

“Does that mean you actually missed me and looked for me?” The teasing glint was back in Dane’s eyes.

“I looked.”

“Which brings me back to my question—and no avoiding this time. Why didn’t you call me?”

Riley closed his eyes and groaned again because between Dane’s attention to his ear and the slow gyration he was doing against Riley’s groin, it was all he could do to pull together a coherent thought. “B-because I thought it was just a game to you, th-thought you were playing me. I didn’t know if you were for real,” Riley admitted. Once the words were out, he was shocked at his own honesty. It wasn’t like him to share something like that, something that revealed his lack of sophistication when it came to meeting men. Especially not to the very man who made him so crazy he felt continually flustered around him.

“How about this...?” Dane curved a hand around Riley’s neck and pulled him into another kiss, this one more all-consuming than the first. By the time he eased away again, Riley’s body thrummed, his lips felt swollen, and his dick ached against the zipper of his jeans. “Does that feel real?”

“Yes,” Riley gasped.

“What about this?” He grasped Riley’s hand and brought it to his crotch.

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Oh, God. That's definitely real. Riley almost came at the feel of the other man's thick bulge encased in tight, faded denim beneath his palm, obvious evidence the attraction was two-sided. Out of pure instinct, he squeezed, and was rewarded with a low groan and Dane's eyelids fluttering closed. His head tilted back, and the long, sexy line of his throat made Riley's mouth water...almost as much as the stiff cock responding to his touch.

Jesus. He wanted to touch him. Really touch him. With no barriers between them.

But before he could take action, Dane's eyes opened and he was kissing Riley again.

This time there was no holding back. Riley didn't know what the hell was happening to him, what effect this man had on him. He just knew that he wanted him, needed him, with a driving passion and boldness that shocked him.

He felt Dane's hands at the waistband of his jeans, unbuckling his belt, working the button free, sliding down the zipper. A mindless frenzy had taken him over, and he lifted himself up off the chair enough for Dane to drag down his pants and boxer-briefs. They tangled around his ankles. And then, like something out of one of the fantasies he'd been having, except far more explicit and far, far better, Dane wrenched his mouth free of Riley's and lowered his attention to Riley's lap. The sight of his dark head between Riley's legs was almost too much as it was. But when the hot mouth closed over the tip of his dick, Riley practically lunged out of the chair. He moaned and dug a hand into the soft thickness of Dane's hair.

"Oh...fuck!"

The man sucked dick like nobody's business, and Riley quickly found himself losing control. Not that he had much left as it was,

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but the tongue swirling around his shaft, over his balls, and up again, then the firm suction on the head stole the last of his reason.

Dane suddenly grasped his hips and slid him down farther in the chair until Riley's ass was at the edge of it. And then...*holy mother of God...* he deep-throated him.

Riley's back arched. His head tilted against the well-padded leather chair, and he closed his eyes. No one had ever taken him in all the way before, and he'd never felt anything like it. The wet, squeezing pressure... He wasn't going to last long like this, but didn't want to shoot too soon and make it end. Didn't want to seem like some overeager teenager who had no control. And so he gritted his teeth and fought against the burning ache beginning to flare deep in his balls.

But just as he thought he couldn't make it another second, Dane lifted his head, releasing him. Riley cried out in protest.

Dane gave him another one of those sexy, teasing smiles, proving he knew exactly the state in which he'd left Riley, and kissed him, twining his tongue with Riley's, letting him taste himself. Then he sat back on his haunches and stroked a black-polish-tipped finger over the head of Riley's cock, slicking up the sizeable droplet of pre-cum that glistened at the slit, and bringing it to his mouth.

Watching him sucking it off his finger was too fucking hot for words.

"Mmm...I'm tempted to keep you on edge like this all night just so I can savor your gorgeous dick," Dane murmured, taking it in hand and stroking it a few times, then letting it go again.

"No!"

Dane arched a dark brow. "No?"

"Don't keep me on edge all night." His prick was so stiff,

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jutting up against his abs, it hurt. "I don't think...I could take it."

Another grin. Christ, the man would be the death of him with that sensual smile.

"Oh, you can take it, baby. This and more. I promise. But first, you're way overdressed for the occasion." He pulled Riley's shoes, socks, jeans and briefs off the rest of the way.

Dane was wearing way too much also, to Riley's way of thinking. He ran his palms over Dane's chest, covered in a tight, black, long-sleeved shirt, then snaked them up under the soft fabric to caress hot, sleek skin. He pushed the shirt up. "This has to go."

Dane helped, grasping the hem of the T-shirt and pulling it over his head in a fluid motion that was as beautiful as it was efficient. When the six-pack abs, smooth, sculpted chest and shoulders, and chiseled biceps were revealed, Riley's mouth went dry. With his tight jeans hanging suggestively low on his hips, his dark hair tousled, his eyes half-closed with lust, Dane was every inch the sex god Riley had imagined him to be. *Fuck*. His gaze dropped to the line of dark hair that began below his navel and disappeared into the waistband of his jeans.

He sat up and reached for the top button on Dane's jeans, popping it free. But Dane, equally driven, took advantage of him being upright to pull Riley to his feet.

He pushed Riley's jacket off his shoulders. "This has to go, too. You won't be needing it where I'm taking you."

The words sent a sizzling little thrill through Riley. He shrugged out of the coat and let it fall to the floor. Which left him with nothing on but his blue button-down shirt and his shoulder holster. He hadn't bothered with a tie today—it hadn't been one of his better mornings.

Dane took a step back and licked his full lower lip as he

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checked Riley out from head to toe. “Oh, yeah. The gun looks good on you. Jesus, you’re hellaciously hot.”

Riley felt his cheeks heat. No one had ever called him “hot” before. And certainly had never devoured him with a gaze that way—like *he* was a rich dessert—the way he’d been devouring Dane for the past three weeks. He just hoped once the gun was off, Dane wouldn’t be disappointed in Riley Ellison the regular man.

He took off his holster that held his service weapon, a Glock 9-millimeter, and set it on the coffee table.

Riley was in good physical shape—the best of his life, actually. He’d been thin and gangly as a teenager and hadn’t filled out much more even into his early twenties. It had been the source of a lot of personal grief for him—forever the scrawny, awkward geek, and always feeling self-conscious and taking shit about it. So several years ago, when he decided to join the police force, he’d vowed to make a change and had worked hard at it. He still ran, used the elliptical machine at the gym, and faithfully lifted weights several times a week as his work schedule allowed. Over time he’d managed to tone and shape his slim, average-height body into a lean, passably athletic physique that no longer embarrassed him. But alongside Dane’s six-foot-one raw sexuality and beauty, he was afraid he came up seriously lacking.

He needn’t have worried about Dane’s reaction, though, because the moment he straightened from setting down his gun, Dane was kissing him and his fingers deftly slipped Riley’s shirt buttons through the holes. When he had it open and Riley had pulled his arms free, letting the shirt join his jacket on the rug, Dane worshipped Riley’s now nude body with his hands and lips. At least that’s the way it felt to Riley. There was no part of him Dane didn’t touch, kiss, or murmur low, appreciative comments

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over, igniting a whole new fire in Riley.

When Dane, who at some point had dropped to his knees in front of Riley, looked up at him, the eyes Riley had so often seen glinting with teasing mischief now burned with unchecked passion. With his mouth wrapped like hot velvet around Riley's cock, the feeling of being worshipped became even more profound. He'd never, ever had a lover pay so much attention to every detail, never had one look at him like he was the one and only person they couldn't live without. It stole Riley's breath and created a strange tightening in his chest.

Dane stood, pulled Riley into a kiss, then looked into his eyes. "I'm taking you to bed. If you have any reason to stop me, now's the time to let me know."

"I'm not going to stop you," Riley said, his voice husky.

"I already know I'm not going to be able to get enough of you, Riley. One night's never going to be enough—I want more than that. I'm not telling you to scare you. I just have to be honest."

The words caused another of those sweet, clenching aches in Riley's gut. He wanted more than tonight? What did that make this thing between them then? Did he want an actual...relationship?

The possibility confused Riley, boggled his mind, and challenged all the assumptions he'd automatically, and probably unfairly, made about flamboyant, sexy hunks like Dane.

"I just...I have to ask... Why me?" Riley said. It was the burning question on his mind from the first time Dane had looked at him and given him a flirtatious smile in the Java Pit. What in the world could someone like Dane see in him?

"Because I knew the moment I saw you that were everything I'd been looking for." He said it as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, and his heated gaze radiated a sincerity that shook

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Riley. “Smart, strong, gentle, and sexy as hell yet you don’t even seem to realize it.”

Riley stared at him, speechless. Was Dane talking about *him*?

Dane lifted one of his hands and brushed his lips against his fingertips. Never taking his eyes off Riley’s, he said, “Come let me show you how much I want you.”

Riley’s soft moan was swallowed in a penetrating, erotic kiss. Then Dane gripped his ass in both hands and lifted him until they were groin to groin. Automatically, Riley wrapped his legs around Dane’s hips, savoring the friction of the man’s jeans against the tender skin of his exposed genitals.

Without breaking the kiss, Dane began to walk, across the living room, into a darkened hallway, and through a doorway into a room lit by the dim light of a plum-shaded lamp. Riley didn’t notice much of his surroundings. Didn’t care about anything except the warm, hard body holding him, the touch of skin against skin, the faint, clean, citrusy smell wafting from Dane and seeping into Riley’s senses, and the mouth on his, coaxing him to let go and give himself over to whatever this powerful thing was between them.

One of Dane’s hands slid up his back, and then Riley felt himself being lowered. The soft cushion of a mattress caught him, enveloped him, as Dane eased him back onto it and leaned over him. Riley didn’t let go with his legs, and his hands slid up and down Dane’s back, learning every curve and ripple of muscle. He liked having the other man’s solid body on him, over him.

But it ended all too soon. He couldn’t argue about the reason, though. Dane straightened, unzipped his fly, and shimmied out of his tight jeans in a motion that was pure sensual poetry.

Jesus. No fucking underwear. The man wore nothing under his

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jeans. Sexy to the extreme. But even more breathtaking was the sight of his dick, hard and long and angling up toward his navel in salute.

“Oh, fuck...I want that,” Riley murmured. Then bit his lower lip when he realized he’d said it aloud.

But rather than embarrassing him like it might have at any other time, Dane’s husky laughter only turned Riley on more.

Dane wrapped a hand around his cock and gave it several strokes, cupped his heavy balls, then stroked again, his gaze, now serious, focused on Riley. “It’s all yours,” he said softly. “I’ve been thinking about you like this, naked and stretched out on my bed, looking up at me with those gorgeous blue eyes, for weeks.”

He crawled onto the bed and over Riley like a sleek big cat stalking its prey.

Except Riley didn’t feel like prey. He felt...wanted. Maybe even needed. And it was a heady experience. He could get used to this way too easily. Could fall into this sensual game that wasn’t really a game at all, with this man who made him feel truly attractive and whole for the first time in his life, and the rest of the world bedamned.

“Do you know how many times I’ve imagined what kind of sounds you’d make when I do this?” He licked, then bit one of Riley’s nipples.

Riley whimpered and buried his hands in Dane’s hair.

“Or what it would feel like to do this?” He curled his fingers around both his and Riley’s cocks, squeezing them together and rubbing them in tandem.

“Oh, God...” Riley lifted his ass off the bed, thrusting up into his hand.

“Damn it, Riley...do you know how many times I’ve wondered

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if you'd want to fuck me, or have me fuck you, or if you like it both ways?"

"Both," Riley moaned. "I've thought of both, imagined both."

Dane smiled. "So I'm not the only one who's been having wet dreams then?"

"I haven't slept well in days. Since you gave me your number. And the fantasies...since before that." What the hell? In some still functioning part of his brain he couldn't believe he was babbling about such personal issues again. Yet he couldn't seem to stop.

Dipping his head, Dane captured Riley's mouth in a slow kiss, his tongue dancing with Riley's in time to the rhythm he used to masturbate their cocks. Riley tweaked Dane's nipples, explored the planes and angles of his chest, slid his hands up and down the man's sides to his arms, then up along them to his shoulders.

When they parted for air, they were both panting. Dane's hand was bringing them close to the edge.

"Too close," Dane gasped, seeming to read his mind. He released them both and rose to his knees, then reached over Riley to a bookshelf next to the bed. When he sat back up, he held lube and a condom. Still breathing hard, he laid them on Riley's abdomen. "Your choice."

"Do or be done?"

Dane's quick flash of teeth in a grin made Riley grin, too. "Yeah."

Riley sat up, tore open the wrapper with his teeth, and rolled the condom down over Dane's substantial length. Looking up at his beautiful face—he had a classic, high cheek-boned, masculine beauty that would have made him a perfect dashing gentleman in Regency England—Riley said quietly, "This okay?"

Dane shuddered and his dick twitched in Riley's hand. "Fuck

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yes.”

He shuddered again and closed his eyes as Riley lubed him. Riley couldn't resist drawing it out as long as possible, the thrill of having Dane at his sensual mercy too much to pass up. He fisted his cock in one hand and took it for a slow ride, while he fondled his balls and teased back against his anus with the other.

“God, Riley,” Dane rasped in a husky whisper, his eyes still closed. “I may not ever let you out of this bed.”

That brought another smile to Riley's mouth. He lay back and pulled his legs up against his chest in invitation.

Dane's eyes flared with desire. He swiped up the bottle of lube, poured some onto his fingers, and slid two fingers into Riley.

Riley sucked in a sharp breath, then shuddered as Dane probed deeper, easing in and out, circling his fingers and stretching Riley. As with everything Dane had done to him tonight, it felt too fucking amazing for words. He was reduced to panting and quiet grunts that turned to louder ones, and finally morphed into low, throaty moans when Dane's thick cockhead butted up against his opening and pushed into him.

Dane rubbed a hand over his chest. “You okay?”

Riley nodded, finding it hard to speak.

Dane slid out, then pushed in, in slow motion, over and over, each stroke an agonizing journey of pleasure. Even when he picked up the pace, thrusting deep into Riley, it was unbelievably, achingly sweet.

Still unable to speak, Riley gasped for air and continued to moan on each in-stroke. He couldn't have stopped if he tried. Even when Dane leaned down and kissed him, soft, muffled “mmmm” and “unnnh” sounds continued to escape him. God, had he always been this noisy during sex? He didn't think so. But then again, he'd

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never felt this free and out of control.

Dane. The man did things to him, made him feel things, he couldn't explain.

"Christ, Riley..." Dane choked out, as if lust or emotion or both had filled his throat with a knot he had trouble talking around it. His eyes squeezed closed. He stole another kiss. "Fuck...this is so good."

He sat up partway and as he continued to spear into Riley he also fisted Riley's cock and began stripping it in firm strokes.

Riley gripped the back of one of his thighs, holding it in place against his chest to give Dane easier access, and with the other hand, clutched at the comforter, his fingers squeezing and releasing the soft fabric. He'd almost grown hoarse from the constant stream of vocalizations that weren't quite words, weren't quite anything except raw emotion he couldn't hold in.

Their bodies surged together, hard, sweat-slicked, straining as one for release. Everything focused down to where they were joined, how they fit, the give and take, thrust and retreat.

When Riley's orgasm hit, it gave no warning, just tore through him like a wild fire out of control, throbbing in his balls and searing up his dick to explode in powerful bursts that poured over Dane's hand and splashed onto Riley's abs and chest. Dane didn't let go of him until he'd spent the last drop.

Then, as if he'd only been waiting for Riley to find pleasure first, Dane thrust hard and fast and with a guttural cry, shot his own seed.

In the aftermath, his body trembled hard against Riley's. Riley gathered him into his arms and pulled him down on top of him. Dane buried his face against Riley's neck and continued to shudder for long moments as Riley rubbed his back and struggled to regain

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his own composure.

Finally, Dane lifted his head and gazed down at him. “Don’t move,” he whispered, grazing his knuckles along Riley’s cheek. “I’m not going to be able to stay in you much longer, but I don’t want to be out until I have to.”

Still more than a little overcome by the intensity of their lovemaking, Riley nodded and smiled and brushed two fingers over Dane’s lips. Those perfect, sensual lips.

Dane pressed a kiss against his fingers and smiled back.

It was a strange moment of closeness. Real closeness. Not driven by lust or fueled by physical attraction, but, to get Zen about it, just by *being*. It was comfortable, and oddly comforting...

Things Riley had never had before with a lover. And certainly things he’d never imagined he could find in Dane Scott’s arms.

CHAPTER 4

After a long, steamy shared shower, with much groping and fondling and clinging kisses, Riley found himself sitting on a stool in the kitchen, watching Dane cook the dinner he'd promised him wearing nothing but a towel wrapped low around his hips.

And now Riley sat cross-legged and nude in the middle of the king-sized bed facing the gorgeous man who'd lost the towel somewhere along the way and who balanced a plate of food in one hand. They were so close together their knees brushed, sending sparks of awareness through Riley.

"I've never eaten dinner in bed like this before," Riley said with a smile.

"You mean you've never eaten dinner in bed *naked* before."

Riley laughed. "That either."

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Dane's sultry gaze roamed over him. "It suits you. You should do it more often."

"I'm not much of a cook."

"But I am. You can come eat in my bed any time you want." Using the edge of the fork, Dane cut off a piece of the cheese blintz covered in strawberry jam, stabbed it with the tines, and held it up to Riley's mouth.

It was another one of those motions that Dane did so smoothly it was completely natural, as if he fed bits of food to lovers as easily as he stripped out of his clothes. To Riley, who'd never actually been fed by a lover, it was a moment of startling and breath-stealing sexuality. He opened his mouth and let Dane slip the fork inside. When Riley closed his lips around it and pulled off the rich, sweet, cheese-filled pancake...between the flavors themselves, the passionate look on Dane's face, and the intimacy of having someone else take charge of one of the most basic of his human needs, he found himself growing hard.

"Oh, my God," he groaned as the full flavor hit his taste buds.

Dane's eyes sparkled. "Like that?"

"Jesus."

"More?"

Riley nodded and opened for the next bite. When Dane delivered it, once again Riley felt a surge of desire thrum through him.

"Oh, God, who, in the real world, eats incredible food like this?" he demanded when he'd swallowed.

Dane smirked. "I do."

Riley stared at him, partly in disbelief and partly in awe.

"Okay, I'll tell you the secret to my culinary success," Dane said with a low, rumbling laugh that ignited a whole new round of

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lust in Riley. He fed Riley another bite, then kissed him.

“My dad was a gourmet chef. He worked at several four-star restaurants over the years. My mom died when we were young, so my dad spent a lot of time with my brother and me, taking us to the restaurants where he worked, finding ways to make it fun for us so it didn’t seem like we were stuck going to ‘work’ with him. He always wanted Kyle and me to take an interest, and I think secretly would have loved one of us to follow in his footsteps. He even gave us cooking lessons when we were growing up. Kyle could have cared less and always wandered off to do other things. But I found it kind of fascinating. It’s never been a passion for me like it was for my dad, but some of what he taught me stuck.”

As he talked, he’d continued to feed Riley, who wondered if he’d stepped into some kind of Twilight Zone where he was trapped in an alternate reality that felt like heaven, complete with a sexy, nude, dark-haired angel, a warm, welcoming, and comfortable apartment, surrounded by books and bookshelves that would make any bibliophile drool, and sitting in a pillow-soft bed eating ambrosia. Well, maybe that was mixing pantheons since ambrosia was Greek rather than Biblical, but it didn’t change the fact he was, as his sister would say, in la-la land.

Dane drank from a glass of red wine, then passed it to Riley. Riley sipped from it, finding a new appreciation for wine. He tended toward beer and an occasional shot of whiskey. Wine, however, he decided, could be damned nice. Especially when sharing it with the right company. He passed the glass back to Dane, who took another swallow, then sat the glass on the shelf.

“You said your dad *was* a chef. Past tense. Is he no longer alive?”

Sadness clouded Dane’s face. “He passed away last year.

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Cancer.”

“I’m so sorry,” Riley murmured.

“Yeah, me, too. I miss him still. I took care of him the last eight months of his life. I was living in Manhattan, had done some modeling—some magazine shoots and a few runway shows—and was starting to make a name for myself. When he got sick it was sudden and his health deteriorated fast. My brother was...unavailable”—he said it with a hint of bitterness—“so I moved back here and into the house where I’d grown up so my dad wouldn’t be alone and so he wouldn’t have to have strangers taking care of him. That bothered him. He was a private man and was afraid of becoming nothing but a ‘case’ with strangers poking and prodding him and seeing him in his weakened state. He didn’t have to go into the hospital to stay until the last few days. And even then, I was with him the whole time. He died in my arms.”

The story painted Riley a whole new picture of Dane Scott the man, and once again squashed the half-assed and lame assumptions he’d made about him earlier. Beneath the flamboyant sex appeal lurked the heart of a loving son and giving man who’d walked away from a potentially lucrative career in the city to come home and care for a dying man and protect him from his fears.

He leaned over and kissed Dane, a gentle brush of lips against lips. “You’re a good man.”

Dane blinked, then smiled. “Thanks. What about you? Family?”

“Pretty ordinary stuff, I guess. My parents live in Florida...they moved there a few years ago when my dad retired from the law firm where he worked for thirty years. Like you, my dad would have loved to have me follow in his footsteps and go into law, and I actually did one year of law school after college. But I hated it. I

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was a book geek, but law was way too boring and tedious even for me.”

“An attorney, huh?” Dane said, his eyes teasing, “Riley Ellison, Attorney at Law.”

Riley snorted. “In my dad’s dreams. He didn’t take the news too well that I was quitting law school, and almost became apoplectic when I told him instead I was going to the police academy. To him that was like saying, ‘No thanks, I don’t want the million dollar sweepstakes, I’ll settle for the two dollar scratcher ticket win.’”

Dane’s rich, husky laughter brought a smile to Riley’s face.

“Any siblings?”

“I have one sister, Carol, who’s eight years old than I am. She’s here in town. She didn’t go into law either, but that was okay because she married a lawyer, which my dad thought was perfectly dandy. Of course, she divorced him five years later, much to my parents’ chagrin. Then redeemed herself by marrying a surgeon the year after that. By her third marriage, they forgave her and decided she was still ‘traumatized’ by the surgeon’s cruelty to her.”

“What did he do to her?”

Riley grinned. “He wouldn’t buy the summer villa on Lake Como in Italy for her. Said her tastes were too expensive and if she wanted things like that she needed to get a job. Naturally, that didn’t go over well with my sister, who liked being a trophy wife and lady of leisure. When she pushed, he wouldn’t back down, so she left him. And so on and so forth. She just got divorced from her fourth and is now working the jewelry counter at Macy’s.”

“Any kids? Are you ‘Uncle Riley’?”

“No. At least she’s always been honest enough to admit they aren’t for her because she’s too selfish with her time. She’s kind of

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a pain in my ass sometimes, nags, and tries to play mother hen, especially now that our parents moved away, but”—he shrugged—“what can I do? She’s my sister and I love her.”

“I hear you on that. Siblings...not always easy.”

Riley noticed a distinct tightening around Dane’s mouth. From that and his comments and tone earlier, he clearly had some issues with his brother. He started to ask, but decided after being responsible for bringing up sad memories for Dane about his father, maybe he shouldn’t open another can of worms about his brother if there were problems.

Instead, he asked, “Why’d you stay here after your dad was gone? Why not go back to the city?”

Dane fed Riley another bite of blintz, and took one himself, looking thoughtful. “I guess the biggest reason was that I didn’t realize how much I’d missed it here until I’d been gone for several years. When I graduated from high school I couldn’t wait to get away, move to the city, start my own life. Those were some good times. But life in New York City is hectic, always busy, always people to see, things to do, places to go. Which is fun and exciting for a while, but eventually I found myself getting frustrated that I had no time to be alone or spend a few minutes of a day without someone needing or wanting something from me.”

He offered Riley another bite. They’d almost polished off the entire plate of blintzes, and Riley couldn’t remember anything ever tasting so good.

“When I came home, my intention was to go back eventually. But then I ended up liking the slower pace and the chance to have quiet when I wanted it without people telling me what to wear and how to stand, or feeling like I had to go out to clubs in order to be ‘seen’ and generate publicity. I’d made a bit of money with

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modeling, so after my dad died, I bought this place. I guess I could have gone for a house, but I didn't want the upkeep of a yard. Besides"—he grinned—"as you've probably guessed from all the books and my interior decorating, I'm more of an inside guy than an outside one. All the apartments in this building are privately owned and I liked that it was older and artsy. So here I am."

"And you took a job working as a stri— a *dancer* at the Sable Den because..."

Dane laughed. "You can say it, 'stripper.' It's not a bad word, Riley, and you don't have to sound like the job is totally illegitimate. I know strippers get a bad rap and we're supposed to be promiscuous airheads who are too enamored of our bodies and making sexual conquests to get a 'real' job."

Riley hated to admit that the moment he'd realized Dane was a stripper, he'd immediately pinned most of those stereotypes on him.

"But contrary to popular belief," Dane continued, "we're not all horny nitwits with no ambition. Many of the guys I've worked with have stripped to put themselves through college, or pay the bills, or as a weekend sideline because they had a more staid and 'responsible' job during the week and they just needed a break from it. I took a job at the Den quite simply because it's fun. I enjoy doing it. I get to work only a few nights a week, and the rest of my time is my own...to read or write or whatever else I want to do. I'm not going to strip the rest of my life, but it suits me right now."

"So you gave up on modeling?"

"Not completely. I still have my agent and I do some work. I'm more selective now, though, and only pick the things I'm truly interested in. When something comes up, I'll go into the city for a

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few days for a photo shoot. But when it's done, I'm free to come back home to my life here. I like it that way."

"Back to the...stripping."

Dane's chuckle slid along his nerve endings like velvet heat. He set the now-empty plate on the bookshelf, took another sip of wine and passed the glass to Riley, then stretched out on the bed propped up on a pile of dark purple and gold silk throw pillows, totally at ease with his nudity—and of course he would be, Riley thought, feeling stupid at thinking otherwise. With one arm stretched up and tucked behind his head, the other hand drawing lazy circles on Riley's thigh, his cock half-hard lying against the dark curls at his groin, and the self-satisfied smile on his face, Dane looked like... Jesus, like a cross between a god and a porn star.

It momentarily flustered Riley, and for a minute he couldn't remember what he'd been about to say. It finally came to him. *Duh*. Considering the state Dane was currently in, how could he have forgotten?

"When you...take your clothes off in the club..."

"Yes?" Dane's smile cranked up a notch, and the familiar teasing glint crept into his gray-green eyes.

"Do you...er..."

"Say what's on your mind, babe."

Riley swallowed, feeling like an awkward geek again, but needing to know. "Do you take off everything?"

"At the Sable Den? No. No full frontal."

"Meaning?" He was really showing his naiveté now, but couldn't stop from asking.

"Meaning most guys get down to a G-string pouch or a leather thong or maybe fishnet shorts, depending on the rest of the

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costume or theme of the song. Basically, it just means everything is exposed except the naughty bits.”

Oh, Jesus. Now Riley blushed. He felt the heat sliding up his face. The thought of Dane dancing around with only his “naughty bits” covered and men no doubt tucking money into whatever tiny thing he was wearing was...well, damn it, it was arousing, which probably shouldn’t embarrass him, but it did.

“The way you said that so specifically, that at *the Sable Den* you don’t, does that mean you’ve done it at other places?”

“When I lived in the city I stripped for a couple of years to earn rent money. This was before I started getting modeling gigs. I worked at a private club for a while that preferred full nudity. Plus I used to do some private parties as well, as an independent contractor. At those, pretty much the more you took off, the more money you made. But I haven’t done it in a while. Why do you ask?” And then a knowing smile quirked at Dane’s lips. “Riley...are you jealous?”

The question sent more heat up Riley’s cheeks. “I...”

Was he? *Yes!* Which was insane considering he barely knew Dane and had no claim on him. *But Dane is the one who said he wanted this to be more than one night, who implied he might want something beyond a fling.* So if that was true, and he wanted more between them, then surely he shouldn’t be offended if Riley admitted the truth.

“Maybe. A little.” *A lot. God, I’m such a liar.* The thought of horny men seeing Dane in the almost altogether, whooping and hollering for him to “take it off,” pawing at him and tucking money into his... *Oh, hell.*

Dane took the wineglass from Riley and set it aside. Then he pulled down the comforter and sheet, reached for Riley, drew him

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down beside him, and rolled to face him. He captured Riley's lips and stroked his back, down to his ass, up again, in a slow, arousing touch that sent heat spiraling to Riley's core.

"It's just an act. It doesn't mean anything real," Dane said, his penetrating gaze focused on Riley. "This, here, with you, is real."

Riley swallowed and nodded.

But Dane could obviously see he wasn't convinced. And Riley didn't know what bothered him more...that he was so transparent Dane *could* see his insecurity. Or the fact he was insecure about it in the first place.

For the first time in a couple of hours, niggling doubts about what he was doing here crept back into his consciousness.

In spite of everything he'd learned about Dane tonight, about what made up the man beneath the beautiful package, he couldn't shake the worry that this could only end badly. A cop and a stripper. It was like a B movie plot.

He's more than a stripper and you damn well know it.

But it didn't change the fact he still took off his clothes at a club several nights a week. How in the hell could Riley ever come to terms with that if they even tried to have something beyond a one-night-stand? Riley would always be uncomfortable about who was watching Dane, touching him.

Who are you kidding? It's not just the stripping.

Damn it, he hated that fucking voice in his head, but it was true. If he were with Dane, really with Dane, he'd always be waiting for the other shoe to drop...to discover Dane had found someone not dull and vanilla like Riley, but sexy and gorgeous and outgoing, and then Riley'd be left to left to clean up the mess and patch his broken heart. Because one thing he knew well about himself was that he sucked at keeping his emotions out of

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relationships. *Fuck.*

And, damn it, Ellison, what about the fact that he is, until the murderer is caught, a potential witness on your current case? You're the guy who loves rules...what the hell are you doing here?

"Hey." Dane lifted a leg over the top of Riley's and used it to pull Riley in more closely against him. "Come back to me."

Riley closed his eyes, not wanting it to feel so damned good—being pressed up next to Dane's hard body, the feel of his palms on Riley's ass, kneading into the muscles, the way their cocks flirted and slowly hardened against one another, or the sweet, rich flavor of wine that still lingered on his tongue as he lured Riley into an ever-deepening kiss. All of Dane's actions seemed to be saying, *"Let go...come away with me...let me take away your worries and fears."*

The sound of rain falling outside, blowing against the windows of the French doors that led out onto what Riley assumed was one of the wrought iron balconies overlooking the Hudson River he'd seen earlier, soothed as well. *"It's cold and wet outside,"* it said. *"But it's comfortable in the big soft bed. Stay...stay...stay with Dane for a while longer."*

Even the feel of the silk sheets sliding against his skin, and their fresh, recently-changed fragrance seduced him.

Everything in Dane's world, including the man himself, was warm and sensual...his choice in furniture and linens, the colors he used for decorating, the thick Oriental rugs on the honeyed wood floors, the cherry bookcases and art prints that lined the walls, the food he ate, the coffee and wine he drank. Even the texture of his hot, sleek skin, the soft thickness of his hair and its rich coffee color, the scent of his spicy citrus soap still clinging to his skin.

All of it offered Riley something he'd been desperately missing

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in his drab life. And now that he'd had a taste of it, he didn't want to lose it. He didn't want to walk away, back to his boring townhome that still had commercial grade carpet on the floor and builder's white paint on the walls even though he'd lived there for five years now. He didn't want to go home to his empty refrigerator and a freezer full of TV dinners. Or the lumpy, plain-Jane futon he'd been meaning to replace but hadn't gotten around to. And most of all, he didn't want to go home to the silent emptiness that reminded him every day how alone he was in his personal life.

He was so damned tired of being alone.

"Roll onto your hands and knees, sweetheart," Dane said, his voice husky. "Let me take care of you."

The endearment, along with the implication of his words, sent pulses of tingling pleasure along Riley's skin and through his veins. Fully under the spell Dane wove, he did as he asked, tipping his head down to rest it on his arms.

He felt exposed and vulnerable, and yet, somewhere in his sluggish brain that was already intoxicated from the sheer pleasure of being with the man who now knelt behind him, he trusted Dane.

Warm hands worked over his ass again, as well as his lower back, massaging until Riley was so relaxed his limbs felt like butter, yet also arousing him beyond measure. His dick and balls hung heavy and aching between his legs, and a deep-down trembling began inside him.

When Dane spread his cheeks apart and Riley felt hot breath against the sensitive skin, the trembling spread. "Dane..." he said, part sigh, part plea.

"I'll take care of you, Riley. Trust me."

The wet swirl of Dane's tongue against his clenching hole sent

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shockwaves of pure, electric voltage through Riley. He moaned in pleasure, thrusting back against Dane's mouth, pleading for more. Which Dane gave...and gave...and gave. His tongue. His fingers. Two fingers. Sometimes all at once, until Riley was a quivering mass of raw tension.

"Need you," he finally sobbed, at the edge of reason. "God, Dane..."

Dane immediately sat up. Riley heard the sound of a package ripping open, the snick of a bottle lid, and then Dane was filling him, thick and hot and to the balls. He wrapped an arm around Riley's chest and pulled him upright, until Riley was kneeling, with Dane behind him, leaning against the taller man's chest. "I've got you," Dane whispered against his hair. One of his hands stroked Riley's pecs, and the other wrapped around his cock.

He slid partway out and thrust back in.

Riley cried out, feeling every inch of Dane's length buried inside his passage, stretching him, filling him like nothing or no one else ever had. He felt impaled. Claimed. His chest tightened with emotion. "Dane," he pleaded.

"I'm right here, baby. I'll give you whatever you want." He thrust again.

"Oh, Jesus...don't stop."

"I won't."

Another thrust. And another. And another, each one building into a steady, deep rhythm that rocked through Riley. He ground his ass back, meeting Dane plunge for plunge, moaning each time Dane's cock sank into him, certain he felt each onslaught all the way to his soul.

He turned his head, curved an arm back around Dane's neck, and sought his mouth. Dane gave him that, too. *Whatever you*

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want...

He pulled Riley's dick in smooth strokes, increasing the pace to match the intensity of their fucking, swiping his thumb over the leaking tip.

All of the sensations swirled around Riley, through him, into him, enveloping him in a passionate haze that consumed him. Their soft grunts and hoarse moans, the sound of skin slapping against skin, and the scents of their arousal made Riley even more drunk on the passion and the man inside him.

"Come with me, Riley. Come for me." Dane's breath was hot against his cheek.

Climax pounded through him, tightening every muscle, stopping his breath, and exploding in a mind-searing blast of white light behind his eyes, and a hot river of seed from his cock.

He was still coming, still spurting, when Dane ground into him and shouted.

Spent, exhausted, but unwilling to move apart, Dane held him, and Riley rested his head back on Dane's shoulder and closed his eyes.

The rain continued to fall outside in a comforting, steady beat.

"Stay the night," Dane murmured, grazing a kiss against Riley's temple.

Riley's concerns came fluttering back, banging themselves against the wall of his conscience like angry moths, trying to get in and bring him to his senses.

But he shut them out. *Just for tonight.* Was one night in Dane's arms without any guilt or worries too much to ask for?

"I'll stay."

Dane's arms tightened around him.

What harm could come from one night?

CHAPTER 5

As he watched Riley sleep, stretched out on his side, one arm tucked beneath his head and the other innocently resting in the curls at Dane's groin, Dane rubbed gentle, absent circles on Riley's back. The motion didn't seem to be disturbing him. In fact, he sighed in his sleep, a contented sound that made Dane smile.

He looked young and vulnerable and completely the sweet boy next door like this. All the tired, worried lines around his eyes and mouth were smoothed out in sleep. It took all Dane's willpower not to kiss him awake and bring him pleasure again just so he could hear Riley's soft whimpers, lose himself in the feel of his tight heat, and watch his face as ecstasy broke over him.

But Riley needed the sleep, and Dane was determined to give it to him for as long as possible. He'd looked exhausted when he'd

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arrived earlier in the evening, and Dane hadn't exactly given him a chance to relax. But, jeez, having him so close, wanting him so badly, and knowing Riley was just as hungry for him had pretty much overridden anything else in his brain. When Riley had looked up at him with those blue eyes full of yearning and said he couldn't think of a reason not to stay for dinner, Dane had been lost.

What blew his mind, though, was how seemingly unaware Riley was of his own attractiveness and sexual power. He'd blushed every time Dane had complimented him or mentioned how hot he was, like no one had ever told him that before. How could that be possible? And yet his modesty was probably part of what made him so damned alluring. There was nothing sexier than a good-looking man who was oblivious to his appeal.

Modesty wasn't exactly a trait common to most of the men Dane had met, worked with, and dated in the city. When he'd started modeling, he'd hung with the high fashion "it" crowd, and shallowness and an obsession with looks had almost been an inbred trait. He liked to look good as much as the next person, and certainly took pride in his body and tried to take care of it. But the obsession with Botox and plastic surgery and eating nothing or purging after every meal in order to stay thin for the camera had always been too over the top for him.

Even more disturbing had been the "me" attitude. Me, me, me. Everyone thought the world revolved around them, *demanding* that it revolve around them. It had never hit home to him harder than when his dad had gotten sick and he'd decided to come back home to take care of him. His boyfriend at the time, Matthew, a man he'd been seeing for almost a year, had been appalled that he would willingly give up life in Manhattan to go back to what he called

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“Hicksville” just so he could be a servant to a sick old man.

Dane had been appalled at his attitude. “That sick old man,” he’d said, “is my father. He raised me, loved me, supported me, and has done nothing but give all his life so I can follow my dreams. Now it’s time for me to give back and show him how much I love him.”

Matthew had rolled his eyes, thrown his hands up in the air, and muttered, “Whatever!” as if Dane were hopeless. “But in the meantime, what about me? You said you’d talk to your agent about hooking me up with that designer you did the shoot for last spring. We’re in a relationship, so you’re supposed to be supporting me in my career. How can you possibly be there for me if you’re spending all your time up in the sticks wiping drool and changing Depends?”

Dane had packed his things that very day, gotten in his car, and driven away. He hadn’t spoken to Matthew again. There’d been nothing left to say.

In contrast, Riley devoted his life to looking out for others. It was something Dane had sensed in him from the very beginning, even before he’d begun to suspect he was a cop. He came across as so unpretentious, yet there was a gentle strength to him, and an awareness of the needs of those around him. When Dane had spied him that first morning, he’d been intrigued by him and felt an instant attraction to him just because he was so damned cute. But when he’d seen Riley give up his place in line for an elderly woman with a walker and then help her to a table with her coffee, giving her a genuine smile that had clearly brightened her whole day, Dane had fallen for him on the spot. Each day since then, whenever Riley had come into the coffeehouse, Dane had fallen a little farther and a little harder.

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Now, as he listened to Riley's soft, even breathing, as he relived everything that had happened between them tonight, he knew the infatuation could easily become something more. Riley was too damned loveable for it not to. That was, if Riley would only give them a chance.

They had incredible chemistry, and there'd been moments tonight when Dane felt like they'd connected not only on a sexual level but an emotional one, too. Toward the end, though, after they'd been talking about Dane's job at the club, Riley had gone quiet. Too quiet. Dane had almost been able to see the wheels of thought and doubt turning in his mind. And when they'd made love the second time, there'd been a quiet desperation to it on Riley's part. Almost as if he weren't expecting them to be together anymore and he had to soak up as much closeness as possible before it was over.

But why? Dane had told him upfront that he didn't want it to be a one-night-stand, and they were so damned good together. Why would Riley not want to explore that further?

He hated to think it, but in his gut, he had a feeling Riley was going to bail. Just like he'd done at the Java Pit every time Dane had openly flirted with him and made eye contact. It was almost as if he were afraid of letting Dane in too close.

Why was he so skittish? What was the man scared of?

* * *

When Dane stirred awake, Riley was already sliding out of the bed. The first pale light of dawn shone in a translucent gray through the windows on the French doors, and it created a soft halo around Riley sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to Dane.

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“Hey.” Dane rubbed a hand along Riley’s spine.

Riley stiffened, then sighed and relaxed into the touch as if he couldn’t resist it. He looked over his shoulder. “Hey. Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you. I...I have to go.”

“It’s barely light out. Why don’t you come back to bed for a while longer.”

“I can’t. I have to leave.” He pulled away from Dane’s hand and stood.

Uh-oh. A knot formed in Dane’s stomach. This was it. He heard it in the distant tone of Riley’s voice.

“Riley?”

“I realized my police car has been sitting in plain view parked on your street all night. Jesus. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking.”

He paced across the room and disappeared out the bedroom door.

Dane threw off the sheet, and rose to follow him. Then he doubled back to grab a pair of sweatpants from his dresser drawer and tug them on. Normally nudity wasn’t an issue for him, but he had a feeling Riley might feel more at ease if he was wearing something this morning.

Riley had already pulled on his underwear and jeans and was reaching for his shirt when Dane got there. He slid his arms into the sleeves and began attempting the buttons, but his hands shook and he missed the top one twice.

Dane stepped close, brushed his hands aside, and took over. He knew he wasn’t going to be able to stop Riley from leaving if he was determined to, but he didn’t want him to go without Dane having a chance to touch him and talk to him first.

“Aren’t you allowed to keep your car out all night? Does it

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have a curfew?" he teased, hoping if he kept it light Riley might relax.

The humor was lost on him, though. "Technically, yeah, I can keep a car overnight, drive it home, especially if I'm on call."

"So then there's no problem."

Riley stepped away and fastened the last button himself, then sat on the edge of the chair to put on his socks and shoes. "Yes, there is a problem. I didn't request the car for overnight use, so I should have turned it in already." He dragged in a stuttered breath. "It sat out there all night, Dane. For anyone to see. An official vehicle, and not at my residence. I came here on duty, but then I stayed, and I..."

"You what?" If Riley regretted staying, he was going to have to say it. Dane wasn't going to put the words in his mouth.

But Riley shook his head, avoiding the question. He picked up his jacket, dug into the pocket, and pulled out his cell phone. His hands still trembled as he punched a button to light up the screen. Then he let out a shaky breath and closed his eyes in obvious relief. "At least no one tried to get in touch with me to find out where the hell I was and I didn't answer." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "God, what was I thinking?" He stood and threw his jacket over the arm of the couch and set his phone on top of it.

Before he could reach for his shoulder holster, however, Dane pulled Riley into an embrace. "Riley, take a breath. It's okay."

He half expected him to pull free, but instead, though his posture was stiff, he dropped his forehead against Dane's shoulder and shuddered.

"No, it's not okay. You don't understand. This isn't like me. I don't forget things like the fact I'm driving a department vehicle. I don't break the rules or even bend them. Ever." He lifted his head

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and met Dane's gaze with his own troubled one. "Do you know how many ethical problems I created by staying here last night, Dane? I get around you and I can't think straight. And that's not good."

"I understand your concern about not turning in the car when you weren't planning to keep it overnight. But as for what happened after you finished asking me questions...you were off duty. You can do anything you want with your personal life when you're off duty, yes?"

"Not when the man I slept with is the same man I questioned about a murder case just a few minutes before."

"But I already told you...I didn't see anything unusual with Miguel on Sunday night, I barely talked to the man ever. I didn't see him leave work. I don't know anything."

Now Riley did pull away. "It's a gray area. I don't like gray areas, especially not when it comes to my work. You may not have talked to him or seen him leave, but it doesn't change the fact you were there at the club, working with him, only a half hour before his death, which happened right outside the back door. Until we have a suspect, anyone could be the murderer, so I should have kept my distance from you. I shouldn't have stayed last night. I shouldn't be here now." His face twisted in frustration. "And the thing that really gets me is that I don't make mistakes like this. I can't afford them, damn it."

Dane felt a twinge of guilt for convincing Riley to stay last night. He hated seeing him like this. "I'm sorry you spending time with me while you're working this case has upset you so much. I never wanted that."

"I know." Riley sighed.

Dane was hoping to grow a relationship with Riley, not send

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him away, especially when he was afraid Riley's doubts would win out and keep him away. But he didn't want to cause Riley any grief over his job. So though it about killed him to say it, he did... "If the ethics of seeing me right now bother you, why don't you do what you need to do on your case and when you feel comfortable it's far enough along, I'll be here. I told you already, I want more than one night with you, Riley. If it means waiting until your case is squared away, I'm willing to do that."

Deep lines etched Riley's forehead. He looked sad, but resigned. "About that... The case aside, I think we both know this can't ever be more than one night."

A band tightened around Dane's chest. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it could never work. Because me ending up here last night to question you because you just happened to work at the same bar as my victim was a fluke. Dane...last Thursday, at the Java Pit, I promised myself it was going to be my last day to go there. I wasn't coming back."

"Why?"

"Because..." He sighed. "Because nothing could ever come of it. I mean...guys like you don't hit on guys like me. And if they do it's only a..."

"A game?" Dane asked softly. "That's what you said last night when I asked you why you didn't call. You said you thought it was a game to me. Thought I was playing you."

"Well...yeah."

"Why would you make that assumption?"

"Because in my experience, that's the way it works. You even had the clerk at the Java Pit tell me you'd bought me the exotic coffee because I needed a little 'spice' in my life, meaning I was too boring and plain."

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Danes eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t mean that all! My God, Riley, there’s nothing boring or plain about you. I meant ‘spice’ like an adventure because I was trying to pick you up. Clearly it was a bad, cheesy choice of pick-up lines.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that in the end, sexy, self-assured, ‘the world is my oyster’ men like you aren’t interested in—” He stopped and shook his head.

“In meeting or having a relationship with sexy, intelligent men like you? I’m not following you.”

Riley let out another frustrated sigh and dragged a hand over his face again. “Come on, Dane. You make a living on your good looks—you’ve modeled, been in magazines, work in a business where having a gorgeous face and an incredible body probably earn you a slew of money and I’m sure the fawning adoration of every gay man who sets foot in the Sable Den. And I’d be willing to bet my next year’s pay check that you’ve always had that going for you. You’ve probably never had a day in your life when you woke up, looked in the mirror, and wished to God you could be someone else, anyone else, so you didn’t have to suffer through another day of teasing and taunting in school for being a skinny nerd with braces and thick glasses, or worry in your twenties that the hot guy picking you up in the bar and making you fall for him is only doing it on a dare from his friends as a joke.”

He huffed out a strained breath. “So, yeah, I did make an assumption because I haven’t seen much in this world, either through the eyes of an awkward, socially challenged young gay man or the eyes of a mature police officer whose seen too many hate crimes and incidents of bullying turned tragic to think otherwise.”

Oh, Riley... So that’s what drives you. Dane ached for him.

“I’m not ignorant or naïve, Riley,” he said softly. “I know what

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goes on in the world. And if you think for even a second that I don't hate that you had such bad experiences when you were younger, then you don't know me at all. I'd give *anything* to take that away and make it so you never had to go through that pain. But by the same token, in one broad sweep of your generalizing paintbrush, you're condemning me as one of the villains in this whole deal based on outward appearance alone."

He shook his head, torn between feeling awful for Riley, but also shocked that Riley would write him off because, in a nutshell, Dane happened to be graced with a pretty face, which in Riley's eyes automatically made him untrustworthy. "You looked at me in the coffeehouse, made a snap judgment, and were ready to dismiss me without ever having the first clue about who I really am. Even worse...now you do know more about me, but you're going to do it again anyway. You're going push me away and toss out what could, potentially, be an amazing relationship because you can't get past a stereotype."

Riley winced and stared at the bookcase on the opposite wall.

"Have I done anything at all to lead you to believe I'm some kind of cruel, game-playing asshole? Anything?"

Shoulders slumped, his hands stuffed in the front pockets of his jeans, Riley continued to look away, but his chest rose and fell rapidly.

"You know I haven't. So don't blame me for something I haven't done just because you think I *might* do it. I'm not the bad guy here. And it's not fair for you to make me into one because it's easier for you to have a reason to run than to stay and face your fears."

Riley's gaze shot to him, defensive.

Dane's throat felt raw. Goddamn it. This was the last thing he'd

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wanted to do...fight with Riley. But he couldn't stand here and not speak up. If they weren't able to be honest with one another and face problems openly, then they'd never have a future anyway. And Dane wanted a future with him, damn it.

"I need to go," Riley murmured. He grabbed his holster and strapped it on, then shoved his arms into his jacket, all without looking at Dane.

Running again.

As he reached the door, Dane grasped his hand. Riley stopped, but didn't turn to look at him.

"Riley, whoever hurt you in the past, whoever treated you so badly...you have every right to and damn well should be angry at them. But don't lump me in with them when all I want is a chance to show you I care. I just want you to be happy."

His shoulders rose and fell as he dragged in a breath. Then he nodded, slid his hand out of Dane's and walked out the door.

When the door clicked shut behind him, Dane leaned against it and closed his eyes against the dull ache that spread through his system.

"Damn it," he whispered, wishing with all his might things had gone differently this morning. He had no idea what was going on in Riley's head right now. No idea what that nod had meant, or if he'd ever hear from him again. Whatever happened from here on out, though, it would have to be Riley's call. It was the only way. Because Dane knew if he pushed any harder Riley would slip away for good. If it wasn't too late already.

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. He'd finally found the man who was everything he'd been searching for, everything he craved in a lover and partner. Someone who was real and smart and sexy and sweet, and who had true depth of

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character. Only to have that man shut him out because he expected Dane to be the very thing Dane detested and had forsworn when he moved here—a selfish, shallow prick who cared about no one but himself.

If it weren't so damned personal and painful, it would almost be funny.

A knock on the door at his back startled him.

At this early hour, it could only be one person. His heart in his throat, he opened the door.

Riley stood only a foot away, his posture dejected, his hands in his coat pockets, his blond head down. He slowly looked up, and the sight of his churning eyes and the pained lines on his face tore at Dane's heart.

"I left my phone. I think it fell...when I put on my jacket." His voice sounded gritty, like it hurt to talk.

Dane held the door open for him and Riley passed by him as he entered.

He crossed the living room to the couch, looked around, then reached down beside it and came back up with the phone in hand.

Dane had followed him a few steps into the room, and when Riley turned, their gazes fused for a long moment.

"Thanks," Riley finally mumbled, "for letting me back in."

"You're welcome."

It took all Dane's willpower not to go to Riley, wrap his arms around him, and do whatever it took to make the look of pain on his face go away. But he didn't because he'd already tried that earlier and it hadn't helped anything.

Riley returned to the door. But with his hand on the knob, he stopped. A deep sigh rattled through him. He rested his forehead against the wood. "I fucking hate this," he whispered.

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Then he turned and looked at Dane.

“What you said before...I know you’re right. I try so damn hard not to judge because I know how it feels, yet I turn around and do it anyway. What kind of a hypocrite does that make me?”

Dane approached him, watching Riley’s body language to see when he was too close for Riley’s comfort. To his surprise, Riley didn’t put up any walls or give any signals he didn’t want Dane there, so he stopped only when he was right in front of him, close enough to touch him.

And he did touch him, his hand reaching without thought to brush Riley’s cheek. “The kind who’s been hurt in the past and has every reason not to trust easily.”

Riley leaned into his touch and closed his eyes. “I don’t know what to do, Dane. I know, logically, what I *should* do. And unlike my damned emotions, logic has never failed me. But now...even though I know my job and responsibilities, and I’ve spent years girding myself with stern orders to stick to only what’s safe and simple and known in my personal life, I see you and all that goes to hell. It’s been that way since the first time I laid eyes on you in the Java Pit. And now, it’s even worse. My brain tells me to follow the rules, but my insides are in knots and my fucking chest aches and all I really *want* to do is close my eyes and be back in bed with you. So where the hell does that leave me?”

Dane pulled him close.

This time, instead of holding himself at a distance, Riley’s arms snaked around his waist and squeezed.

“I guess you have to find a way to balance the two. Logic and your heart,” Dane said softly.

“That’s what scares me. Whenever I’ve tried to follow my heart, it’s been the absolute worst choice. I don’t trust my own

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judgment. If I..." He sucked in a shaky breath and looked at Dane. "If I let myself fall for you and it turns out my heart was wrong..."

"I wish I could promise you everything would always be perfect between us and we'd never have any problems, but I can't make guarantees like that. There are always going to be risks in everything we do. I can promise you, though, that I'd never hurt you on purpose, Riley. That's the last thing I'd ever want." Dane swallowed past the lump in his throat. "In case you haven't noticed, whether you want to believe it or not, I'm totally in to you. But in the end, it has to be your call. You have to decide if taking a leap of faith with me is worth the risk."

Riley gazed at him. "Right now, I'm more afraid of walking out that door and never seeing you again than anything else," he said softly. "Which, I guess, answers my question, doesn't it?"

Dane's chest squeezed tight.

But before he could get out any words, Riley's lips grazed over his. And then again. And again, until the light touches were no longer enough and everything deepened and intensified.

One of Riley's hands grasped the back of Dane's head, pulling him in closer, while the other danced up and down his back and dipped into his sweats to stroke his ass in slow, sensual torture.

Hampered by Riley's jacket and gun holster, Dane made do by grabbing his jean-clad butt and lifting him onto his toes so their cocks made direct contact. Even through layers of fabric, the feel of Riley's erection straining against the front of his jeans stole Dane's breath and made him want to take the man straight back to bed and slide into him so deep Riley would never again doubt how much Dane needed and wanted him.

"Need to touch you," Riley gasped. He pushed Dane's sweats down to his thighs, then reached for his own jeans.

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Dane's pulse shot off the scale. He probably hindered more than helped, getting Riley's jeans unfastened, but finally they and his briefs were down. The blessed heat of skin to skin, dick to dick contact caused shimmering sparks to appear behind Dane's closed eyelids. Christ, would he ever be able to get enough of this man? *No.*

He lifted Riley to his toes again, and they ground together, their cocks, stiff and leaking, a hot friction between them.

"Can't last," Riley groaned.

Dane couldn't either. His balls were already tingling and heat flared at the base of his spine.

He shot first, in hot, powerful bursts that felt like liquid flames.

His cum made them slippery, and Riley moaned against his mouth. "Oh God...oh God...oh God, Dane."

Dane dropped to his knees, awkward with his sweats around his thighs, but nothing was going to stop him from this. He closed his mouth over Riley's shaft, swallowing it to the root. "Oh, Jesus!" Riley cried. And then he was pounding into Dane's throat and coming.

Dane took it all, savoring every drop, until he was spent. He licked Riley clean—his dick, his balls, and his abs where Dane had spilled on him.

When he rose, Riley kissed him, twining his tongue with Dane's as if he wanted a taste of their cum as well. Then he rested his forehead against Dane's. "You're like a damn drug. I think I might be addicted to you already."

"Do you think I feel any different about you?" His body still buzzed just from being so close to the other man.

"God, I know I really, really need to go to work," Riley said, "and yet, in spite of the fact I know I'm in so much shit, I can't

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make myself leave.” Then he laughed. A soft, breathless sound that went straight to Dane’s heart. “One minute I’m whining because I need to do my job, and the next I’m whining because it’s the last damn thing I want to do. I’m like a fricking teenage girl, back and forth, can’t make up her mind.”

That drew a laugh from Dane. “Baby, there is nothing about you that looks, feels, or otherwise resembles a teenage girl. Girls don’t get boners the size of Texas like you had a few minutes ago.”

“You didn’t seem to mind it.”

“Damn right. And I do it again in a heartbeat. But right now...” He took a step back and cupped Riley’s cheek. “As much as I’d love to take you back to bed and keep you there the rest of the day, I promised you earlier that I’d wait for you to get your case squared away if that’s what you need. I don’t want to cause you any more trouble, Riley.”

Riley sighed and his expression sobered. But it did wonders for Dane’s peace of mind to see the spark of light still shining in his eyes rather than the confusion and hurt of earlier. Riley brought two of his fingers to his own lips and kissed them, then pressed them to Dane’s.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

Dane nodded and pulled up Riley’s jeans, carefully tucking him back into them and zipping them.

“And here I thought your specialty was taking clothes off, not putting them back on. This is the second time this morning you’ve helped me dress.”

Dane smiled and pulled up his own sweats. “I try to be well-rounded in my skills.”

Riley feathered a kiss against his lips. “I probably shouldn’t see you again until we’ve apprehended a suspect. I have to be careful

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all our procedure is clean or else the defense will try to use it court.”

“I’ll be here.”

“I don’t know how long it’ll take. You might...” His brows drew together and he bit his lip.

His insecurity washed over Dane. “I’ll be here,” Dane said again, emphasizing each word. “I know you’re looking for reassurance that you can trust me, and all I can tell you is that actions speak louder than words. You do what you have to do, and when you’re ready, you’ll find me right here waiting and then you’ll know.” He reached toward the cherry hat and coat rack sitting near the door and pulled a soft, dark gray, cashmere knit scarf off it. He twined it around Riley’s neck. “Here...this is my favorite one. When you have doubts, wear it and think of me. It’ll be just like I’m there.”

Riley lifted the end to his nose, and Dane knew he was trying to pick up Dane’s scent on it.

The gesture touched Dane. He lowered his mouth to Riley’s in a lingering kiss. Then, though it was painfully hard to do, he reached past him and opened the door for him. “Now go. Be a cop.”

He only hoped the time apart wouldn’t give Riley reason to revisit all his doubts and fears about them. Dane felt like he’d won a portion of Riley’s trust this morning, but in spite of the closeness they’d just shared, their fledgling relationship was still fragile at best.

Riley started through the door, then looked over his shoulder. “Dane?”

“Hmm?”

“The coffee...the spicy mocha stuff? I liked it. A lot. I find

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myself craving it at all hours.” A sweet, sexy grin curved his lips. “But my very favorite thing was the purple heart.”

Dane laughed. “Better art than poetry. I really suck at that.”

He curled a hand around the back of Dane’s head and pulled him into a kiss. “I don’t regret staying last night,” he whispered.

Then he was gone.

CHAPTER 6

Riley drove home, grabbed a quick shower and changed clothes, then booked it straight to the police department. No one yelled at him or looked otherwise concerned that he was only getting around to returning the car this morning. He didn't know what angel was looking over his shoulder, but he wasn't complaining. He had a solid record at the department and it looked like it might still be intact. At least for the moment.

By the time Jeff came in, Riley was already on his second cup of coffee, writing up his notes, and trying hard not to think about Dane. Which was pretty much an impossibility, considering he'd chosen to torment himself by wearing Dane's scarf. It was warm, but light and soft enough it was comfortable even inside. And it smelled like him. Every time he moved, a faint whiff of Dane's

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citrus-spice scent wafted up to him. Which in turn sent continual slow pulses of heat scudding through his veins.

“Well, well, look at you,” Jeff said, making his usual stop on the way to his cubicle. “Yesterday morning you looked like my granny’s string mop—tired and used up. But this morning you’re all bright-eyed. And will wonders never cease...you’ve even accessorized.” He picked up one end of the scarf and rubbed it between his fingers. “Nice. Cashmere, isn’t it?”

Riley gave a noncommittal shrug that could be taken either way because he didn’t really know. Wasn’t cashmere expensive and fancy? If so, then it probably was something Dane would have and like. Which brought a little, secretive smile to his face.

“Were you channeling *GQ* while you slept? Oh, but wait...I feel another revelation coming on. You’re positively glowing today. Which makes me wonder if it was sleep that worked its magic for you, or something else. So, enlighten me. Just how *did* you spend your night, Detective Ellison?” he asked with a smirk. “Because you sure didn’t show up at O’Furry’s.”

Riley felt heat creeping up his cheeks. He ducked his head and pretended to be looking at the papers on his desk as he answered. “Sorry. I was interviewing witnesses and it slipped my mind.” Which was completely true, even if it wasn’t the whole truth. God, he was so fucked if anyone found out where he really had spent the night. For the hundredth time he asked himself what in the holy freaking hell he’d been thinking.

And yet, even now, away from Dane’s magnetic aura and back at work, although he knew it shouldn’t have happened the way it did, he didn’t regret it. The fact he’d wandered into ethical gray haze territory, yes. He hated that part. But sleeping with Dane, no. Even though he’d attempted to push him away, and had a major

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dose of guilt this morning, ultimately he couldn't deny there was something between them. Dane made him feel things he'd never felt before...and not just sexually. He felt close to him, felt a connection with him that though it seemed inexplicable, was undeniable.

Jesus, am I falling in love with him? But how could he explain that when he hardly knew the man? There was no such thing as love at first sight, was there? Maybe love at first sex? But then how did he know it was the real thing and not just some glorified, prettied up lust he was feeling? Dane was the first man who'd ever given as much, if not more than, he took. The first man who'd ever evolved the act of sex from fucking to lovemaking for Riley. Maybe what he was feeling was some kind of hero worship?

Or maybe he's the real deal and like Dane said, you're too blinded by your past experiences to see how honest and good he is.

"Hello!" Jeff called. "Some things clearly haven't changed since yesterday. You're still zoning out."

"Sorry. Lots on my mind."

"I can see that." Jeff gave him an odd look.

"We need to talk about this case," Riley said, trying to shift the attention off himself.

"Yeah, we do," Jeff agreed.

"I still have four people to run down that I couldn't connect with yesterday."

"I have two. But we have bigger problems."

"Oh, Christ. What?"

"I got back before you did yesterday evening and got an earful from the lieutenant. It turns out our dead guy at the Sable Den is the son of the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico."

"Fuck." Whenever politics were involved it made their job that

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much harder. "Let me guess, the State Department is demanding answers."

Jeff pointed a finger at him. "You win the prize. Which means the chief is demanding we come up with a suspect forthwith."

"Ah, crap."

"I'm right there with you. It's hard enough to work through evidence and witnesses and come up with something as it is. But with the bigwigs breathing down our necks...not pretty."

"All right then, what have we got so far?"

Jeff sank into the chair opposite Riley and opened the file folder he held. "Forensics says the stripper died from strangulation, which we already knew. Looks like someone approached him from behind, and the weapon was a leather strap or belt. He wasn't sexually assaulted. No sign of blunt trauma or drugs in his system. No fingerprints on the body and nothing conclusive elsewhere in the alley simply because too many people come and go through that door."

"What about connections with the other victim...Edward Jacobs, the guy in suburbia."

"Same MO, except he was in his car. He also was strangled from behind."

"So the killer probably waited for him in the backseat of the vehicle. But we have no prints from there either."

"Which means both the murders were probably premeditated. The killer took the time to put on gloves, and in the case of Edward Jacobs, lie in wait for him."

"He probably did the same at the strip club. Do we know if Miguel usually left by the back entrance at night? If so, then the killer would have known when to look for him."

"I'll check through my notes, but I'd say it's a good bet the

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killer knew he'd be coming out that door."

Riley's first thought was to ask Dane if he'd noticed Miguel had a pattern for leaving. But then he caught himself. *No, you have to stay away from him. Don't fuck up this case, Ellison.*

"And we still have no reason to believe these two men knew each other," Jeff said. "So why them? Are we looking at a serial killer here, or were these one-time deals?"

"Interesting they were both strangled. That's not the easiest way to kill someone."

"But if you don't want to be heard, it's convenient. A gun, without a silencer, is loud."

"And leaves a blood trail. As would any kind of stabbing or slicing implement."

"So we have a killer who doesn't like to get his hands dirty."

"But who's strong enough to hold a leather belt around a struggling male victim's neck long enough for them to pass out and die. Both the victims were pretty muscular."

"Oh, and don't forget the other interesting tidbit...Miguel Montoya's wallet was missing. Edward Jacobs's was not."

"I expect Miguel's wallet held a fair amount of cash—probably several hundred dollars at least. One of the witnesses I questioned said he was popular with customers. Strippers at those gay clubs tend to make a bundle in tips. Maybe the money was too tempting to leave behind."

"And yet..." Jeff said, flipping back to look at notes on the other victim, "Edward Jacobs had six hundred dollars in his wallet, but the killer didn't take it."

"Maybe he wasn't after the money. If this kid was the son of a diplomat, maybe he had some kind of special credentials or information in his wallet."

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"I don't know, Ri. Something about it doesn't jive, but I can't put my finger on why."

"Then let's get busy finding some answers."

"Yeah, and tick-tock, let's do it fast. But no pressure or anything."

"God, I love my job," Riley said drily.

"Yeah, ain't it grand?" Jeff rose to leave. "That's a good look on you, by the way. Very New York City chic. There's fashion hope for you yet."

* * *

Riley spent the rest of the day and most of the next talking to the remaining witnesses, going back through everything they had so far, digging into both victims' backgrounds. He felt like his head was going to explode from all the information.

Around three o'clock, Jeff returned after being out most of the day. Riley had just gotten back in himself and sunk into his chair when Jeff rounded the corner.

"I finally talked to the last employee on my list—the dishwasher at the Sable Den. He says he was fishing in the Adirondacks the past couple of days and only got home, which was why I hadn't been able to reach him. I believe him if only because he was unloading his fishing tackle from his truck when I got there and, damn, but he stank of fish. Have I ever mentioned how much I hate fishing?"

Riley smiled. "Yeah. So what's up. Any useful information or was he like everyone and didn't know anything?" He jiggled his computer mouse to bring his computer out of sleep mode, then typed in his password.

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“Got a new very interesting tidbit from him. He claims that right after closing, a little after two A.M. he opened the back door as he was sweeping and saw two men talking in the alley.”

Riley looked up at him, his attention riveted. *Fuck*. This could be the break they needed. “Who were they? Did he hear anything?”

“He said they were in the shadows, maybe sixty feet away from the door, arguing. He wasn’t close enough to hear about what, but their voices were definitely raised. He couldn’t make out one of the men because he was in deeper shadow, but he recognized the other one. It was one of the club’s strippers.”

“Miguel?”

“No, another stripper. The dishwasher only knows him by his stage name, Zen. I had to call the club to find out his real name—Daniel Scott.”

Riley felt all the blood drain from his face. His heart pounded. A horrible, sick knot formed in his stomach.

Jeff looked at him strangely. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he whispered.

“Wasn’t Daniel Scott one of the people you interviewed? Did he say anything about this?”

“No. Not a word.” *Why, Dane? Why?*

“What did he tell you?”

“The same thing as everyone else—he didn’t know Miguel that well, didn’t see him leave, didn’t notice anything different about him that night. He said he left the club a few minutes after two and went home alone.”

“And it didn’t seem important to him to tell you that he was out in the alley arguing with someone—maybe even Miguel Montoya himself—just a few minutes before the murder? That’s not a good sign.”

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“No, it isn’t.” It was hard to breathe. “What did...” He winced. His stomach suddenly lashed out like a sonofabitch...it felt like the ulcer he’d had a couple of years ago kicking back to life with a fury. “What did the dishwasher say happened after that. Did he hear the end of the argument or see what the men did?”

“Ri, seriously, are you okay?”

No. Not okay in any way. “Yeah,” he rasped. “What did the dishwasher say?”

“Nothing. The two men were still out there when the dishwasher shut the door and went home by way of the main entrance. And we already know the manager locked up the club around 2:10. He didn’t open the back door—had no reason to.” Jeff stepped around the deck and settled a hand on his shoulder. “You look really bad. What’s going on?”

Riley dragged in a breath. “I need to talk to you.”

“What is going on?” Jeff repeated.

“Not here. Privately.” Riley managed to drag himself to his feet. He was already making a circuit of the building in his mind’s eye, trying to find a place where they could talk behind a closed door and not be overheard. But everything he thought of, he rejected because there was too much risk of being interrupted. “Outside,” he choked out.

He pushed past Jeff, not bothering to see if he followed, just trusting that he would. He couldn’t look anywhere, at anyone, as he passed through the row of cubicles in the Person Crimes division, or the long hallway that carried his numb feet to the glass side door that led out into the parking lot.

The damp cold hit him the moment he walked out the door, causing him to shiver violently.

Jeff jogged up next to him, then past him to his car, a silver

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Lexus sedan. Riley heard the beep of the remote locks, then Jeff was holding open the passenger door. “Get in,” he said.

Riley slid into the seat and shut the door.

Jeff entered on the driver’s side, started the engine, and cranked the heat. “It’ll warm up in a minute.” He angled his tall frame toward Riley. “Ri, talk to me. This has to do with the information from the dishwasher, doesn’t it?”

Riley nodded. He closed his eyes and dragged a hand over his face. God, he wanted to be anywhere but here. Except now his actions on Monday night had gotten him into far more serious trouble than he’d imagined, and he couldn’t fathom how to get everything straightened out. Personally, he was a wreck. His fucking heart had screwed him over again, telling him to believe in Dane, assuring he was different and good and that this time, just maybe, he’d found Mr. Right. He couldn’t even wrap his mind around how angry and hurt and betrayed he felt. But he’d have to deal with all that later. Because right now he had bigger problems. He needed advice. And Jeff wasn’t only his co-worker, he was his best friend. He trusted him.

“I fucked up bigtime, Jeff.”

“On the case? On procedure?”

“You know how I’ve been preoccupied? Well, when I went to see Dane—Daniel Scott—on Monday evening, I questioned him, and then I...”

“You what?” Jeff studied him with concern. Then his dark brows rose. “Preoccupied... Oh, God, Riley. Please tell me you didn’t sleep with him?”

Riley squeezed his eyes closed. “I did,” he whispered.

Jeff was silent for so long Riley thought he wasn’t ever going to respond. But then, finally, he said, “I’m sure you’ve already

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asked yourself this, but why?"

"It's complicated. I already knew him. Sort of. Not his full name, I didn't know that until I went to question him, but I'd been seeing him in this coffeehouse I go to sometimes in the mornings. We'd been..." He sighed, feeling more stupid by the minute. "We'd been sort of silently flirting. Last week he bought my coffee and gave me his phone number. I hadn't called him, though, because..." He couldn't bring himself to tell Jeff it was because Dane was a gorgeous model and he was too afraid of being played. "I didn't call him. And then I went to question Daniel Scott on Monday and when he opened the door, I discovered it was him, my coffeehouse guy. I kept everything professional during the questioning. But afterward, he asked me to stay for dinner, and one thing led to another."

He turned to look at Jeff. "I've compromised this whole fucking case. I know I shouldn't have slept with him. I have no excuse except that I was thinking with my dick instead of my head. But he said he'd seen nothing, knew nothing, and if that was true, my slip up would never have mattered beyond me learning not to ever let it happen again. But now... Jesus, Jeff, if he was really in that alley, then that bumps him right back up near the top of the suspect list. Which means my involvement with him is going have to come to light."

"Take a deep breath."

Riley tried not to think about how Dane had told him something similar when he'd awakened in a panic Tuesday morning.

"I'm so fucked. But worse, we've got the chief and the State Department riding us for resolution because of who Miguel Montoya was, and when we put someone on trial for his murder,

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the defense is going to pick apart every little thing that we might have done wrong.” He shook his head. “I think the only thing I can do at this point is take myself off the case.”

“No! No, Riley. That is not the thing to do.”

“It’s the only right thing to do.”

“Listen to me, you do not want to go to our superiors and ask to be taken off the case because they’re going to ask why and you’re going to have to tell them in great detail. It would get everyone stirred into an uproar. Do you really want your personal life dissected by everyone in the department and maybe even the media? Plus, coming forward would affect how the case proceeds, and depending on how pissed the bosses are, and how much pressure they’re under from their higher-ups, you might end up in a disciplinary hearing, and worst case scenario, lose your career. I’m damn well not going to let that happen. You’re too good at what you do. I’m not letting you go down like that.”

“Jeff...”

“No. Don’t even think it again. It’s not an option.”

Riley sighed and rubbed a hand against his midsection, which continued to ache. “Then what?”

“No one but me knows about your relationship with Daniel Scott?”

“No one but you. Except...I was in a department vehicle Monday night and it sat parked outside his apartment building all night. Before you say anything, I know how stupid that was, too.”

“Did anyone question you the next morning when you brought it back?”

“No. Probably because it’s not unusual for me to take one home two or three times a month.”

“I don’t think the car’s a big issue, then. What’s more

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important is that this business with you and the stri—" He winced. "You and Daniel Scott stay between the two of us."

"Dane," Riley said softly "He goes by Dane."

"Fine, Dane. He has to be questioned again."

"I know."

Fuck. How was he going to face Dane? On the other hand, knowing Dane lied to him, how could he not face him?

"And then from there, we're going to bust our asses to get to the bottom of these murders, we're going to make an arrest, and we're going to make it stick. If we cross all our T's and dot our i's and keep this absolutely clean from here on, everything will be fine."

Riley tried to breathe deeply and find some calm. *Breathe. Breathe.* "Okay, he finally said. "We'll do it your way."

Jeff nodded.

"I'll go back and question Dane now. But I don't think I should go alone. It's better for the case if you're there, too, this time."

"Agreed. Let me ask you a question before we go, though. Off the record."

"All right."

"You've already met this guy and have obviously gotten to know him more intimately than most. I know that probably colors your objectivity about him somewhat, but you usually have pretty good instincts about people. What's your gut feel about him? Do you think he's the murderer?"

Riley took another deep breath and tried to look at Dane without blinders or messy feelings getting in the way. "No. I don't know why he was in the alley, if he was, but I don't think he's the killer."

"Good to know. That helps. You going to be okay facing him?"

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“Yeah.”

“I don’t know where you two stand personally, but you know after today you’re going to have to stay away from him at least until we have someone in jail.”

“Not a problem.”

“All right then. Let’s go see him.”

* * *

When Dane opened the door, looking as sexy and spectacular as ever, dressed in black jeans, a long-sleeved plum colored knit shirt that fit him like a glove, and barefoot, as he had been the time before, Riley’s breath caught and heat curled through him.

Damn it. Even now, hurt and furious, he still couldn’t resist the man on a purely visceral level. Everything inside him called out for Dane. *Mine. I want.*

He saw Riley and one of those knee-weakening smiles curved his lips. It stayed on his face but dimmed, however, when his gaze slid to Jeff and Jeff held up his badge.

“Daniel Scott, I’m Police Detective Jefferson Carver. You already know my associate.”

Dane’s brows drew together. He nodded. “What can I do for you?”

“We have a few more questions for you about the murder of Miguel Montoya.”

“Sure. Come in.”

It was like déjà vu, but not, as Riley entered through the same doorway, passed by the same man, into the same living room he’d been in before. But this time he made a point not to get close enough to let any part of him brush against Dane. Keeping his eyes

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ahead, he moved to the big window overlooking the Hudson.

Behind him he heard Dane say, "Have a seat," and, "Can I get you gentlemen something to drink?"

"No thanks," Jeff said.

The soft *whoosh* of couch springs and gabardine against leather indicated Jeff had seated himself.

"Detective Ellison?"

Dane. Closer now. Riley could feel his presence vibrating along his nerve endings. Could even, he thought, smell Dane's scent. But Riley didn't turn around. He wasn't ready yet.

"Can you I get you anything?"

"No, I'm okay, thanks," Riley murmured.

Another *whoosh*. Dane was seated now as well.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush because I know you've already talked to my partner once about Miguel Montoya. We've had some new information come to light. We have a witness who places you in the alley outside the back door of the Sable Den around two A.M. Monday morning. Would you care to confirm or deny that?"

A beat of silence.

Now Riley turned. He needed to see Dane's face when he answered.

Dane drew in a deep breath, then released it in a sigh. "I was out there." He glanced up at Riley, but rather than the guilty or defensive expression Riley expected to see on his face, all he found was sadness. It made a tiny crack in the fortress Riley had build around his heart.

"Would you care to explain?" Jeff asked.

"My brother Kyle came by the club just before closing. It was the first time I'd seen him in over a year. He's not into the whole

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gay scene, so he left a note with the bouncer, and when the last show was over, the bouncer passed it along to me. Kyle wanted me to meet him outside to talk. I went out front and didn't see him, so I walked around the side of the building and found him waiting for me at the entrance to the alley."

"The witness says you were arguing."

"We were. My brother and I have a difficult relationship." His gaze slid to Riley again. Riley remembered Dane saying that when their dad got sick his brother was "unavailable" to care for him. He'd said it with bitterness in his tone.

"Difficult?" Riley asked, wanting to know what kind of bad blood they might be talking about here.

"When we turned eighteen—we're fraternal twins—we moved to New York City. My brother got caught up in living in the fast lane and partying, and developed a drug habit. At first it was mostly social, doing E and smoking dope when he was at clubs. But eventually that led to harder stuff. He got picked up for possession the first time when he was twenty-one, then several more times over the years. And then he was arrested for dealing. He's been in rehab a couple of times, but he went right back to the drugs. When he's had financial trouble over the years"—Riley noticed the bitter emphasis on the word "financial"—"he's come to me for a bail out."

"And you give him money?" Jeff asked.

"At first, when we were younger, I did because he always had a sob story—he was mugged and he'd just cashed his paycheck so the thief got everything and how was he going to pay his rent? Or his friend's kid was really sick, so he'd given his friend money to pay the emergency room fees, but now he didn't have any grocery money for himself. That kind of stuff. He never told me outright, at

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least back then, that he needed the money for drugs. Eventually, though, especially after I became more successful in my career—”

“Stripping?” Jeff said.

“No, modeling. When I was earning decent money, Kyle started asking for more. Instead of a ‘loan’ of a couple hundred bucks it was a thousand or two or five. I found out he wanted it to pay his supplier and I cut him off. Needless to say that caused tension between us. Later on, I’d get calls in the middle of the night to come pick him up because he’d been arrested during a club raid, or have the police knocking on my door to ask me questions about him because he was in trouble again. I was always the one the police, the public defender’s office, the probation officers, and everyone else called to clean up his messes. A little over two years ago he was released from prison after serving ten months for dealing and other assorted charges. He got out and went straight into an inpatient rehab program. He’d just been released from that and probation when we got word my dad had terminal cancer. Within a month, Kyle was using again.”

Dane sighed. “I moved back here to take care of my father. Kyle stayed in the city and couldn’t be bothered to help or visit. When Dad died he showed up for the funeral loaded. We had words. I hadn’t seen him since until a few nights ago.”

“What did he want when he came to the club?”

“What do you think? Money. I got a story about how he was clean now, but he’d been unfairly fired from his job and the state was giving him the runaround about unemployment benefits, so until they got it all worked out, could I give him some money to live on. The same old crap. He was stoned when he was talking to me.”

“So what happened?” Riley asked.

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"I told him no. He tried to beg and when that didn't work, he got pissed and accused me of emotionally abusing him and blamed me for all his problems. Nothing I haven't heard before from him." Dane's voice grew slightly hoarse and Riley recognized it for emotion. More sadness.

Another crack split open in Riley's wall.

"We talked for maybe five minutes," Dane continued, "then I left and came home. I offered Kyle a ride if he wanted me to take him somewhere, but he refused and said he'd walk."

"Where was he when you left?"

"As I pulled out of the Sable Den parking lot, I saw him coming around the building toward the front."

"Mr. Scott, why didn't you tell Detective Ellison, when he talked to you earlier, that you were in the alley just minutes before the murder?"

Dane looked at Riley, and Riley tensed. This was the \$64,000 question. Why *had* Dane withheld this information from him?

"I wasn't intentionally trying to keep it from you," Dane said quietly. "I answered all your questions honestly. You didn't ask if I was outside. If you had, I would have told you. As it was, I didn't volunteer it because I honestly didn't think it was relevant. I was out there all of five minutes, on my way home. Several other people were leaving around the same time."

"But the pertinent part here is that you were in the alley. And I'm sure Detective Ellison told you Miguel Montoya was murdered in that same alley. So it didn't seem 'relevant' to you to mention that fact?"

"It really didn't. We weren't actually in the alley. We were standing at the corner of the building at the edge of the alley. Riley—Detective Ellison—said Miguel's body was found outside

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the club's door. We were nowhere near the door."

"What about the fact that your brother is a known felon? It didn't occur to you that it might be important to share that information also?"

Dane's body tensed up. Frustration. Riley read it as clearly as if Dane had told him. He was frustrated because he truly believed what had passed between him and his brother hadn't been important to the case, but Jeff's challenging tone implied he'd done something wrong.

"Look, my brother's a mess, I'm not going to deny that. And, yes, he's been in and out of jail. But he's not a killer. An addict, a dealer, sometimes a thief, but not a murderer."

"You said yourself you haven't been around him in over a year. How do you know what he's capable of?"

Riley knew it was time to step in. The look on Dane's face ripped at his gut and he literally felt the man's pain as if it were his own. He didn't know what the hell that was about and didn't even want to try to figure out what it meant. Not here and now anyway. It was something he'd have to mull over later. He just knew he didn't want Dane to feel it anymore.

"Dane, do you have any idea where Kyle has been living this past year? Do you happen to have an address for him in case we need to talk to him?" He used his most soothing voice, and the effect was almost immediate.

Dane took a deep breath and visibly relaxed. He flashed Riley a look of gratitude.

Riley had never expected to end up playing good cop to Jeff's bad. He'd thought he'd be the one with the angry questions and Jeff would be reining him in and keeping things on an even keel. Strange.

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"I don't know," Dane said. "But he has several friends in the city that he's stayed with on and off over the years. I could give you their names if that would help."

"It would. If you could write those down for us, we'd appreciate it."

Dane rose and crossed to an antique cherry rolltop desk. He opened it, pulled out a spiral notebook and a pen, and began writing. When he was done, he tore off the page and, ignoring Jeff still sitting in the chair, held it out toward Riley, who stood closer.

Riley took a breath. *Stay calm.* A few steps and he was reaching for the paper. His and Dane's fingers brushed and a slow, tingling spread from his fingertips through the rest of his body. Their eyes locked only for a moment, but it was long enough for a wealth of need and unnamed emotion to pass between them.

Riley pulled his hand back as his heart pounded in his chest. He turned away and retreated to the window, needing to put some space back between them.

"If I can help in any other way, please let me know," Dane said, addressing both of them. "I'm sorry if I caused any problems by not speaking up earlier."

Jeff rose. "I'm going to ask you not to leave town, Mr. Scott. We may have more questions for you. And if you hear from your brother again, please contact us immediately. He's a person of interest right now."

Dane winced and again Riley felt his pain.

"I understand."

"All right then. Riley? Anything else?"

Riley shook his head. "No, not at the moment."

Jeff held out his hand. "Thanks for your time and cooperation."

Dane shook it and nodded.

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Riley didn't offer his hand...there was no way he could deal with having Dane's warm skin against his.

They walked to the door, and Dane opened it for them. Jeff went out, and Riley followed. Or started to, until Dane lightly touched his hand. "Riley, can I talk to you?" He glanced at Jeff, then back. "Privately?"

Oh, God, what are you doing, Ellison? Riley turned to Jeff. "I'll be right behind you."

Jeff's brow furrowed. "I don't think that's a good idea, Riley," he said softly.

"It'll be okay. Just a couple of minutes."

Jeff sighed. "Fine, two minutes."

Riley nodded and shut the door. Then he took a deep breath and faced Dane.

"I really am sorry, Riley. I wasn't intentionally trying to withhold information from you."

"You should have told me. This has complicated things. For the case and for my job. Because now we have a witness who places you and your brother at the scene of the crime just a short while before the crime was committed, and I'm the cop who slept with you after it happened."

"Can you lose your job over this?"

"I don't know what's going to happen. Jeff and I are trying to do damage control, but I don't know how things will end up."

"Will you really question Kyle?"

"Yes. We'll try to anyway. If he's got a record, he's not going to talk willingly, so we'll have to have him picked up."

"He's not a killer, Riley. He's..." Dane sighed. He looked tired and emotionally wiped. "He's got problems, and I don't condone anything he does, and I try not to enable him in any way. But he's

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my brother. And I still love him.”

Riley swallowed hard and nodded. “I...I better go.”

“Wait.” Dane’s fingers brushed his again, stopping him from turning to the door. “Where does this leave us?”

Riley’s thoughts and emotions were in chaos.

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “I’m not sure if there even is an us.”

The tormented expression on Dane’s face stayed with him long after he’d closed the door and left the building.

CHAPTER 7

Five days later Riley met up with Jeff in one of the conference rooms where they'd set up camp for the duration because they had room to spread out all their information on the two cases and work from a large white board to fit puzzle pieces together.

They'd decided—actually, Riley had decided—that it would be best if Jeff took the lead on the Miguel Montoya murder. After the visit with Dane and the realization they were going to have to dig into his and his brother's pasts, as well as have his brother picked up for questioning, Riley knew it was too much of an emotional hotbed for him and he couldn't be objective. He'd purposely remained as hands-off as possible, concentrating his full energy and taking the lead, instead, on the Edward Jacobs case. He was determined to find a connection between the two victims. He and

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Jeff were convinced the same person had committed both crimes, which meant the killer had known both victims from somewhere.

Jeff dropped a file folder in front of Riley as he entered.

“What’s this?”

“Thought you might be interested to know your guy checks out. He’s squeaky clean, in fact. Never been in trouble, pays his taxes, has a healthy stock portfolio with enough cash on hand he probably wouldn’t have to work for years—not sure what the hell he’s been stripping for. He’s the one who paid for his brother’s inpatient rehab a few years ago...a private clinic to the tune of a hundred grand. Did you know he graduated magna cum laude from Columbia with a degree in English Literature? And even cooler”—for a guy who’d been the bad cop a few days ago, Jeff suddenly sounded like a fan boy—“did you know he’s been in *two* Dolce & Gabbana ads.”

Jeff opened the folder and Dane’s sensual face leapt off the page in glossy color.

“I didn’t know,” Riley whispered, his pulse racing. He brushed his fingers over the picture. In it Dane sat behind the wheel of an expensive sports car, wearing a gray three-piece suit and tie. His rich, coffee-colored hair was sleeked back, a faint five o’clock shadow dusted his cheeks and chin, and dark designer sunglasses hid his eyes. He looked...*Jesus*...like a classy, corporate, millionaire sex god.

“Check out the one under it.”

Riley lifted the page that Jeff had obviously printed out on the color laser printer.

Again his heart stopped. This time Dane was with two other men on a beach, one fully clothed, one in designer black briefs, and Dane, wearing only sheer white pants, slung low on his hips,

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with his chest bare, and a white scarf draped casually around his neck.

His mouth gone dry, Riley could only stare.

"I've gotta give you credit, my friend. You've got good taste."

Slowly, because it was physically hard to make himself do it, Riley closed the folder. He couldn't look anymore. It brought up too many emotions, and right now he needed to keep himself distant from them. Needed to not think about Dane Scott. Or the look on his face when Riley had left him standing there.

Have I been wrong to be angry at him?

It didn't matter. As long as these murder cases were ongoing, Dane was off limits and Riley couldn't afford to let thoughts of him cloud his judgment.

"Also, I know you're trying to stay hands-off on the Montoya case, but to keep you abreast of what's going on, the NYPD picked up Kyle Scott yesterday. He confirmed his brother's story, though he gave a different view of his own behavior, trying to make himself look like a victim. With some pressure, he confessed that after Dane left, he crashed an after-hours party on the same block in the hopes of scoring some blow. As he was leaving, he heard noise in the alley, went back thinking maybe his brother had come looking for him, and saw a burly man jogging away and someone on the ground. He decided to check out the person who was down because he said he wanted to see if he could *help*." Jeff's eyebrows rose in skepticism. "And when he realized the man was dead, he found the man's wallet lying next to him a few feet away. Naturally, he had to pick it up and look in it to see if there might be a name and contact information so he could let someone know what had happened to the guy. You know, as if 9-1-1 had never been invented."

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“Yeah, and never mind the several hundred dollars in cash in the wallet. I’m sure the money is long ago spent, but at least that explains the mystery of what happened to Miguel’s wallet. Any chance Kyle might be the killer?”

“A slim possibility. But it would be hard to connect him to the Jacobs murder as well.”

“What about the guy he saw leaving?”

“NYPD has a sketch artist working with Kyle, though if he was fucked up on coke, who knows what we’ll end up with.”

“So do you want to hear my news?”

“Shoot.”

“I think I might have found a possible connection between Miguel and Edward. Not a direct connection, but let’s just say I’ve got a lead that Edward might have been an occasional visitor at gay clubs in New York City.”

Jeff’s eyebrows went up again. “Well, well, well. So Mr. Straight and Suburban Married with Children had a little secret, did he?”

“I need confirmation first, but it looks that way.”

“So we have two gay men...or one who’s gay and the other who’s either closeted or, is it called bi-curious?”

Riley nodded.

“Hate crime?”

“Possibly.”

“Damn. It’s been a bountiful day.”

“We’re still a long way from making an arrest.”

“Yeah, but a hell of a lot closer than we were yesterday. I feel it in my bones. We’re on the right track, Ri.”

“I hope so.”

“What are you going to do about your guy when this is over?”

BRING THE HEAT

The question shook Riley. It was the last thing he'd expected to hear from Jeff. "I...I don't know."

"Not that I'm sticking my nose in your business, but I saw the way he looked at you when we were at his apartment last week. The man's in love with you."

Riley's heart stalled. "Wh—at?" he whispered, staring at Jeff.

"I don't have to be gay to see the obvious. He looked at you like you were the most important thing in his universe and he'd cut off his right arm if he thought it would make you happy. "

"Since when did you become his cheerleader?"

"Nobody said I was cheerleading. I'm just pointing out that you two are obviously crazy about each other."

"I don't know if that's enough," Riley said quietly "He's... Well, look at him." He flipped open the folder again, exposing the ad with Dane in the sports car. "And then look at me, the cop nerd who wears thick black reading glasses, and sport coats from the thrift store because I can't be bothered to go to the mall. And it's not only the clothes, it's the whole personality. We're too different."

"Are you? I'm not so sure. I don't think you give yourself enough credit, Riley. Sometimes you're your own worst enemy."

Jeff stood, squeezed Riley's shoulder and left the conference room.

And Riley was left to ponder his words, staring at a picture of the man who'd turned his life upside down.

CHAPTER 8

As Dane entered the Java Pit, the warm, spicy scents swirled around him, a welcome refuge from the cold, blustery October day outside. As he entered, he met a forty-something woman juggling three cups of coffee and her purse. He waited and held the door for her.

“Thank you so much!” she huffed. “You’re a doll!”

Dane gave her a smile. “You’re welcome.”

When she successfully navigated through the doorway, he moved into line. The coffeehouse was busy this morning. One of the busiest mornings he’d seen in a while. It didn’t look like he’d even be able to get a table today, which meant he’d probably be taking his coffee to go.

Which was fine. He used to love to come in here, get his

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coffee, find a table, and spend a half hour or an hour reading and people watching. It used to make him feel grounded and like he was truly a part of the community. But it hadn't been the same for a while now.

Since Riley.

The same dull ache that seemed to always be lurking in wait whenever he thought of the detective reared to life and filled his chest.

It had been five weeks since he'd last seen him. The day Riley and his colleague had come to his apartment and questioned him about Kyle. Five weeks since Riley had walked out the door and, presumably, out of his life.

Dane knew they'd finally made an arrest—two of them, actually—on the murder cases Riley had been working. He'd read about it in the paper several days ago. Miguel and the other victim, a financial adviser, had been lovers. They'd met at a gay bar in New York City when the other man had been there on business, and had begun a relationship. When it got harder to sneak away from his family and get to the city to see Miguel, Miguel moved here to be closer to him. The wife had found out about it, and incensed that not only had her husband been cheating on her, he'd been doing it with another man, she hired her brother—a convict with a history of drunken brawling, battery, and robbery—to kill both men. The wife and her brother had been arrested for the murders.

It pained Dane, but Kyle had also been arrested. Dane had checked in with his attorney, and found out that when the NYPD had picked Kyle up for questioning, he'd admitted he'd stolen Miguel's wallet. But he'd also had several ounces of cocaine on him—probably purchased with Miguel's money.

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Dane hated to think of Kyle in jail again. But at the same time it was almost a relief to him. Because when he was in jail, Dane at least knew he was getting three square meals a day and he didn't have to worry about what was happening to him on the street. As he'd told Riley, in spite of everything, he loved his brother.

Now if only he could stop worrying about Riley.

The man haunted his thoughts. When he'd read about the murder arrests, he'd spent two days with his pulse constantly racing, hoping for a phone call or a knock on the door. It didn't come. By the third and fourth days, he found himself despondent. And by the fifth, he'd given up and faced the facts—Riley wasn't coming back.

That had been day before yesterday.

Dane moved forward in line, getting closer to the ordering counter.

He had Riley's business card and had contemplated picking up the phone several times over the past few days. He hadn't, though. Because this wasn't just about him. This was Riley's choice, Riley's call to make. Dane had told him he'd wait for him to finish the case, but after the last round of questions, when Riley had said he didn't know where they stood or if there even was a them, it was obvious he didn't have hope for them.

You can't force him to care for you no matter how much you care about him.

It was his turn and he stepped up to the counter. "Hi, Cherie," he said to the usual red-haired college girl, giving her a smile he didn't really feel.

"Hey, Dane." Her smile, in contrast, was bigger than usual. And she seemed way too perky. "You want your usual?"

"Yeah. I'm kind of boring I guess. I always drink the same

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thing.”

“Doesn’t matter as long as you like it.”

“True.” He reached into the inside pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out his wallet. He fished out a ten and handed it to her. “Keep the change.”

Another smile. “Thanks!”

He moved down the counter to the pick-up area, and again waited his turn. The two ladies in front of him collected their cappuccinos.

“Large black regular,” the barista said.

“That’s mine.” Dane reached across the counter for the cup.

Instead of putting the protective heat sleeve on like usual, the barista laid it next to the coffee. Dane picked it up as well. But when he started to slide it onto the cup, his heart began to pound like a bass drum.

Written on the cup in left-slanting purple magic marker, it said:

*Roses are red
Violets are blue
I suck at poetry, too
But I don’t want to live without you.*

A laugh burst free even as he felt the hot sting of tears in his eyes.

He turned and looked over the busy store. Every table and chair was full. He scanned all of them.

And then he saw him.

Not at a table or in one of the cushioned arm chairs. Standing against a pillar near the door.

Their gazes locked. Riley smiled—one of those slow, sweet,

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sexy ones. And everything else around Dane ceased to exist.

Good God...had there ever been a more perfect vision? Riley was dressed in his usual Converse tennis shoes and jeans along with a gray tweed jacket over a soft, white button-down that made his eyes look bluer than blue. And wrapped around his neck, he wore Dane's gray scarf.

He didn't remember his feet carrying him there, or how he managed to make it through the crowded space without stepping on someone. But he found himself a mere foot away from the man he longed for.

"Hi," Riley said softly, his voice husky. It was the best sound Dane had heard in weeks.

"Hi."

"I'd offer to share my table with you, but..." He shrugged, never taking his eyes off Dane. "You can share my pillar if you want."

Dane nodded, but didn't move. He couldn't. Being so close to the one person in the world he wanted more than any other after far too long apart...at the moment, that was all he could soak up.

Riley's voice lowered, grew intimate. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

"I'm sorry. For everything, Dane."

"There's nothing to be sorry for." His voice was hoarse. "I'm sorry I caused you so many problems."

Riley swallowed hard and nodded. Moisture welled in his eyes.

The sight did things to Dane's insides he couldn't even begin to explain. He wanted to reach out and touch Riley, but held back. Something told him this had to be Riley's move.

"I saw you got the murder cases wrapped up. Congratulations."

"We couldn't have done it without your brother. He's the one

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who gave us our first real good information.”

Dane’s brows lifted in surprised. “He did?”

“Yes. We’re working with the NYPD to see if we can get him some kind of deal on his possession charge since he helped us.”

Dane’s throat clogged with emotion. “You’d do that for him?”

Riley nodded. “For him...and for you.”

“Thank you.” He’d never meant the words more.

“Do you want to get out of here?”

“God yes.” He wanted to be with Riley alone, not stuck in a crowded coffeehouse.

They walked through the door onto the sidewalk. The chill wind bit at Dane’s cheeks and whipped his hair. Whipped Riley’s, too.

“Where do you want to go?” Riley asked, turning to him.

“I know a place...” He hesitated, not sure if Riley would like it.

But a faint smile teased at Riley’s lips. He slid a hand into Dane’s jacket pocket. “Do they serve breakfast or lunch or dinner in bed there?”

Dane moved closer and put one of his hands in Riley’s pocket. “They do. All three.”

“Since I’m on vacation for the next few days, I was kind of hoping maybe, if it wasn’t too much trouble, I could sample all of them.”

“Well, I know the owner and he’s pretty accommodating, so I think you’ll be able to get whatever you want.”

Riley leaned closer. “*Anything* I want?”

“Absolutely anything.”

Their mouths brushed, and then they were kissing right on the sidewalk, in plain sight of anyone passing by, and Dane didn’t give a damn who saw.

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“My car or yours?” Riley asked, his breath warm against Dane’s lips.

“I don’t care. As long as we get there.”

Riley grabbed his hand. “Come on then.”

They slid into the blue Camaro and kissed again before Riley managed to start the engine and get moving.

It took less than five minutes to arrive at Dane’s apartment building at the speed Riley drove. They climbed the stairs, pausing to kiss every few steps, and then they were in front of Dane’s door and he was fumbling to get the key in the lock. It clicked and turned, and they were in.

They left a trail of clothes leading to the bedroom.

When they were nude, Riley crawled onto the bed and pulled the lube and condoms off the shelf. Kneeling in the middle of the bed, he slicked his fingers, reached between his legs, and slid them into himself, never taking his gaze from Dane.

Dane watched, his throat growing dry at the sight. *Sweet Jesus.*

Riley smiled...this one less sweet and way, way more naughty. He crooked a finger at Dane. “Come here.”

When Dane knelt on the bed in front of him, Riley curled a hand around Dane’s cock, and lowered his mouth to it. Dane cried out at the hot, wet heat.

Riley sucked him until Dane begged, and only then did he roll a condom down onto Dane’s slippery length. He lay back in the bed, taking Dane with him. Dane settled against him, his bigger body covering Riley’s. Their mouths found one another and they kissed for long leisurely minutes, supremely aroused, but not in a rush because they had all day.

“Now,” Riley finally gasped. “Please, Dane. I’ve missed you so damned much. I want to feel you inside me. Fuck me. Deep. And

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don't stop."

His words shot fire through Dane. "Holy God, Riley," he rasped. "You're killing me, talking like that. It's too fucking hot." He rose to his knees, pushed Riley's legs back against his chest, and without pausing, thrust into him.

Riley's back arched off the bed. His beautiful, lean body rippled with pleasure. His head tilted back, his eyes closed, his lips parted. Dane had never seen a more beautiful, sensual picture. He bent over Riley and kissed him again. "I love you, Riley."

Riley's eyes opened, and Dane saw something swirling in those blue depths he hadn't dared hope for.

"I love you, too. You're all I've been able to think about these last weeks."

"I was afraid you weren't coming back."

"I couldn't stay away from you at the Java Pit before I even met you. How in the hell could stay away from you now? When I'm with you I don't ever want to leave."

"Then don't. Move in with me so you don't have to leave." It was impetuous, he knew, to live together so soon. But he knew in gut they'd never regret it.

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean it. Going to bed with you every night, waking up next to you every morning, lots and lots of breakfasts and lunches and dinners in bed, no more early morning goodbyes...what's not to love about us being together all the time?"

"I don't know..." A teasing smile quirked Riley's lips, and it almost bowled Dane over it was so hot and adorable. "A cop and a stripper? What would people say?"

"They wouldn't say anything because your tag line is wrong." Dane fought back a smile. "There is no stripper."

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“What do you mean?”

“I quit working at the Sable Den.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“Because it made you uncomfortable.”

“But...Dane. I didn’t meant for you to—”

Dane put a finger over his lips to silence him. “Riley, you’re way more important to me than something I was only doing for the fun of it anyway. I’ve got plenty of money in the bank—I don’t need the job. And the last thing I ever want is to give you reason to worry or make you feel ill at ease about what I’m doing. Do you think I’m going to risk losing you over something like that? There’s no way.”

Riley let out a soft huff of breath and shook his head “You’re too nice to me.”

“I’m in love with you. And think of it this way...you get to reap the benefits of my vast experience. Now, the only man who gets to see me in my G-strings is you.”

“G-strings... Just how many do you have?”

“Lots. And other things, too. Other very”—he kissed him—“naughty”—another kiss—“things. Want a private show?”

Riley’s blue eyes glazed with lust and a slow, sexy smile curved his lips. “Oh, hell yes.”

Dane grinned. “I thought you might.”

Riley’s kiss scorched through him, erasing whatever else he’d been about to say.

Oh, yeah. Bring on the heat, baby. Because there wasn’t any other place Dane wanted to be except right in this man’s arms.

M. L. RHODES

Award-winning and bestselling author M. L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for fifteen years. Her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim from such places as *Romantic Times Magazine*, *The Romance Studio*, and *JERR* and have garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry.

In her gay romances, she enjoys pairing strong, independent heroes who are open to exploring both their sexuality and their emotions. Men fall in love with one another every day, and M. L. believes in celebrating that!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M. L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, check out her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com.

* * *

**Don't miss *Under My Skin*
by M. L. Rhodes,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

"The smart guy"—Sebastian Keller's lived with that label most of his life. Though he hasn't always appreciated it, and it hasn't exactly made him a man magnet, he's put his intelligence to work

building his store, Great Escapes Travel Book Shop, to the point it's now the favorite recommendation of travel agents in the St. Louis area. His customers—especially the jet-setting senior citizens—love him for his amiable personality.

He doesn't feel very amiable, however, when Rad Tattoos moves in next door to Great Escapes. Its owner, Dylan Radamacher, rubs Sebastian the wrong way from the get-go. The man's insufferable, stubborn, and, worse, a bad boy. Everything Sebastian loathes. To add insult to injury, Sebastian's certain the loud music, the congested parking lot, and the constant colorful parade of the counterculture in and out of the tattoo studio are scaring away his loyal, conservative customers.

And yet, much to his annoyance, the teasing sparkle in Dylan's eyes, his hot, inked body, and come-hither voice set Sebastian's libido on fire. Sebastian's "been there, done that" with the bad-boy type before, though, and almost lost everything because of it. There's no way he's going down that road again.

But when Dylan sets his sights on Sebastian and is determined to take him for a walk on the wild side, Sebastian knows he's in big trouble. It's going to take all his smarts and a whole lot of willpower to resist the sexy tattoo artist before the man finds a way to burrow deeper under his skin...

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