

A photograph of two shirtless men embracing in a grassy field. The man on the left is wearing blue jeans and has his hands on the other man's waist. The man on the right is also wearing blue jeans. In the background, there is a white house with a chimney and a wooden fence, and the ocean is visible under a clear blue sky.

# Blue Skye

*Viki Lyn*

Aspen Mountain Press

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## Warning

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Skye Taylor lives the artist life in Manhattan, openly gay and proud. Drew Adams, socially conservative and from one of Woodland Village's wealthiest families, lives within the limits of his father's expectations. A successful architect, Drew is content with his work and his marriage. The secret he desperately hides remains safely hidden behind lies and deception, so he thought.

Best friends in high school, Skye and Drew were inseparable. Quiet and serious, Drew was drawn to the outgoing Skye and his hippy loving parents. Then graduation night changes everything. Uncontrollable urges are discovered in a night of passion, a love Drew refuses to acknowledge, a love Skye refuses to deny. Skye leaves town, leaves Drew and leaves all his feelings behind. But he never forgot Drew and that one night that changed their lives.

Years later, painful memories surface with Skye's arrival and Drew's carefully constructed world begins to unravel.

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# Chapter One

The crates loomed like a bad omen. How could inert objects cause such a crazy flutter in his stomach? It felt like thousands wings were hitting the inside of his gut. Drew rubbed at the annoying throb at the back of his neck. Packed inside the crates were paintings by the exhibiting artist, Skye Taylor, that name invoked a foreboding gloom around his heart.

Skye was in town, which meant Drew would have to see him. How could he ignore the exhibiting artist when he had designed the gallery? The owner expected him to attend opening night.

Before he could think of any more reasons to get the hell out of town, the bell chimed announcing a customer. Drew jerked his head around and his heart skipped a two-step.

Too late.

Skye Taylor sauntered through the gallery door. Drew's lungs filled with an unexpected rush of air leaving him breathless. Breathless, as the ground shifted below his feet.

"I didn't expect to see you here." Skye remarked. "What a nice surprise."

Drew glanced at the half-finished counter wishing he had let his crew do the last minute touch-ups, but he missed working with his hands. Too much of his time was spent behind a computer.

"Ah, I don't usually get my hands dirty but..."

"You always did love making things." Skye's smile widened into a dazzling grin.

A bittersweet ache rushed through Drew at the sight of that familiar smile. He inwardly groaned, gripping the edge of the counter, thankful it created a barrier between them. Any feelings for Skye should have been dead and buried. Buried miles underground along with Drew's past.

As Skye inspected the gallery, Drew studied him. He'd changed from the coltish teenager he'd kissed under a starless night so long ago. Now Skye showed up, six foot two inches of hard muscle, with ridiculously rich brown hair and those unforgettable gray eyes that were too seductive to be legal. Skye's crisp white shirt stretched over his broad chest, his muscular physique refusing to be held in by a mere shirt. Even from where Drew stood, a whiff of oil paint and clean soap invaded the air around him.

Skye gazed at him, his face lit with boyish enthusiasm. "My work's going to look awesome here. Carl told me he hired you. You did a fantastic job."

Drew shrugged off Skye's compliment. "The building had good bones." It was easy to enhance the original warm red brick, the thick hewn wood beams and the numerous, wide, rectangular windows facing the street.

Skye stopped near a leather chair, his lean fingers resting on the headrest, mild humor curving his lips. "Your reputation's deserving. I went to see the Johnson Building."

The skyscraper had garnered a lot of press because of its innovative roofline, becoming a favorite landmark among New Yorkers.

Drew warily watched Skye sit in the chair, his jeans too tight to miss the restraint of his firm muscles. He cleared his parched throat, reaching for his water bottle. Empty. Damn. He tossed it in the waste basket.

"I read about it online," Skye continued, "and then went to see it. There are several pages devoted to you on the Net. 'The Frank Ghery of the twenty-first century'," Skye quoted.

Drew frowned at the moniker. He didn't like to be compared to anyone. He was surprised Skye kept track of his career, although Drew had done the same for him. What didn't surprise him was his school friend's success. Even as children, Skye always had a sketch book in his backpack. Drew used to tease him about how he'd rather draw than play Final Fantasy, but he secretly admired Skye's dedication.

Skye swooped his gaze down Drew's body, not afraid to show the admiration in his eyes. "You look good. More than good."

Drew wet his lips, feeling too exposed. He picked up the power drill, then set it down again. "You always were a good liar."

"You always were too modest." Skye slouched further in his chair, his long-fingered hands folded in his lap, his sinfully long legs stretched out before him.

Drew stared at his own hands, smudged in wood dust and dirt. He brushed them on his jeans but still felt dirty. Why did Skye have to show up looking like a male model out of GQ, while he looked a mess in torn jeans and a black t-shirt faded from several washings?

"I expected your crew," Skye chuckled. "I thought you designed buildings, not built them."

"There are a few minor changes that need to be completed before opening night. I'm not half-bad with tools."

One of Skye's dark brows arched seductively. "Yeah, I bet. Although I remember you did ace wood shop."

"And you almost cut your fingers off." Drew smiled at the memory of Skye trying to work the power saw. "You didn't like anything sharper than a paintbrush."

"Or noisier. Speaking of paintbrushes..." Skye glanced at the crates. "I see my work arrived. Hopefully all in one piece." He rose and stretched his arms over his head, his biceps flexing. "God, I'm stiff. It was a long drive." He massaged his neck and rolled it around a few times.

Drew lowered his eyes, unable to keep from reacting. He hated that his cheeks flushed hot, along with other parts of his body.

"I better check out the merchandise." Skye made his way across the room.

Drew got a tissue from the Kleenex box and wiped his forehead. Safely behind the counter, he relaxed his shoulders and took in deep breaths trying to calm down. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Skye carefully remove each painting from the crates, taking his time to examine each one.

Drew loved a three-dimensional challenge but never took interest in two-dimensional works of art. Architecture was his passion, but he appreciated Skye's sense of color and composition. When it came to visual arts, he knew what he liked and that's what he collected.

Skye arranged his paintings along the walls. He spent time contemplating the arrangement, standing back, and rearranging the paintings again and again. When he was satisfied, he walked back to the chair and sat.

Drew felt side-swiped by Skye's presence. And foolish. He had to get back to work. The counter was the last item on his 'to do' list before opening night. The glass top had to be attached and the area cleaned up. It shouldn't take long, but having to deal with Skye slowed down Drew's concentration.

"Where's Carl?" Skye crossed his arms, and as he did, his sleeves shifted higher, revealing a tribal tattoo circling his right bicep.

Drew wondered if he had other tattoos in more private places, and his neck flushed imagining where they would look the best.

"He's supposed to meet me. That man's always late."

"You can probably catch him at the Coffee Zone." Drew hoped Skye would take the hint and leave. Leave him alone, and stay out of his life forever.

Skye gave him the once over, his lips curling into a smirk. "I'd rather wait, if it's all right with you?"

No such luck.

Drew stared past Skye, taking in the windowed landscape. Rainclouds painted the sky gray, the clouds like they were ready to let go of the moisture they held. The air had been hanging oppressively over the town all day—the weather definitely befit his mood. His stomach churned, and his throat was bone dry, though not from the dust.

"I can't believe it's been seven years," Skye said. "I can't believe you didn't come."

Drew refused to acknowledge the reason for the rift between them. He picked up the drill and turned it on, testing the speed. It buzzed loudly in the gallery, too loud. Drew recognized the stubborn line of Skye's mouth. Drew ignored that too.

The deafening noise bounced off the walls but Drew kept his concentration on boring holes into the counter to inset the glass top. He pushed aside the churning in his stomach.

Maybe Skye would go away. And maybe pigs would fly.

The drill sputtered a dying croak. Silence spilled over the room.

Drew snarled, waving the drill in his hand. "Hey, what did you do that for. Plug it back in."

The cord swung to and fro over Skye's arm. "Are you going to ignore what happened between us?"

"I don't have time for—"

"Don't be an ass." Skye's mouth pressed tight, bringing out the cleft in his chin. "You know what I'm referring to."

"There's nothing to discuss."

"I'm the one that should be pissed. I waited for you, for hours. You gave me no choice but to board that fucking train and leave you behind."

Drew clenched his jaw, his voice granite. "We were friends. Best friends, and you had to ruin it."

The strain around Skye's mouth softened. "It was one night. Besides, we weren't very good." He grinned. "I'm so much better now."

"We were drunk and you took advantage."

"Funny how my recollection is vastly different. I remember you withering under my hand, coming several times."

Heat seared through Drew at the mention of that night. He'd spent years carefully building a wall around his world—the world he needed. He'd be damned if he let this man tear it down.

He grabbed the edge of the counter, his knuckles bone-white. "That wasn't me... I'm nothing like you."

Skye tossed the cord while approaching the counter in rapid strides. He snatched the drill from Drew's hand, dropping it on the floor.

Skye's anger railed in his voice. "Oh yeah, what about you and Carl? Has he got into your pants yet?"

What a child.

Anger radiated off Skye's body making Drew dizzy. He did what he knew how to do best. He lashed out. "He's my client, and you have no right to ask about my personal business."

Skye stood mere inches from Drew. "I've known Carl for years. He prefers men like you. Blond, beautiful, bisexual."

"Screw you."

"Carl and I like the same type. Pretty, slender... we have a game we play, a competition of sorts. We pick out a guy at a party, and both try for him. You'd be a hell of a target."

"You're a slut."

"I didn't say I took my winnings to bed."

Skye's lazy grin insulted Drew. The slut enjoyed teasing him, taunting him, testing him.

"Get out."

Skye rounded the counter so swiftly Drew couldn't escape. Skye grasped Drew's wrists and pulled him in. Their chests collided. Full length, bodies of hard muscle came in heated contact.

Skye's hands tangled into Drew's hair, his voice muffled. "Damn you. Why didn't you come with me? I missed you."

So warm, so inviting, so simple, those three words.

Drew let out a repressed breath. Skye was too close. Almost the same height, their eyes met straight on. Lust burned in Skye's eyes. It was an intoxicating feeling to have Skye's attention focused on him. His anger morphed into something else. Something he refused to name.

Drew curled a strand of hair behind Skye's ear knowing he'd find a mole on his right earlobe, disappointed to find a diamond stud instead. A beautiful, cool, brilliant stone, like the man himself.

Skye grabbed Drew's chin in his strong grip. "You're so beautiful."

Beautiful. Drew winced.

Skye placed a gentle kiss on Drew's upper lip and licked across it. He pulled back. "That cool aloof look of yours. You haven't changed since high school."

Drew was losing his equilibrium as Skye's hot tongue lured him into another kiss. He brushed his fingers across Skye's knuckles, not believing he was actually being kissed.

Right now, right here, right in public.

Unable to tear himself away, their tongues sparred for control. Desperate breaths rushed between them. Drew had forgotten how Skye's lips felt; soft, but arrogantly selfish.

There was no doubt that this was a man holding him. The body was all hard angles and muscle. The feel of stubble, the rough way hands tore into his hair, pulling his face back to expose the vulnerable cord of his neck. Skye sucked and licked, a ripping low groan rumbled from Drew's throat.

"Such a sexy voice," Skye whispered in his ear.

Drew's body revved into overdrive, heating way too fast. A moist palm cupped his neck, while the other hand teased down his back. Lust rippled beneath Drew's skin, and he stepped back, bumping his legs against the office chair, falling into the seat.

The chair rolled back and hit the wall. And struck some sense back into Drew's muddled head.

Now aware of how much control he was willing to relinquish, Drew gave Skye a hard shove. "Get the fuck off me."



Skye stumbled back into the counter, and caught the edge to steady himself. His eyes smoldered. "Don't play innocent with me. You want it."

Drew shrank back. The man was too damn sexy and he knew it.

Skye wore his signature smirk. "You run when you can't deal."

"Give it a rest. I never intended to go with you that night. I couldn't move to Manhattan, didn't want to. That was your dream, not mine."

"You're lying. You wanted to, as much as me."

"No, I wanted you out of my life." Drew slammed the wall with the ball of his hand. It stung but the pain felt good. "I don't need this right now."

Skye strode to the exit, and paused in the doorway, turning to bring Drew into his sight. Drew flinched at the storm brewing in Skye's eyes.

"You never gave me a good reason to stop loving you," Skye said. "Not until you married Sam. Did you marry her because you loved her? Or, because she fit the image of a perfect wife?"

Drew scooped a handful of nails off the counter, and threw them across the room. "Get out!"

Skye hopped behind the front door and slammed it behind him, rat-a-tat-tats pinging the glass. The nails fell to the floor but Drew didn't bother to pick them up. Skye always had the annoying habit of hitting all of his emotional buttons.

Drew crumbled in the chair and covered his eyes with his hand. His headache continued to spear his brain. Christ, what happened? Skye Taylor stormed into town and tilted his world off its axis, again.

Drew twisted his wedding ring. Skye's accusation hurt.

Oh, hell, who am I kidding?

Drew touched his lips still buzzing from the kiss. He missed being with a man. No. He missed being with Skye.

A strange emptiness settled over the gallery. This uncontrollable desire needed a bucket of cold water poured over it. He'd made a good life despite his sexual leanings. Leanings that he took out and tried on, briefly, away from Woodland Village. He had a successful architectural firm, a decent marriage, all to give his father no reason for complaint. The problem was his obsession with Skye Taylor. An obsession that had to be chained, again, or else it'd blow his world apart.

## Chapter Two

Skye didn't slow his stride until he came to the pier several blocks from the gallery. Sailboats moored along the shore cast a peaceful scene, unlike his heart which was anything but calm. Heavy black clouds hung over the ocean, patiently waiting to sweep over the town to release their torrential rain. For now, brilliant sunlight highlighted the primary colors of the marina. Sunday painters displayed their creations. It was the weekend, and this meant tourists escaping the strict confines of Manhattan.

Maybe he should chuck it all, set up a booth along the marina, and paint for the love of it, not for the critics. Skye took in the salt air and let it soothe his agitation. Worse was the sexual tension refusing to subside. His jeans were embarrassedly snug around his groin. Their kiss had reawakened his unrequited desire for Drew Adams. Once their lips touched, Skye was lost in the need to possess him. The memory lingered; Drew's arms clinging around his neck, slender hips pressed against him, the scent of expensive cologne and sweat clinging to Drew's t-shirt.

Skye slowed his pace and kept his sight on the ocean. Drew hadn't changed. Even in sweaty work clothes, he never lost his elegant bearing. It was inbred in him since day one, and it ruled his life.

"Hey, is that Skye Taylor, living and breathing?"

Mike Cole zigzagged his bulk across the street, scrambling around cars, ignoring their brash honks. He pulled Skye into a bear hug. Mike reminded Skye of a strapping lumberjack. A shaggy beard, plaid shirt and broad smile would have perfected the image, but instead, Mike wore a well-fitted suit, his face clean shaven and his carrot top cut short. This lumberjack was a successful personal injury lawyer.

"Good to see you, buddy." Mike's hearty greeting turned down a notch. "Heard about your exhibit. Me and my wife will be there."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Always knew you had the talent." Mike slapped Skye's back. "Hey, let's get a cup of coffee." He kept his tone neutral. "Did you see Drew?"

Mike knew about his unrequited love for his friend. Skye never mentioned how he'd actually made love to Drew for one blissful night. That secret he never told anyone.

"What do you see in that guy?" Mike said. "Though, I can't argue that he's a terrific architect. You'll have to come by and see the house he designed for us."

"Sure. I'm curious about your Raggedy Ann." Mike's wife, Tamara, had hair as siren red as her husband's.

Mike's nose wrinkled but his eyes danced. "Tease me all you want, but I'm in love. She's a peach."

"A Southern girl?"

"Yep, and with that smooth skin, and--"

Skye raised his hand. "Stop. No details, please."

"You're the perv."

"Can't argue there."

The Coffee Zone kept the residents happy serving thick, strong brew they roasted fresh every morning. Skye liked the lingering aroma of roasted beans, the comfortable mismatched tables and chairs, the booths along the rectangular bay window. The antithesis of Starbuck's, this was a coffee house for the community.

After ordering cappuccinos, they settled into a booth. Late afternoon ensured a seat. He scanned the room for Carl, but must have missed him. It amazed Skye that he didn't recognize anyone. Seven years wasn't that long to be away.

"I was sorry to hear about your mom. Are you staying at the cottage?" Mike said, scooping out the foam with his spoon.

"Yeah, but it needs work."

"Why don't you have Drew do the renovations?"

"I doubt he'd even set foot in the place. He hates me."

Skye ran his fingers through his hair. He inherited the Cape Cod cottage after his mother's death. She'd died on a cruise ship, in the middle of the dance floor, with a smile on her face. Her heart had stopped. Maybe from too much excitement, or too much rich food—or too much of a good thing. She'd been with her new boyfriend who had been twenty years younger. Skye smiled at the memory, so typical of his mother who defied convention at every turn.

Mike shoved his beefy elbows on the table, cupping his chin in his hands. Skye's smile widened at his friend's old habit. He looked like the same football jock as in high school. A kind, good-hearted jock who didn't let race or income decide who'd be his friends. If he'd liked you, you were in.

Mike narrowed his shrewd eyes, showing the lawyer side of his personality. "You're not still pining over him, are you?"

"That was a long time ago." Skye took a sip of his cappuccino, wiping his white mustache with a napkin.

"Look, Skye, he has a good life. From what I can see, him and Sam are tight. Tamara's always going on about how much Sam adores him."

A not-so-subtle warning from Mike to stay away from temptation. "Great, I'm happy for them. Anyway, I don't hang out with straights."

"You hang with me when I'm in the city."

"I don't date straight men. Is that clear enough for you?"

Jealousy had tightened Skye's stomach at the mention of Drew's marriage. He shifted in his seat trying to get comfortable. It was hard to hide his feelings when Mike studied him with sharp, clear eyes. Mike knew too much, but Skye valued their friendship and Mike's honesty.

"Did you ever get the impression that Carl and Drew are close?" Skye was careful to hide the insinuation from his voice.

"The Formidable Foursome?" Mike chuckled. "Sam, Tamara, Drew and Carl are on the public art's commission. They spend plenty of time together. I'd say Drew and Carl are close. As much as Drew allows anyone to get close to him. You don't suspect them to be," he leaned and lowered his voice. "...you know."

"Nah, but I know Carl, and he's a dog."

"He's gay?"

Skye laughed at his friend's round eyes. He patted Carl's hand. "Can't you tell? Carl doesn't hide it."

"Ah, but Drew shoots straight if you know what I mean."

Skye stroked his upper lip thinking about the kiss. Straight, no way. Bi maybe, because it didn't take much effort to get Drew into his arms.

Mike checked his wristwatch and stood. "Gotta go. Stop by the house tonight, say around eight. I'm having some friends over for drinks." Mike drained the last of his coffee before tossing the empty cup in the trash can. He stopped next to Skye, gripping Skye's shoulder. "Don't forget. I won't take no for an answer." He took out a Monte Blanche pen and scribbled his address on a napkin. "Here, don't lose it."

Skye pocketed the napkin and shook Mike's hand, promising to attend the party. He finished his coffee and took off for home.

Skye skipped up the porch steps two at a time and unlocked the front door. The familiar smell of lemon oil hit his nose the moment he walked inside. It permeated the four-room cottage; a kitchen, living room and two bedrooms, one that had been converted into his father's studio when Skye had left for college.

The house was a mirage of memories, a snapshot from an older era. When his dad died, his mom turned his studio into a shrine. Nothing had been removed. Not one piece of furniture, not one painting, not one paint brush. Skye had a heck of a mess to sort through.

Skye opened the living room windows to let in the ocean breeze. The storm clouds held back, their black mass hovering on the edge of the horizon. The heavy air begged for release. His chest felt the pressure, and it got worse when he thought of Drew. He lifted his chin toward the breeze, letting it cool his skin.

Skye got a bottle of water from the fridge and left for the back yard. The two green Adirondack chairs weathered from the biting salt air were strategically placed toward the ocean. He surveyed the yard before sitting down. Tall weeds ran amok, taking over the flower beds that were once beautifully manicured. The door hinges on the brick kiln were rusted. So much to clean up or throw away, years of ceramics scattered across the lawn. Birdbaths, garden sculptures, wind chimes, all made by his mom's hands.

Loneliness left him too melancholy. It came on unexpectedly and unwanted, and he took a swig of water to douse the ache. He had no ties left to tether him to Woodland Village. He missed his mom who nurtured and supported him. He missed his dad who encouraged his dreamy son to be proud of his creative spirit. Shaking off his morbid thoughts, he kicked off his shoes before sitting, determined to focus on the present.

Tomorrow he'd clean his dad's studio to make room for his supplies. The room had the best morning light, and like his dad, it was Skye's favorite time to paint. If he didn't paint soon he'd go crazy. He also had to meet with Carl, a stickler for details when it came to business.

Carl Williams collected boys as passionately as art, but he knew talent and wasn't afraid to gamble on emerging artists. His New York gallery was the benchmark for every living artist in which to show their work. He had made Skye's career, and Skye owed him. So Skye found himself back home after years of absence, and still in love with Drew.

Skye tied back his hair with a rubber band he kept around his wrist. He squeezed the water bottle and forced himself to refocus his thoughts but the image of Drew kept invading his head.

Drew's mature face had chiseled down to the essentials. Pale blond lashes framed intense blue eyes. Drew was vain enough to stay in shape, his stomach flat, his hips slender, long slim flanks. His wheat blond hair fell a scant-inch below his ears. The haircut looked silly on most men, but Drew wasn't most men. It suited his patrician elegance and the fragile, almost delicate body. A body which set Skye's groin on fire. The man was fucking beautiful.

"Skye Taylor? Long time no see, dude."

Ryan Adams opened the gate without an invitation. Drew's brother sat in the available chair and sighed as he looked at the sky. "What a sight. Mother nature at her most dangerous."

"The clouds or the ocean?"

Ryan turned to face Skye, his grin infectious. Skye wondered how Drew could have a brother so different in personality.

"Dude, the clouds. Look at them. Darker than a luscious chocolate-skinned woman on a hot day. Sweet."

Skye shook his head. "You're a whore. Aren't you married by now?"

"Not me. Drew's the bro to fulfill familial duties. I get to grovel before the man to ask for his benediction."

"Liar, you're richer than he is."

"Oh, but I've made my fortune in such a dubious business."

Skye laughed. "Computer gaming might be a boyish pursuit, but dubious?"

"Andrew Senior never did approve, but how can he complain? I'm richer than god, and you know how he worships money."

Skye rolled his eyes. "It's not a bad pursuit, and you both did very well for yourselves."

Ryan raised his knees to his chest. Long legged and slender like his brother, with the same sensual, full lips, this is where the similarities ended. Ryan's chestnut hair framed a square jaw, and his brown eyes were full of mischief. He played the role of bad boy to perfection, acted out to irritate his father. Unlike Drew, who did everything to appease their old man.

Skye wished Drew would have taken his brother's path when it came to their father, but then Drew wouldn't have been the boy he fell in love with. Prickly and uptight. There was something very sexy in peeling back the layers of Drew's tightly held principles.

Ryan's eyebrows snapped together. "Seen Drew yet?"

"I ran into him at the gallery. He would have used that wicked drill on me if he could have gotten away with murder."

Ryan's infectious grin turned into an infectious laugh. "That bad, eh? He was upset when you left. He certainly can hold a grudge."

"Yeah, well, that's not what I heard," Skye said, his voice bitter.

"You sound like a woman scorned."

"Shut your mouth."

Ryan unfurled his legs and stretched out. He scraped his lower lip with his thumbnail and stared at him. Skye squirmed in his seat. Ryan knew he was gay. Everyone in town knew. His hippy parents never kept their son's sexual orientation a secret, flying the rainbow flag on the front porch. Did Ryan guess how much Skye cared for his older brother?

Ryan pursed his lips. "Did you guys ever fuck?"

"Hell, no."

"Should have, then maybe he wouldn't have married that shrew."

Skye refused to admit how much Ryan's words gave him hope. To be this pathetic. "I heard they are happy."

"Who told you that bullshit?"

"Mike Cole."

"They haven't slept in the same bed for years. Does that sound like a happy marriage to you?" Ryan shook his head. "I swear the man's a eunuch. Girls throw themselves at him and he never seems interested. That's why I thought..." Ryan's gaze pierced Skye's face.

Skye held his breath and looked away.

"Carl and Drew have a lot in common," Ryan said, very slowly.

Skye's heart began to pound in his ears. "They're friends. They're on the Arts Commission together."

"That's not what I'm getting at."

Ryan seemed ready to air Drew's dirty secrets. Skye glared at Ryan. "What are you implying?"

"I caught them kissing one night in the gallery." Ryan looked triumphant. "They didn't see me, so I left."

Skye wanted to wipe that smirk off Ryan's face. Nothing like killing the messenger, but it wasn't the brother's fault. He couldn't blame Carl, either. At this moment, it was Drew he hated. The beast—so insistent that he was straight, and all this time he'd been rubbing against Carl as randy as an alley cat.

Ryan leaned back his head, breaking eye contact. "Are you jealous?"

You bet he was jealous. Drew betrayed him. The so-called straight man in the arms of another man. Skye needed to get a paintbrush in his hand before he went mad.

Skye strode to the gate and opened it. "Sorry but I have to meet Carl." He waited until Ryan took the hint.

Ryan sauntered over, but stopped long enough to squeeze Skye's arm. "Glad you're home for a while. If you want to sell, let me know. I've always loved this place."

"I haven't decided." The sadness at being alone seeped in his voice, and he flinched. Looking away, he glanced toward the back door. "Gotta go."

"See ya, and don't be a stranger."

Stranger; that's exactly what he'd become. He didn't belong here. Not anymore. When he left for Manhattan, he vowed to never look back on his past or his unrequited love. He came out of the closet and hit the gay scene with a vengeance. Best of all, he perfected his art. He wasn't about to stuff himself back into the closet for a pseudo-straight man.

## Chapter Three

The stucco beach house blended into the rolling white sand dunes punctuated by willowy reeds. The ocean lapped peacefully at low tide, the setting sun casting purple shapes on the shore. The rainclouds had turned away leaving wispy clouds, making room for the emerging stars.

Drew stood on the wrap-around deck watching the sunset. He ran his hand along the curved railing. Seeing one of his creations come to life always gave him deep satisfaction. Watching the sun sink below the horizon calmed the storm in his heart. He had a terrible row with Sam, again. It was official. She hated him. His uptight behavior. His cool reserve. His ability to shut her out.

Maybe he was an icy bastard. He had no heart, certainly no soul when it came to relationships. He lost all of the feelings he'd ever had for Sam. Perhaps he'd never loved her at all. Skye had accused him of loving an illusion.

Sam had made her form of protest by staying home. Fine with him, he preferred flying solo.

A champagne glass was nudged into his empty hand. Drew turned to see Carl smiling at him. Brown hair cut short, curious coal-black eyes, square chest tapering to slender waist and powerful legs. Carl Williams dressed every inch the New Yorker; conservative tailored shirt and slacks, finely weaved wool sweater, a Rolex watch and silver ring worn on the middle finger of his right hand.

"It looked like you needed a drink."

Drew took the offered glass, lowering his lashes to avoid looking at Carl's mouth. Too much of a reminder of how close he'd come to giving into desire. The need, the want to feel another person's warmth, all this bundled into a shit load of guilt.

Carl turned toward the ocean to wave at Skye as he approached the deck from across the beach.

Skye. Drew refused to be drawn into Skye's forceful nature. He built the life he had planned; before college, before high school, before he could crawl. Being considered gay or even bi-sexual was not an option. Divorce wasn't an option, either. Traditional as it sounded, he was expected to conduct his life in a proper manner.

Skye glowed unworldly against the backdrop of a vibrant orange-red sky. He strode confidently towards them, barefoot, long waves of hair shimmering past his shoulders. Heat spread across Drew's chest despite the breeze. He tugged at the collar of his wool turtleneck and turned away from the vision. Ready to make an excuse to leave, Carl grabbed his wrist, preventing his escape.



Drew swatted Carl's hand. "The mayor's here. He wants to talk about renovating the old Hanson mill."

"You should enjoy yourself. Not everything is business."

"For me it is."

Drew started to walk away but was stopped by the steel edge in Carl's voice. "You should try to live honestly for a change."

Drew turned back on Carl and hissed, "Stop speaking in riddles."

"You enjoyed our kiss."

Skye bounded up the stairs saving Drew from answering. He brushed the sand off his feet. The exuberant energy surrounding Skye rooted Drew to the ground.

Carl's eyes crinkled in amusement. He nudged his head toward Drew. "Weren't you two an item in high school?"

Skye stepped into Carl's space, his eyes darkening. "Drop it. Someone might hear you and not get the joke." He gave Carl a gentle shove. "Get me a drink, would you?"

Carl shrugged, winked at Drew and sauntered off to the bar.

"You didn't have to protect me like that." Drew crossed his arms. "I can take care of myself."

"He already kissed you once. What makes you think you'll be able to resist the next time he plays you?"

Shame caused Drew to flinch. Someone must have witnessed the kiss in the gallery? Is that why Sam picked a fight?

Drew looked down at his loafers, then away from Skye. He had to get out from under that gaze, pinning his heart to his throat.

"At least look at me." Skye's hurt tone forced Drew to pay attention. His upper lip curled into a sexy pout. "How about a walk on the beach?"

"A walk?"

Skye laughed. "Yeah, you know, where you use your feet to move forward."

Drew shook off his dulled senses. This guy made him stupid. He couldn't utter one coherent sentence when standing in front of this barefoot demon. Their eyes met and Drew's heart stalled.

"Well, what about it?" Skye headed for the stairs expecting to be followed.

Like an obedient son, Drew did as expected.

A servant to its master, and this vision of a domineering Skye shocked him. Drew quickened his pace, almost running into Skye's back. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the straight, broad shoulders. His cock stirred, half erect, but growing harder. Too bad Skye's sweater fell over his ass, hiding one of his most delicious assets.

Drew dug in his heels, stopping to catch his breath. For Christ sakes, he was married. Although he hadn't had sex with Sam in months, each preferring impersonal bed partners. One night stands, sex for sex's sake, no emotions to tie them down, or force them apart.

Drew's business kept him busy. He poured his passion into his designs. His marriage might be a sham, but it had its purpose of keeping his father off his back.

So why was he admiring Skye's backside? Because he was fucking gorgeous.

Skye stopped by the water's edge and waited for Drew. "What are you doing walking behind me?" Skye fastened his gaze on Drew's mouth. "You like the idea of being a slave to a master?"

Hell, yes. If it's you.

Drew sucked in air so fast, his lungs burned. Christ, what was he thinking? He had to get a grip on these impossible fantasies. All he could do to protect himself was to bite...and hard. "What do you want from me!"

"I want you to be honest."

"You want me to say what you want to hear."

"Maybe you're right." Skye lifted his face to the sky, a pale blue-gray vision as the sun set. "Let's walk further. It won't get dark for a while."

Drew stopped to take off his loafers, rolling his socks and stuffing them into the toe of his shoes. He left them on the sand, letting the frigid tide wash over his bare feet.

They continued to wander away from the house. A nervous tick squeezed Drew's jaw, his body tense as he realized where Skye was leading him. To the rolling sand dunes where they hung out during high school. Plenty of niches where a couple could be alone, a place for all kinds of illicit activity, and where long ago he gave in to his desires.

Skye halted, squiggling his toes in the sand. He picked up an empty beer can. "I see it's still a hangout." His toss arched the can into a nearby trash bin. It hit the rim and toppled inside.

"We should go back." Why did Skye bring him here? To relive their night together? A better question, why did he follow him? He didn't want to touch Skye intimately, or be fondled by those masterful hands. Or did he? Their kiss had meant everything, and yet, it meant nothing.

Christ, who was he kidding. He'd been ogling Skye since he had arrived. But, he had to keep up appearances. "I'm straight. This isn't going to change."

"Then why did you kiss me?"

Drew stepped back. "You kissed me."

Skye stepped forward. "You kissed Carl."

Drew stepped back. "He kissed me."

One step back, one step forward, they danced several paces before Drew stopped, his voice cold. "One fucking kiss. That's all it was. I don't get turned on by men."

Skye's finger traced Drew's jaw in one flirtatious sweep. "You let me touch you that night. Right here, all those years ago." Skye slipped a kiss to Drew's neck. A weakness, that soft spot on his neck. Drew meant to say 'Let it go', but it came out a grunt.

"I knew from that moment it was right. I loved you, I loved boys, and it was going to be okay. An awesome epiphany." Skye tugged at Drew's collar to reveal bare skin.

Lust wrapped around Drew's heart. Skye wouldn't let the memory of that night disappear.

"You could have overpowered me, thrown me off, screamed rape," Skye continued, unable to stop. "I believed you wanted it as badly as me."

Drew's eyelids fluttered shut as Skye's tongue found its way to his earlobe, licking, teasing. Finally his voice broke through.

"We were drunk off our asses," Drew croaked out, wishing he could close his ears off to Skye's admission.

Skye tilted Drew's chin. A warning tickled under Drew's ribs, but before he could react, Skye yanked him into a kiss.

No negotiation. No hesitation. No denial.

Skye's tongue plunged into Drew's mouth. The sudden masculine taste shocked him out of his stupor. Drew wrestled for command with his tongue, his hand clawing at Skye's neck, his other sliding around his slender waist. Their mouths pressed hard, furiously. Drew's bones melted, every muscle defeating him. Pinned in Skye's arms, he had no chance.

"Your mouth is so fucking sexy," Skye growled, vibrating against Drew's lips.

Skye licked Drew's earlobe, his fingers sweeping the nape of his neck. Drew tried to catch a full breath. His skin sweated profusely under the stifling wool sweater. The crashing waves receded in the background. His vision blurred. Skye never relented, his tongue leaving a trace of moisture down Drew's neck. Hands found their way beneath Drew's sweater, rough fingers teasing Drew's bare chest, almost stopping his heart.

"No, not here. I can't..."

Too much, too fast, he was catapulted back into the past. Graduation day, with a celebration on the dunes, they'd been drinking shots of tequila. He had felt so free. Free from his father. Free from his duty as the eldest son.

The world had opened its arms. And so had Skye.

Skye's throaty laugh barely registered as he cupped Drew's erection. Guilt shot into Drew's veins snapping him back to the present. He pushed hard from Skye's embrace. "I told you to stop."

Disbelief flickered in Skye's eyes, quickly replaced by indifference. "Don't get upset. I'm not into rape."

Drew shoved his rumpled sweater into his waistband. "I don't want to see you again. Is that clear?"

"I'm sorry." Skye sank to the sand, crossing his legs, bowing his head. He let out a heavy sigh. "I never wanted to come back here. Carl insisted. I knew if I saw you again, all these feelings..."

Neither one moved an inch. Drew didn't want apologies. He didn't want a contrite Skye Taylor, either. He didn't want to forgive him. But a part of him gave in at seeing Skye upset.

Drew knelt next to Skye, his anger all but evaporated. He placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. He tried to make sense of how he felt. "You have to understand, there's no way out for me." His troubled marriage, his inability to love anyone, all but shut down his emotions.

Skye placed his hand on Drew's arm, a non-threatening gesture. "I promise you'll never see me again if this is what you want."

Drew's chest tightened. "I'm tired."

"Then tell Sam the truth. That you want out."

"And do what?"

"If you need a place to crash, come back with me. I have plenty of room."

"My life is here. Everything I've worked for. I don't want to live in New York."

Skye removed his hand from Drew's arm. "I understand. Can we at least be friends?"

Drew smiled and stood. He ruffled Skye's hair. "Yeah, all's forgiven. But only if you behave."

Skye jumped up and brushed off his jeans. "We better get back to the party or people will talk. I have a notorious reputation you know."

Drew's eyebrows hitched and he laughed. "Come on, then, Casanova."

They walked back in companionable silence. Drew kept his desires carefully restrained. He glanced at Skye, and regret descended over him. Things could have been so different between them.

Scared of how hard Skye pursued him, scared of how close he came to giving in, most of all, he was scared of how powerfully Skye drove a wedge into his unfeeling heart.

## Chapter Four

Overhead lights blazed a blast of heat on Skye. The sweat beaded across the back of his neck, his hair one thick braid down his back. For the art exhibition, he wore plain jeans and a white shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows. His usual uniform for these types of events. He was good at playing the role of the devil-may-care artist.

Skye's heavy boots clicked on the wood floor as he headed to the wine bar. He needed another drink. Keeping his eyes on the front door, he tried to hide his disappointment. Drew hadn't shown. Skye glanced at the clock above the counter. Ten o'clock. The exhibit would go on for another two hours, then the majority of the guests would convene to the nearest bar, and he'd slip out and head home.

"Great show." Mike Cole grabbed a red wine from the table. "The gallery has Drew's name all over it. Is he here?"

"He's probably not coming."

Mike lowered his voice, bending close to Skye's ear. "I heard Sam and Drew are having problems. Tamara and I were shocked to hear it. I wonder if she'll leave him?"

Skye sucked in his lower lip, refusing to react. "Yeah, if she does, he'll be on to the next bimbo who meets his specifications."

"Did you two have a tiff?"

Skye scoffed. "There's no reason for us to argue." They were friends, and friends only. He finished his wine and had the bartender pour him a refill.

Mike touched the rim of Skye's glass. "Hey, buddy, slow down."

"Honey, I knew I'd find you at the bar." Tamara Cole slipped her hand around Mike's elbow, the gesture one of love and comfort. This affection not lost on Skye, he envied Mike at this moment.

Tamara could have been Mike's twin except for her petite, sweet figure. Wearing a slip of a dress, Skye appreciated her shapely legs. Indeed, she was a Southern beauty, and Mike seemed smitten. Well, he should be. There was no doubt Tamara worshipped her husband. At least one of his friends found his soul mate.

"Hey, you look great, Tam." Skye meant it. He appreciated women, with an artist's eye to proportion, color and detail, and Tamara had plenty of all three.

"I want that painting." She pointed to a six foot canvas on the south wall. One of Skye's favorites, and he approved of her excellent taste.

"For you, anything, but you'll have to talk to Carl about the financing," Skye said.

She patted Mike's arm. "My darling won a major lawsuit. He'll pay."

Mike grumbled at Skye. "Not that I don't like your stuff, but I don't understand it."

Tamara laughed warmly. "You don't have to understand it. Come on, hand over the credit card." She opened her hand, and flexed her fingers. "Gimme..."

Mike took out his wallet and exaggerated his reluctance, but his loopy grin gave him away. Skye watched their interaction with envy. That was what he wanted. A deep connection with another man, a relationship that went beyond sex, that was loving, caring, and beautiful. He turned away, not wanting Mike to see the sadness that most certainly showed on his face.

The crowds were too thick, the noise and music pounding in his skull. He felt the walls closing in, his claustrophobia threatening to disassemble him, piece by piece.

Oh god, he was having a panic attack.

Crowds did that to him. He hated opening nights, with all the attention focused on the artist, rather than on his artwork.

Weak. Weak. Weak. Get a grip.

Skye needed air. Hurrying towards the exit, his skin prickled, his breathing, hard. Almost out the door, escape just a few feet away, a man gripped his arm. "Hey, are you all right?"

Startled, Skye turned to tell the guy to shove off. Drew stood before him, concern radiating in his eyes.

"You look lost."

"I'm having an attack," Skye barely squeezed out.

Drew took Skye by the elbow and led him out the door, making sure no one got in their way. They stood apart from the guests lingering outside.

"Thanks." Skye said. "I kind of get squirrely in crowds."

"I remember."

Skye scratched his head. "Yeah, that Pearl Jam concert. That was a zoo. You saved me back then, too."

"Glad to be of service."

"Are you?"

"Yeah, well, I don't like seeing you suffer." Bundled in a thick coat, Drew removed his wool scarf and draped it around Skye's neck. "You must be freezing. Let's go back inside."

"I need a minute." He shivered from the cold, thankful for Drew's gift. He brought up the ends of the scarf to smother his face. It smelled of Drew's cologne and a twinge in his stomach alerted him how bad he had it for this man.

"You still get panic attacks?"

"Crazy, huh. You would think I'd be used to it by now."

"Do you want me to get you some water?"

"No, I'm fine." Skye shifted on his feet, goose bumps peppering his arms. "I didn't think you would come tonight."

"I promised Carl, and since we made up, I wanted to come."

Skye peered into the window, scanning the guests. "Is Sam with you?"

Drew sucked in his lower lip, his mouth stricken. "She stayed home."

So they did have a fight.

"Right, well, you should go inside. You don't have to babysit me."

Drew leaned against the window frame, his eyes alert. "About the other night--"

"I shouldn't have pushed you."

And that was the truth. The night on the beach was him being a jealous ass. He wanted his revenge for Drew kissing Carl. Simple as that.

Skye patted Drew on the back. "Let's go inside. You can tell me all the reasons why you hate my paintings. You're right, it's fucking cold out here."

Drew spent the next hour networking while Skye talked with prospective buyers. He kept his sight on Drew, willing Drew to stay put, and not bolt out the door before he had a chance to talk with him again. It wasn't enough to be forgiven, he wanted to prove he could be a friend.

The exhibit wound down and the doors closed at midnight. Exhausted, but satisfied, Skye sank on a stool, resting one elbow on the counter, his hand cupping his cheek. Carl stood behind him sifting through the sales receipts, and Drew sat on the edge of the windowsill.

Skye lifted his head. "Well, was it worth it?"

Carl waved the stack of receipts. "You're a goldmine."

"Glad to hear it. It'll at least pay the rent for the next few months." He hopped from the stool and massaged the crick in his neck, while keeping his sight on Drew.

Drew met his gaze and didn't flinch. "Are you going home or to the bar?"

"Home. I've been around enough people for one night. Care to walk with me?" Skye kept on with his casual masquerade.

Drew nodded, and Skye went to the closet for his leather jacket. Carl didn't say a word. He unlocked the latch and waved them out the door.

"Skye, come by tomorrow." Carl turned to Drew. "Thanks for all this. The gallery, everything. It's beyond what I dreamed."

"I'm glad. Let's meet for coffee this week."

Skye pulled on his jacket, letting the conversation wash over him. He refused to be jealous of Carl. He had no rights to Drew or Drew's choice of friends.

The weather, though tempered by the ocean, drew a bitter wind. The streets were empty, and Skye felt like they were the only two people who existed. Drew kept his hands in his coat pockets, his gaze straight ahead. This gave Skye a chance to observe him. He liked looking at Drew. Never got tired of it. He could easily watch Drew for the rest of his life.

Skye let out a frustrated sigh. This kind of thinking was futile. The truth was plain to see that he had no future with his friend, and a longing swept over him, so deep it ached.

They strolled along the marina in silence. The tide lapped seductively along the rocks. Skye lightly brushed against Drew's arm. The touch electric. Skye shivered but not from the cold.

Skye stopped at the first step of the cottage. He tried to keep hope from invading his voice. "You want to come in for a drink? I'm too wired to sleep."

Don't get any ideas if he does say yes.

"Sure one drink. I'd like to see the house again. I haven't been here since you left. I used to see your parents in town. We'd sit and have coffee." Drew rested his hand on Skye's arm. "I was sorry to hear about your mom. I miss them. They always treated me well."

They stood staring at each other, neither one saying a word. Skye lifted his hand close to Drew's face. Before he could stroke his cheek, Drew stepped back, the tension shattered.

Drew took the steps to the front door, and stood with his arms tightly wrapped around his waist, feet shuffling. "It's bitter cold."

Skye raised his collar, his rising hope dashed. He fumbled for his key in his jacket pocket. Once he unlocked the door, he held it open for Drew to go inside.

Drew walked into the living room as Skye hung his jacket on the coat rack then followed Drew into the living room and turned on the lights.

"It hasn't changed much."

"You know my parents. They weren't concerned with outside appearances. They lived and breathed art."

"Like you." Drew smiled and Skye's heart skidded to a complete stop.

Oh fuck. This wasn't a good idea. No, it was a very, very bad idea. All his swagger and confidence from the night on the beach vanished, replaced by a skittish feeling in his stomach.

Drew sloughed off his coat and draped it neatly on the armrest before sitting on the sofa. He crossed his leg over his thigh and leaned back. "How about that drink. Something warm and strong."

Skye went over to a cabinet where his parent's kept the liquor. There had to be something left over. His mom had been a first-rate pack rat. He pulled out several bottles and blew at the dust caked on the labels. "Scotch or brandy?" He lifted a bottle of gin. "Or I can make you a martini. There's got to be vermouth in this mess."

"Brandy's fine."

Skye took out two glasses and cleaned them with his shirttail. He shoved the bottles back on the shelf and poured the brandy while shutting the cabinet door with his foot. Handing a



brandy to Drew, did he dare sit next to him? Or, should he play it cool?

Skye sank into the armchair across from Drew. Yeah. Better to play it cool.

Drew looked around the room. "This place has real possibilities. The location's fantastic. Bay windows would open this room and bring in the ocean."

"I don't plan on living here."

Drew swirled the brandy in his glass, the thick liquor coating the sides. "You're not more than two hours away from New York by train."

"It might as well be eight. It's another world."

"It's your home."

"Was my home. There's no reason for me to visit, not anymore."

Not when you don't want me.

He had to stop thinking like this, and get on the right track with Drew, meet him on his terms. Prove to Drew they could be friends. To do this, he needed a reason to stick around. "Hey, would you consider taking this on?"

"You mean the house?"

"Yeah, draw up some plans. I might go for it."

"Sure, I'd love to. You'd want to keep the integrity of the design. Not turn the house into something it's not."

Like you, Skye thought, turning you into something you're not. Openly gay. He shoved down the awful need to confess everything to Drew. His loneliness, his hopes, his love for him. Air it all out and let it crash and burn. Instead, he didn't waver from the conversation.

"You have the time?"

"Yes, but why bother if you're going to sell the place?"

"It needs to be modernized. If I renovate it, I'll get a better price."

"It seems a shame to sell, but if you'd like me to sketch a few ideas, I can do that."

Skye sat back and drank his brandy. He liked having Drew in his home, the companionship was... nice. It wasn't that long ago when they were teenagers, hanging out in Skye's bedroom, listening to music or playing video games or Skye sketching while Drew read.

Beautiful and graceful, Drew reminded Skye of a dancer instead of an architect. At least he seemed more at ease since their reunion. His eyes were brighter, his shoulders slouched comfortably, his feet resting on the coffee table. And what legs. Lean and sleek, muscles meant more for suppleness rather than strength.

Skye closed his eyes. The brandy soothed a heated pathway down to his lungs. Drew's spicy cologne flavored the air. Lust rode beneath the unique scent, threatening to undermine the peaceful lull. Skye opened his eyes and blinked away the erotic possibilities.

Skye raised his empty glass. "How about a refill? I'm getting one."

"Sure, why not."

That meant Drew would stay, and that made Skye incredibly happy.

Between the two of them, they emptied the bottle of brandy. They reminisced about their high school days, but mostly talked about the present. Before Skye realized it, the rising sun tinted the sky an orange-yellow.

Drew yawned. "This has been fun. I haven't pulled an all-nighter in ages." He rose from the sofa and walked to the front door. "I better get home."

Skye stayed seated. "Sam's probably worried."

"I doubt it."

Skye clutched the throw pillow, biting down an acid remark. "Have you been having problems for long?"

Drew buttoned his coat. "When were we not?"

"I'm sorry you haven't been getting along."

"No 'I told you so'?" he said dryly.

Skye walked up to Drew and squeezed his shoulder. "You sound miserable about it. That's enough for me to be sorry."

Drew removed Skye's hand. "Thanks, but it'll work out between us. It always does." Drew opened the door but before he walked out, he turned back to face Skye. "When can I come by? I'll need to take measurements of the house."

"You don't need an appointment. I'll be here most days painting."

"So you plan to stay awhile?"

Skye would swear that was extreme interest in Drew's voice, but maybe it was his over-active imagination. He was dead-tired.

"I need to take care of my parent's things."

"Let me give you a hand."

"Renovating this heap is enough. Give me your cell phone."

Drew fished out his phone from his trouser pocket and tossed it to Skye, who keyed in his phone number. "There, now you can reach me anytime."

Drew took out a business card and handed it to Skye. "I had a good time."

"Friends, then?"

"About that, are you sure it's all you want from me?"

"I won't go back into the closet, even for you."

Drew's mouth turned a slight twist but he nodded. "Friends, then."

Skye watched Drew's graceful gait as he crossed the street and disappeared around the corner. Closing off any hope he had of ever having Drew love him, Skye stepped back into

the house and slammed the front door.

## Chapter Five

Drew stopped in front of Skye's house before walking in. He straightened his tie, and adjusted his computer satchel on his shoulder. Part of him worried about his real motive in wanting to renovate the cottage. He told himself it was a favor for a friend. The other night had proven they could interact without the threat of an argument. They had spent almost every day together since.

The weather, perfect for a day on the bay, had Skye coming to his office and insisting that he take a day to go sailing. It'd been ages since he played hooky from a day at the office. They had met for BBQ and clam chowder on the pier. While they'd argued over politics, they agreed more than disagreed when it came to social issues. They enjoyed the same wines, theater and music. And, most importantly, Skye's passion for his art equaled Drew's own passion for design. He hadn't felt this content in a long time. Beyond this, Drew didn't want to venture.

The front door was unlocked. Drew walked inside and smiled at the smell of oil paint. In just a few days, Skye had marked his territory. In Drew's mind, this cottage would always represent a safe haven. When things were bad at home, he'd escape to Skye and his parents, basking in their acceptance. So different from his own family situation, where his every move had been monitored for appropriate behavior and manners.

Drew couldn't accept strangers living in this cottage. It reinforced his determination to design such an awesome space that Skye wouldn't think of selling. They were friends, and he didn't have many people he could call that. He didn't want Skye to abandon his home, or maybe, he didn't want Skye to abandon him.

If Drew could design a space where Skye felt at home...

"Drew, is that you?"

"Skye?"

"In here."

Drew paused inside the bedroom—studio—door and set his satchel down. Sunlight blasted through the windows, bathing Skye in golden light; Definitely not an angelic sight. God, the man looked as sexy as an incubus from hell.

A blue and white bandana held the thick mane of hair, and complemented his torn jeans and tight t-shirt. Back muscles rippled beneath the soft cotton as he painted on the six foot square canvas tacked to the wall. A gigantic painter's tarp was laid on the floor to catch the drips of paint.

Skye didn't break his concentration. "Give me a minute."

Skye was utterly devoted to his art, all his concentration honed onto his paintbrush. Drew understood that kind of passion. He would never do anything to jeopardize his work, either.

Drew quietly walked to a wood table strewn with jars of paint, dirty rags and a myriad of brushes in all sizes. From where he stood he could take in Skye's profile. A strong jaw and straight nose brought to mind Skye's father. The son had the same determined concentration in his posture, the same fluid movements in handling a paintbrush. While their work was completely opposite in style—Skye's father had been a master of realism, but he had still been proud of his son's talent. Drew had been envious of their loving relationship, him having a father he could never please.

Skye placed his paintbrush in a jar filled with turpentine, and winked at Drew. "Makeshift at best."

"Why this room?"

"The morning light's awesome."

Awesome was what Skye's dark-lashed eyes were. Feeling his cheeks get warm, he studied the painting instead. "This is different from what you have hanging in the gallery. The colors are brighter, and you used thicker paint." He motioned to an area on the canvas to make his point.

Skye sidled next to him, wiping his hands on a rag. "Not bad for a philistine."

Drew snorted. "Me a philistine? I was the one that had to tutor you in history and English." He went back to viewing the painting. "Why the change?"

"Do you like to use the same design for your buildings?"

"Of course not."

"Same goes with art. It's not what the gallery owners want, though. They would be ecstatic if I cranked out hundreds of the same ol' shit for their collectors. It's not going to happen."

"Always the rebel."

"One of us had to be. Just think how boring your childhood would have been if you had never met me."

Skye spoke the truth. Without Skye's friendship, Drew would have spent his childhood within the confines of his father's world. He never would have discovered architecture without the influence of Skye's parents. They'd taken him along when traveling to Manhattan to view the museums. They visited the Empire State building, Crystal building and other architectural wonders, fueling Drew's growing fascination for architecture and design.

Skye rubbed Drew's shoulder. "You seem miles away from here."

Drew's skin buzzed from the Skye's proximity. An urge to take Skye's hand and hold on to it for dear life overwhelmed him. He cleared his throat. "I was just remembering how you and your parents gave me the courage to become an architect when my father demanded I take law."

Skye chuckled. "I remember. I was so mad at your dad, for making you doubt yourself, for forcing you into a life you didn't want." He walked over to the window and peered out.

"You made me promise to enroll in classes on architecture on an oath of death," Drew laughed. "I always wondered what you would have done if I had chosen law instead."

Skye turned and loosely crossed his arms. "Killed you," he said, dead-pan.

Skye shook out his hair, the bandana and rag tossed to the table. Long, loose strands tumbled down his chest. An ache rose in Drew's throat. He dropped his gaze, and adjusted the knot in his tie. He felt overdressed in Skye's presence.

Skye walked next to Drew, and flipped the tip of Drew's tie. "Why the monkey suit?"

Skye must have caught on to his uneasiness. The man was too damn perceptive. "I have a meeting after this, so I better get to work."

Skye grabbed his arm before he could escape. "If I keep the house, I'd like this to be my studio. What do you think?"

Drew looked at the hand gripping his arm. Artist's hands, Skye's hands, his touch creating a sweet pain in his loins. Drew parted his mouth, his lips dry.

Skye tugged at Drew's sleeve, his amused voice breaking through. "Earth to Drew. Are you in there?" He tapped the side of Drew's head.

Drew rubbed his arms, bringing life back into them. "I better get started."

Drew placed his satchel on the kitchen table and removed his laptop. He took out a pen, notepad and tape measure. He turned on his computer and stared at the screen, watching it boot up. Clicking his pen, he wondered for the n'th time if this was a mistake to take on Skye's project. His willpower to resist wanting Skye and all he offered was weakening, and Skye had to sense it.

Drew sighed, letting go of his frustration. Then he went to work, spending the next hour measuring every inch of the interior and exterior of the cottage.

He almost forgot that Skye was in the house. He almost forgot about Skye completely. Almost.

The Cape Code exterior had to remain true to its history, with minor changes to the windows and some structural repair, but there were plenty of ways to modernize and add interesting details to the interior. Excitement replaced any doubts he had of taking on this project.

Skye found him sitting on the sofa furiously sketching, several papers lying across the coffee table. Drew had already entered the room measurements in his CAD program. Once back at the office, he would use his computer to finalize his designs, but for now, he preferred the conventional way, sketching his ideas on paper.

Drew adjusted his reading glasses, keeping his attention on his task. "I'll be out of here in a sec. Need to jot down a couple of ideas before I forget."

Skye bent close and slipped off Drew's glasses. He put them on, and squinted. "Dude, you're blind."

"I need them for close-up."

"I like men in glasses."

Drew grimaced and held out his hand. "Are they a turn-on for you?"

Skye chuckled and gave them back. "You could say that."

Drew went back to his sketch, and Skye sat on the armrest, refusing to go away. Drew chewed the end of his pencil while making adjustments in his head. The smell of oil paint tickled beneath his nose, making him lose his concentration. Drew looked up at Skye. A red smear of paint streaked across Skye's cheek, colorful droplets spattered on his t-shirt and jeans.

Skye looked mussed, tousled and adorable. But he was also an irritating tease and not to be trusted.

Skye snatched Drew's pencil and flipped it between his fingers. "Still chew on your pencils, eh."

"Old habit, now give it back."

Skye slipped the pencil behind his ear. Sliding off the armrest, he plopped to the sofa. Their thighs touched. Drew stiffened at the sudden contact, but nuzzled closer despite his fears. No reaction from Skye, but his eyes showed confusion at the slight movement.

Drew wet his lips, practically an invitation for Skye to kiss him. Skye's firm mouth was so inviting. Drew longed to kiss those sensual lips. Skye sat quiet as a man in meditation but his body radiated sexual heat. Heat so strong it blasted Drew with a well-aimed force to his cock.

Drew blinked. Then blinked, again.

Skye leaned slightly, bringing his mouth, oh so close. So close their breath mingled, and Drew could swear oil paint tainted his lips. He tugged at Skye's hair gently, very gently, bringing Skye toward his mouth. Deep gray eyes full of wonder captured his gaze. And also of hope and promises he couldn't keep.

Christ, this isn't what I want!

Well, it was, but he couldn't have what he wanted. He dropped his hand and scooted away from Skye.

Skye shrunk into the crook of the armrest, shoulders slumped in resignation, fingers weaving together in agitation. Drew turned from the disappointment carved in Skye's fallen expression. He stood, scattering his drawings across the floor. He didn't want to acknowledge these chaotic feelings. He couldn't stop them, but he could get the hell out.

Drew picked up his satchel, quickly packing away his laptop and papers. He was a professional but he acted like a damn newbie. Skye had a way of making him lose all sense of ci-

vility.

Skye's mouth was strained white at the edges. Guilt squeezed Drew's stomach, his treatment of Skye was inexcusable. His voice came out as tight as his grip on the leather satchel. "I'll call you when I have something."

Drew rushed out the front door without looking back. Skye's eyes bored into his back, staying with him long after he turned the corner. The brisk walk home relieved some of the sexual tension but at a gut level, he knew his body yearned for release. A release only a man could provide. What he didn't know was, would any man do, or did his body yearn for just one?

No matter, it'd never work out between them. Sam would never agree to a divorce. She loved him in her own peculiar way, or maybe she refused to give him to another because of her obsessive desire for living the good life. Was he all that different from Sam? He was fixated on Skye, even when their relationship had no chance in hell to end well.



## Chapter Six

Skye set down his duffle bag and walked across the studio to open the curtains. His loft smelled dusty from the three weeks he'd been gone. The New York skyline spanned across the windows. A breathtaking view. Worth the money he had to lay down for this postage-stamp piece of real estate.

Letting out a sigh, he flopped on the bed and stared at the steel beamed ceiling. The exhibit had been worth the effort, but the hollow space in his gut wasn't part of the bargain. After Drew had run out on him, he had only seen him one other time at the Coffee Zone. They talked cordially for a few minutes, but Drew had excused himself to attend a lunch meeting.

After that, nothing. Nada. Zilch.

Fuck.

A knock followed the entrance of Franc Newman, his next-door neighbor and good friend. The white paper bag he carried looked wimpy in his broad hand. He lifted the bag so Skye could see the Chinese writing on the sack.

"Picked up dinner. Thought you'd be hungry."

Skye leaned up on his elbows and smiled at the red symbols, glad for a meal that he didn't have to cook. "Thanks. Set it on the table."

Franc helped himself to the plates and silverware from the cupboard. He got two beers out of the fridge and set them on the table. He twisted off the cap of one bottle, and took a swig, wiping his hand across his lips.

Chalky white dust stuck to his upper lip. A renowned sculptor, Franc survived quite well on commissions, working mostly in stone, which was the cause of the dust. Skye smiled, and handed him a napkin.

Straddling the chair, Franc leaned on the backrest and narrowed his eyes while wiping his mouth before crumpling the napkin in his hand.

"Something's eating at you," Franc observed, his eyes full of mischief. Franc knew of Skye's reluctance to return home. He didn't know about Drew Adams.

Skye arched his shoulders. "I painted while I was there. The piece came out...well, different."

Franc looked around the room and shrugged. "Don't see anything different here."

"I left it there to dry. Although, the ocean air's a killer."

Franc tossed a pair of chopsticks to Skye. His broad hand ran across his scalp. "What aren't you telling me?"

"I'm thinking of selling the cottage."

"Why not keep the place? It's close to the city by train."

Drew had said the same thing, and a sharp pang tweaked Skye's stomach, his hunger all but gone. He didn't want to dwell on Drew and the impossible feelings he had for the man.

"I'm having an architect draw up some renovations."

"That doesn't sound like a man sure about selling."

Skye had no answer to that. They ate in silence until Franc pushed away his empty plate. He rubbed his flat stomach and grinned. "Love that dive."

Skye chuckled, agreeing whole-heartedly. Drew in his tailored suit would be horrified to step inside the dingy Chop Suey joint. It had to be older than sin, the vinyl booths cracked, the smell of incense embedded into the faded wallpaper.

There he went again, thinking of Drew. What did he care if Drew approved of his choice of restaurants? They had nothing in common. Well, okay, they did have a lot in common, and it had been fun discovering how much they still enjoyed each other's company. And, there was the incredible attraction sizzling every time they got close to each other. Yet, he was made to believe that sizzle was supposedly one-sided.

Drew had no interest in him beyond friendship. Except, for his strange behavior at the house, tripping on his satchel, ears tipped in scarlet, blue eyes wide and scared. He practically ran out of the house. What the hell was that about?

Franc gathered the dishes and placed them in the sink. He got another couple of beers from the fridge and set them in front of Skye. Draping his arm around Skye's shoulders, he leaned in and gave Skye a chaste kiss on the cheek.

Franc smelled of Kung Pao Chicken and beer. Not unpleasant, but Skye pulled away. "What's that for?"

"You look like you need a friend."

"Enough about me. How's Steven? Aren't you two going on your six-month anniversary?"

"We broke up."

"You shitin' me?"

"He moved back to London. I didn't care to follow. End of story."

Skye touched Franc's cheek. "Sorry. I know you really cared for him."

"I'm too old for this shit."

Skye shook his head. His friend, although ten years older, was a compact bundle of muscle, and many a younger man swarmed around him. Silver buzz cut, hazel eyes and a very roman nose gave him an old world appearance.

"You're never too old for love." Skye teased, then he burst out laughing. God that sounded trite, but oh so funny. He couldn't stop his hysterics, the tears leaking from his eyes from the frustration from the last three weeks.

Franc crossed his arms, looking worried at the tears running down Skye's face. Skye let them fall, his laughter sweeping away the cobwebs in his head. The constant hard-on he got whenever he thought of Drew was all but impossible to avoid, but he was so damn sexy to think about.

After he cleared his throat, he looked at Franc, grinning from ear to ear. "That felt good."

Franc pulled out a chair and sat. "Glad you feel better. What happened over there?"

Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' jingled from Skye's jeans pocket, and he fumbled for his cell phone. He flipped the lid. "Hello, Skye here."

His heart leaped in his throat at the sound of Drew's voice. "Yeah, sure, how about tomorrow?" So much for not caring. He couldn't keep down his excitement, drumming his fingers on the table. "I'll email my address. See you."

"So, who is he?" Franc said. "The man who's giving you wet dreams?"

"That was the architect I told you about." Skye was desperate to remain cool, and lowered his eyes. One look in his eyes would give him away. On his own turf, maybe Drew would open his heart to him.

God, when had he become such a fool?

Franc grinned. "Is this only a client/architect relationship? Or is there more to it?"

Funny, that's what he accused Drew when he asked about Carl. "He's a childhood friend."

"Gay?"

Skye hesitated, twisting the errant napkin lying on the table. "He's not-so-straight, and... he's married."

Franc slumped in his chair and groaned, placing the back of his hand on his forehead. "Skye, Skye, Skye. What did I tell you when you first came out?"

"Avoid men who insist they're straight."

"Go on, finish it."

Irritation flared. "...especially the ones that come-on to you."

"Good boy. Now the second rule is follow the first one, and never, ever, deviate. It'll only end up in heartache. Gay men who don't want to walk in the light of day make poor boy-friends."

Skye leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "I've had him once before."

Franc's eyes grew round. "No, when? This last time?"

"Last year of high school, before I left town. A hot, raunchy, wonderful night."

He chuckled at the memory of their innocent grabbing, neither one knowing much about sex. It had been warm that night in the sand dunes, the salt air whispering on their faces, the smell of tequila on their breath. T-shirts off, flies open, hard cocks sprung from the restraints of their boxers, hot, hot hands on each other.

"Let me guess," Franc's voice loud enough to wake Skye to attention. "He avoided you after that."

The sweet memory turned sour. "Yeah. End of my happily ever after."

"This reinforces the first rule. Be careful friend."

"What if he loves me? How can I turn away without trying?"

Every nerve trembled. His voice shaking, his body betrayed him. Franc looked at him with pity, shaking his head. He shoved back his chair and rose, leaning slightly over the table.

"Don't come crying to me when he dumps your handsome ass."

Franc left Skye with the dirty dishes. Only fair, since he had bought dinner. At least it gave Skye something to do besides dwell on tomorrow.

He finished wiping the last dish, placing it in the cupboard. His inner turmoil spoiled his night. He wouldn't get any sleep if he didn't relax. Fate tempted him. Did he play devil's advocate or play the good friend? His feelings for Drew went beyond fucking. He longed for a lover, a person to cherish. All the silly, sentimental clichés every man and woman secretly coveted. Being a gay man made him no less vulnerable to romantic love.

## Chapter Seven

Drew took in Skye's loft and approved. The stunning view of the skyline saved the simple floor plan. Warm brick walls washed in reds and gold softened the hard interior. Industrial window panes drew the outside in. He liked Skye's choice of furnishings, mixing modern with vintage.

"Cool place you have. I can see why you don't want to live anywhere else." Drew walked to the dining table and set down his briefcase. He loosened his tie and let his gaze wander to where Skye stood by the windows.

Drew tried to avoid the glaring king-sized bed. He opened his briefcase and removed several computer printouts of the exterior and interior changes to the cottage that he wanted to make. He carefully kept the pile even as he placed them on the table.

"These will give you a general idea of what I'd like to go with."

Skye came from behind and reached for the stack. Their arms brushed and Drew jumped. While Skye concentrated on the printouts, Drew bit his thumbnail, studying Skye's face for any indication if he liked the designs.

Skye dropped the pile on the table and turned to Drew. His gray eyes flashed silver in the sunlight. They shone with boyish enthusiasm, and that winsome smile bruised Drew's heart.

"They're awesome. Beyond my expectations. When can you start?"

Light-hearted with relief, Drew lowered his cool reserve, and smiled. "I'll send out my workmen tomorrow. They're trustworthy."

"There's nothing to steal anyway."

"Your painting is worth a small fortune."

"You're kind, but most people don't consider art worth stealing. Not unless it's hanging in a museum collecting dust. I'll tell Carl to store it in his gallery."

Drew stacked the designs and put them into his briefcase, snapping it shut. The finality of it startled him. He didn't want to leave.

Drew's stomach growled. Too nervous to eat, he had a cup of coffee and a muffin for breakfast. "Ah, I haven't eaten since the train. How about going for a bite?"

"Am I bad. Let me take you out. My treat. We can discuss your fee and costs over lunch."

Drew waved away Skye's words. "My fee is gratis. For a friend. The other, well, that I can't do much about, but I'll guarantee the best in craftsmanship and a fair price."

"I don't expect you to work for free."

Drew sighed, shaking his head. "Are we going to stand here arguing about my fee or are you going to take me out for a meal?"

Skye grabbed his house key from the top of his dresser. "Meal first, argument later." He slipped his key in his pocket before sidling next to Drew. Fingers dug into Drew's shoulders, keeping him from turning away from Skye.

"Did I tell you how fucking beautiful you look?"

Drew froze, every part of his body unable to function. Yet, he couldn't deny the thrill coursing through him from the compliment. He opened his mouth then shut it. There were no words to convey how he felt. He didn't know.

Skye was the first to pull away, but before he did, he traced Drew's chin. A painfully wonderful caress.

The mom and pop Chinese restaurant had a steep flight of steps. By the time they reached the top floor, Drew was taking off his jacket and loosening his tie. Quite overdressed, he glared at Skye, knowing he took him here for a specific purpose. Always testing him, as if he'd refuse to dine here because of the state of the furniture. Skye's mouth twitched enough to give him away, the ass. A twinge warned him that Skye wasn't through toying with him.

"The food's great," Skye said, as if to imply Drew was worried.

If the food was as succulent as the aroma... "Smells delicious."

Skye nodded to the hostess who gave him a welcoming smile, and led him to a back booth away from the main dining room.

Drew flung his coat over his shoulder and walked ahead. What did he care where they dined? He could rough it as well as the next guy. He dressed this way to impress his clients. A game well played was a game won. That saying came straight from his father's mouth. He might not get along with the man, but he did respect his business savvy.

Skye stood aside for Drew to slide into the booth, slipping in next to him. Drew inwardly groaned at such an intimate seating arrangement. Skye didn't say a word, but shoved a menu in his hands.

Game point to Skye.

Chinese letters scribbled across the menu without English translation. Drew set the menu next to his plate. "You order. This is your hang-out. You must know what's good."

"You can't read Cantonese?" Skye teased.

"I suppose it's your second language."

Skye's mouth ripped into an outrageous smile that should have been illegal. The broad sexy grin forced Drew's cock into a salute, forcing him to shift in his seat. Skye's arm lazily draped behind him as he scooted closer.

Drew slid away.

Skye scooted closer.

Drew slid away, again.

Until he hit the back wall, trapped.

Drew's body refused to deny the attraction. Tingling sensations rippled across his chest. He licked his bottom lip, curling his fingers in his lap. Their thighs pressed in heat.

Warm, soothing, hypnotic.

Skye grabbed Drew's hand, and his eyes spoke of endless possibilities, all illicit, all forbidden. Dark and dangerous.

The air grew thick and messy and smelled of Chinese food and Skye's scent. Their faces were so close, their breaths whispers of air. Skye wouldn't dare kiss him. Not here.

Drew cleared his throat, hoping for a miracle. It came in the form of the waiter serving two glasses of water. Stepping forward, with a pad in his hand, and pencil poised, the waiter smiled. "May I take your order?"

Drew jumped back, his hands slipping from Skye's grip. He thought he heard Skye sigh before he turned his attention to the waiter.

"...and two Tsingtaos." Skye winked at Drew. "Can't have Chinese without an ice cold beer."

Yeah, maybe two or three if Drew was going to get out of this situation with his dignity intact.

The waiter placed chopsticks on the table and pulled the curtain shut. A fire-breathing dragon stared at Drew, as if to warn him of the implication of a closed curtain.

Skye fingered the red silk fabric, sheer enough to let in light. "It's part of the charm. Nice, huh."

"Is this why you come here?"

"Food first, privacy second." Skye adjusted his chopsticks between his fingers, and clicked near Drew's nose. "Relax, I'm not going to kiss you. At least, not yet."

Drew shooed away Skye's hand. "You were too. Admit it."

A discreet knock and the waiter pulled back the curtain and served the beer. Skye closed it again. "Let's toast to your designs." He handed Drew a bottle and raised his in salute. "And to our renewed friendship."

"To friendship." The beer cooled Drew's parched throat. It also cooled the fire burning below his waist. Barely. Skye's presence couldn't be ignored, as much as he wished it, but he could keep his wits about him.

Heaping platters of food were served, giving Drew an excuse to shut out his nemesis. He dug in, starving. Skye watched him, one elbow propped on the table, his cheek resting in his palm.

"For being so thin you can really pack it in." Using his chopsticks, Skye speared a snow pea from Drew's plate and popped it in his mouth.

"Didn't break that nasty habit, I see. Stealing food off other people's plates." Drew chuckled, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "You're right, this food's great." He eyed Skye's scantily filled plate. "You're hardly eating."

Another snow pea stolen from his plate, and Drew let out a deep laugh. "Christ, you're a pest."

Skye grinned, making chopping motions with his chopsticks. "Feed me."

Drew stared at Skye's mouth puckered in mischievous delight. Drew snatched the imp's chopsticks and tossed them next to his plate.

You want to play games, do you? Okay, I'll play.

Tired of Skye's teasing, and tired of his own reluctance, he snagged a heap of noodles and hovered it near Skye's mouth.

"How badly do you want it?"

Skye opened his mouth, his pink tongue curled, his lips twitching in anticipation. Drew pulled the chopsticks back, luring Skye closer. He focused on Skye's tempting mouth. Skye lunged and swallowed the noodles, slowing sucking back on the chopsticks, his tongue licking the sides. Fascinated, Drew wondered how that dirty mouth would feel on his cock, licking, sucking, pulling out his lust. The stiff erection he had answered that question.

Breathing hard and uneven, Drew pressed his palm on Skye's chest, not sure if he wanted to push him away or take him in his arms.

Skye licked his lips, his hand resting on Drew's thigh. Dark, thick eyelashes flashed at Drew. Skye's hand slid closer to Drew's crotch. The movement burned through the wool serge leaving a trail of fire.

Skye nipped at Drew's neck, curling a strand of hair behind Drew's ear. "You smell good," Skye said. "Um... taste good, too."

Having enough of Skye's nips and licks, Drew cupped Skye's chin to hold him steady. He bore down on Skye's mouth, prying open those luscious lips, plunging his tongue to explore inside. Skye tasted of spicy noodles, and beer, and the unique taste that was all Skye Taylor.

A low, rising moan rose from Skye's throat. Drew forced a deeper kiss. Their tongues performed a thrust and parry, fighting for dominance.

Yes, yes, yes... Skye tasted good, felt good, and he grabbed Skye's hair, pulling him practically in to his lap. Long hair had some very practical uses.

Another hot, hard kiss and Skye groaned into Drew's mouth.

Game point, Drew.

Skye's swollen mouth was an invitation to be kissed silly.

Running out of air, Drew was forced to pull back. "You bring all your boyfriends here?" Drew said, needing a breather to calm the throbbing in his groin.

Skye ran his hand through his hair looking lost for a moment. "What? Boyfriends?"

"Earth to Skye." Drew laughed. "I like you this way. Hot and bothered."



"Why did you stop?" Skye grouched.

"We're in a public place."

"So what? The curtains are closed."

"You never answered me about your boyfriends."

Skye tugged down his shirt. He traced a pattern on the table with his chopstick and didn't look at Drew. "It's been a while since I slept with anyone." He stopped his tracing to look at Drew. "Just so you know I'm clean."

Glad for that information, Drew felt he had to reciprocate. "So am I. I've been tested since the last time," Drew hurried, embarrassed at the admittance, "which was over a year ago."

"I take it you don't mean with Sam."

"I'm careful, and I don't fool around. Well, I've slipped a couple of times since my marriage."

Drew waited for the question of the moment—did you sleep with a woman or a man? Skye didn't ask, instead he took Drew's hand and held it gently.

"What if I took you to my bed? What would be your answer?"

Drew caressed the side of Skye's face. He tilted his chin so he could read into Skye's eyes, and saw hope. He suddenly realized the game had gone too far. He could hurt Skye, wound him deeply. Maybe he'd already had.

Skye deserved the truth. He looked down at their intertwined fingers. Drew sucked in his lower lip, not sure what to say. He let out his breath, even and steady. The truth was hard to define, but he did know how he felt this instant.

Drew confessed. "I've been in chaos since your return."

"I feel the same way."

"You seem so sure of yourself."

Skye leaned back, taking Drew's hand with him. "I want us to be more than friends. I'm sorry for the way I feel, but you are constantly sending me mixed signals. Kissing me one minute, pushing me away the next." Skye let go of Drew's hand. He leaned toward the table, not looking at Drew. "I might appear confident but it doesn't mean I can't be hurt."

Drew took a long swig of beer, not sure what to say, the game no longer amusing. He toyed with the knot of his tie, feeling the heat beneath his collar.

No turning back, he told the truth. "I would be lying if I said I didn't care for you. I always have."

Skye released a puff of air. He moved in and Drew stayed where he sat, tugging at the knot of his tie.

"I feel the same. Let me..." Skye unknotted Drew's tie, easing the tight grip around Drew's neck.

Skye unbuttoned the top buttons of Drew's shirt, laying it open. He kissed the tender spot near Drew's collarbone. Drew melted, every part of his body caving in. He hung onto Skye's shoulders needing something to keep him upright.

"Take me back to your place," Drew demanded.

Needing no further encouragement, Skye slid back the curtain and called for the waiter to bring the tab. Drew hid a smile at the expediency of Skye paying the bill, ushering him down the stairs, and rushing the few blocks to his loft.

Once inside, Drew froze by the door. He didn't understand why he gave in, but he couldn't stop the aching need. All he could think about was Skye, and the desire he felt for him. Drew trembled, knowing he was going to do it. Strip naked, and let Skye take every inch of him.

Game point, Skye.

## Chapter Eight

Skye's hands shook as he lit several candles, bathing the room in the scent of vanilla. His heart beat at a furious pace, his groin burning in anticipation of what they were about to do. He stopped by the window and stared out. He had to rein in his nerves or he'd hyperventilate. He didn't need a panic attack in the middle of his seduction.

The skyline winked under the glow of the sun, keeping promises alive for the million-plus residents trying to make sense of their lives. Magical. This word came to mind every time he took in the city's magnificent view.

Skye wanted to ease Drew from his spot near the front door. Drew looked reckless with his shirt open at the collar, his hair windblown, shirttail not quite tucked in.

Skye strode toward Drew, stopping with just the space of a mere breath between them. Slinging off Drew's tie, he released the knot, looped it around Drew's neck and pulled him into a kiss.

Their tongues meshed as if they'd been doing it all their lives. Skye clutched Drew's shoulders and pulled him closer, the hot press of Drew's body built pressure in Skye's chest.

It had been over a year since Skye brought a man to his place, but it'd been several since he wanted someone this badly. No matter how many men he had fucked, they never compared to Drew Adams.

Skye gripped Drew's face, a scorching gaze arcing between them. "Do you want me?"

Pure, simple lust flashed in Drew's eyes. Having his answer, Skye became all business.

He began at Drew's lips, licking the seam, pressing his tongue for entrance into that hot mouth. Drew gave way to Skye's kiss, clinging onto him, fingers gripping the back of Skye's shirt. Excited by the frantic response, Skye deepened the kiss, going in hard and furious. He pressed into Drew's groin, drawing out a long growl from that pale, beautiful throat.

"I love that you're noisy. Shout as loud as you want, babe. The walls are industrial strength."

"Damn you for making me feel..." Drew grabbed Skye's hand and pulled him towards the bed.

Skye needed to get Drew out of those clothes first.

He yanked Drew by the waist in order to get him to face him. A wolfish grin spread across Skye's face at the sight of Drew; wide eyes, flushed skin, and especially his swollen, love-bit mouth. An utter, bone-crushing desire flooded his body. It rocked his world, almost making him fly apart.

Touching Drew's top button, Skye forced down the urge to rip off Drew's clothes. Taking it slow, he traveled down Drew's chest, unbuttoning as he went along, pale, smooth skin was revealed as he peeled back the shirt. He brushed his fingers across the dusting of gold hair,

smiling at the deep rosy nipples. Circling one nipple with his tongue, it felt rough and hard. Back and forth, he traded nubs, loving how Drew gasped and squirmed, his fingers pulling Skye's hair. Drew's skin smelled of soap and sweat, and expensive cologne, the taste was intoxicating.

This wasn't the boy he'd seduced years ago. Oh, fuck no. Not the same at all. Drew's body now had defined muscular lines, a granite-hard washboard stomach, and blond curls peeking from the waistband hinted at more. It hinted to where Skye wanted his mouth.

Skye kissed the sensitive collarbone, snuggling his neck, bringing his mouth close to Drew's ear. He kept his voice low and gentle. "Let's get you out of these pants."

Massaging the back of Drew's neck, his free hand cupped Drew's erection, giving it a playful squeeze.

Drew arched into the pressure. "Ah... not playing fair."

Skye grinned at Drew's complaint but it didn't stop his lover from unlacing his shoes and kicking them off, along with his socks, leaving them in a jumbled heap.

Blue, blue eyes brimmed with passion, and something else, but Skye didn't want to go there. There would be plenty of time to hash out the realities of a relationship later. Right now he had to shuck off those tailored pants. He yanked the zipper and the fly hissed open. Soon the pants and boxers joined the shoe pile.

Skye stepped back to take in Drew. "God, you're gorgeous."

Two lines puckered between Drew's eyes. "You make me sound like a goddamn woman."

Skye's gaze raked from the top of Drew's head, down to his feet, and coming to rest on Drew's engorged cock. "There's no doubt that you're a man. Thank God."

Drew frowned but his body betrayed him. His cock curved away from the thatch of curls. It was hard and ready, and Skye smiled at the bead of pre-cum moistening its tip.

"I'm at a disadvantage. Take off your clothes."

Skye shook his head. "First I want a taste."

Skye licked his upper lip and knelt between Drew's legs. Before doing anything else, he breathed in Drew's arousal. A thrill sucked Skye into wanting nothing but Drew's cock in his mouth.

Drew studied him under pale lashes. Skye winked, then swallowed the entire length of Drew's cock. Drew moaned, his legs shaking, his hands flying from Skye's hair to his shoulders. Sharp fingernails seared painfully across Skye's upper back but it barely registered. Skye didn't mind discomfort if it was followed by intense pleasure. And this was paradise, making the impeccable, uptight Drew lose control.

Skye liked sucking cock. He was good at it. Now he'd drive Drew mad. Blowing air on the tip, Drew bucked and strangled out a groan. Skye licked and sucked, then circling the tip, pre-

cum coating his tongue. There was nothing like sucking off a lover, bringing inside the unique taste of him. Drew thrust his hips, and Skye took the hint, setting a steady rhythm. Tongue and lips slid along the length, and teased the slit, one hand clenched around the base. Skye gauged Drew's excitement. Sensing him close to climax, Skye knelt back on his haunches and skimmed his fingernail over the length.

Drew arched his back, eyes opened and dazed. The uptight, naked gentleman looked quite shameless.

Drew emitted a growl. "Don't stop."

"We have all day."

Skye stood and brushed sweaty bangs from Drew's forehead, caressing his cheek. Smoky blue eyes pierced Skye, and he was reluctant to let go.

Gently, he unfurled Drew's hands from his shoulders. "Let's get you comfortable."

Skye led Drew to his king size bed. "On your back," he commanded.

Drew mutely obeyed, eyeing Skye with trepidation but also with fire in his gaze. Skye straddled the slender waist, and stretched Drew's arms over his head. "Hold onto the posts. They're quite strong."

"Always giving orders," Drew snipped but without bite.

Drew's fingers curled around two sturdy posts, vertical rungs embedded across the metal headboard.

"Don't move your hands unless I tell you to."

Drew's eyebrows peaked at the command, his mouth tilting into a seductive smile. "Yes sir."

Skye took a good, long look, his lover's body stretched out, naked, and ready to be taken. He was amazed Drew allowed such a submissive position. It wasn't anything like their last time together. They'd come with their clothes on, zippers undone, their hands doing all the work.

Skye lifted his t-shirt over his head and tossed it across the bed. He unbuttoned his jeans, and being commando, his cock sprung out from its prison. He broke eye contact with Drew, only to lose his boots and shove off his jeans. He crawled half-way across the bed to grab the lube from the drawer of his nightstand.

He went back to his position, spreading Drew's legs, and sitting between them. At the sight of Drew spread eagled, chest heaving, hands above his head, he almost came on the spot.

Skye squeezed out a glob of lube on his fingers, and set to lubricating Drew's cock.

Drew bucked his hips. "Shit, that's cold."

"It'll get warm." Skye massaged Drew's cock, loving how it thickened in his hand. "Hot enough?"

"It tingles." Drew's knuckles whitened as he clutched the posts tighter. He pleaded. "Let me touch you."

"No, not yet."

Once Skye lubricated his own erection, he let the full length of his body cover Drew in one graceful swoop. Skin-to-skin, Skye's body seized from the contact of fuzzy chests, hairy legs, hard nipples... God, no one ever felt this perfect.

Skye fluidly arched his hips, back and forth, putting pressure on both their cocks. He breathed in Drew's hair, his face nestled in its silken mane. They rubbed together, big cats in heat. Their cocks were slick, hot, and hard.

Drew's body tensed, a gasp slowly tearing from his throat. The air smelled of semen and musk and sweat.

"Let go, babe."

Drew's hands instantly found their way around Skye's neck. Leveraging his body, Drew pressed tightly into Skye, his legs a vise around Skye's hips.

Drew was an unquenchable thirst. Skye attacked, a full-frontal frenzy. The bed shook, the posts rattled, the mattress squeaked. A slow intensified burn swelled between his thighs, his cock slick from pre-cum, sweat and lube. Arms and legs tangled in the bedcovers. Nothing came between them. Skye wouldn't allow it.

Drew arched his head, the thin neck muscle twitching wildly. Wet sparkles glittered off his eyelashes, cheeks flushed, mouth parted and groaning.

Drew looked beautiful and holy... and shameless.

The vision sent Skye heavenward. Too highly charged, he couldn't hang on. Clinging to Drew, he buried his head in the crook of Drew's neck, and grunted as his orgasm hit.

Drew came seconds later.

Drew opened his eyes, his fingers aching from holding onto the posts too hard. Flexing them back to life, he didn't dare look at Skye, not yet. He tried to sit up but fell back, too exhausted. He felt wrung out but in a good way. Semen spattered across his chest. He moved to touch his cock. Shrunken and wrinkled, it fell limp against his thigh.

Luckily, Skye didn't try to talk to him. Drew wasn't ready to face what he'd let happen. He wanted to feel, not think. Not at this moment. He had the rest of his life to let guilt dictate his way of life.

Drew shoved a couple of pillows behind his back and scooted into a sitting position. Skye sat cross-legged, in front of him. Close enough to where he could run his hands through Skye's hair, enjoying how the thick shiny strands flowed through his fingers. He caressed

Skye's face and kissed his sensual mouth, startled by the bittersweet taste. The mix of their unique spicy scents warmed him. No man but Skye ever made him wish for another life.

They were wet, messy and sticky. And he didn't care.

Skye clamped down on Drew's shoulders and looked him straight into the eyes. Those gray orbs were not triumphant, but compassionate. Stroking his lover's face, Drew lured Skye in for a sweet, gentle kiss. They held each other, touching, stroking, letting skin-to-skin be their connection.

Drew wanted this, badly.

A tremor skimmed down his spine, the rising hairs on his nape a warning. It would do no good to believe he could escape his self-imposed prison. No good at all.

Drew pulled Skye into his arms, burying his head in his chest, longing for the courage to break free. Skye finger-combed his hair in slow, lazy strokes, making Drew feel protected and safe.

Skye finally spoke. "Stay the night, stay the weekend, fuck, stay here forever."

The words hit Drew like a whip. His head jerked up, and he wrenched out of Skye's arms. He looked down at their shriveled cocks, their tangled legs; the intimacy was suddenly too real.

What in the hell was he thinking? Playing with Skye's feelings, giving him hope when there wasn't any.

Skye squeezed Drew's forearms, holding him firmly in place. "You're not running away from this."

Drew shook his head. "I don't have a choice. My life isn't here, in some New York loft, living this kind of life."

Skye pleaded. "Damn you. Don't do this."

Were those tears in Skye's eyes? Skye's fingers trembled and Drew felt like a heel.

"What do you want from me?" Drew said, having no strength left to fight the doubts clinging to his heart.

Skye dropped his hold, folding his hands into his lap. "You really want to know?"

"Of course. I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

"More of this."

"What, a fuck buddy? You can have anyone."

"I don't want anyone. You think this was just sex between us?"

"It... it was... a mistake. This isn't the real me."

Skye shook Drew by the shoulders. "It's your life that's a lie."

How dare Skye judge him! He knew nothing, nothing at all about his life, the expectations, how he had to perform close to perfection. All his life, living for his father's approval, having to

always prove himself worthy of the family's name. Skye, who had parents that loved him, unconditionally, dared to dress him down, to define him.

Anger fed his disgust. Disgust at himself for giving in to Skye, at Skye for making him feel. Anger he understood. Anger he cherished.

"Screw you!" He shoved his fist in Skye's jaw, sending him sprawling back.

The guilt hurt worse than his throbbing hand. The loft's walls closed in. Skye stayed crumpled in a heap at the foot of the bed, rubbing his jaw, his face closed down.

Drew refused to admit how much he'd enjoyed fucking Skye. He refused to admit it went beyond sex. He refused to believe in love.

Not with a man, especially an openly gay man.

Drew picked up his boxers and used them to clean himself off. Dressing quickly, he ignored Skye. If he hurried, he could catch the last train.

Skye spoke, making him pause.

"I still want you to go ahead with the renovations."

"Not a good idea."

"Shut your mouth for once, and listen. I'll have everything packed and moved into storage. Let Carl deal with my painting. You have the key. Use it. Do whatever... I trust your taste. You won't need to deal with me except by email or phone."

"I can recommend--"

"I don't want someone else. I want the best."

Damn him.

Nothing left to say, Drew hurried out the door. Away from the man who held his heart tightly in his hands. All hope squeezed out of it.



## Chapter Nine

It had been six months since Skye returned to Woodland Village. Six months to get Drew out of his head. Six months to dig Drew out of his heart, piece by agonizing piece.

Franc had offered no sympathy, crowing on about his theory of why gay men fall for straight men. Something about misplaced homophobia. Bullshit. He didn't lust after straight men. All his lovers were all-out gay and proud of their orientation. Skye secretly wished it would happen to Franc so he'd have to stew in his own platitudes. Then relented. He didn't wish this type of love on anyone.

Skye drove into town, driving his black SUV instead of taking the train. He arrived in town to approve the final renovations on the cottage, and to take his painting back to his New York loft. Taking the route through Main Street, he kept his gaze straight ahead, not daring to glance toward Drew's office.

Don't look. Don't care. Just don't...

Tonight he would whisk Carl to the Roadhouse for a good old-fashioned fuck-fest. They would play their game, and he'd play to win. It had been too long since he took a boy to bed, but abstinence had been good for his art. He had painted non-stop since Drew walked out.

Skye maneuvered the SUV onto the narrow driveway and shut the motor off. Leaning his arms on the steering wheel, he took in the cottage. It looked the same on the outside, except for larger windows and new skylights on the roof.

Inside was a totally different experience.

Skye's footsteps echoed on the wood floors creating a haunting sound. The cottage was lit from within, as if it had its own internal light. Oak floors and tranquil cream walls with large windows invited in the ocean, sky and sunlight. Drew had taken out the interior wall separating the kitchen from the living room creating a spacious open-air feeling. Skye breathed in the smell of fresh paint and wood. Simplicity met sophistication, and Drew had perfectly nailed down Skye's taste.

Skye hurried to view the bedroom-turned-studio, and stopped short at the doorway. "The bastard," he muttered, the studio, simply put, was perfect.

Clerestory windows and skylights allowed solid walls for his canvases. Lighting on adjustable tracks built into the ceiling would show off his paintings to their advantage. Storage with sliding doors hid art supplies, a large basin sink was installed, along with a counter and cement floor. Practical met perfection.

Skye slid to the floor and crossed his legs to take in the spirit of the room. Resting his head against the wall, an ache stole his breath. Drew created this especially for him. Maybe it was the one gift he could rightly give, so he did.

Closing his eyes, he let his mind drift. He didn't know how much time passed when a knock at the front door forced him to rise from the floor. Carl greeted him with his usual white-toothed grin, walking in without an invitation.

"Wow, wow..." Carl toured every room. "Wow..."

"Rich vocabulary you have there."

"You would be crazy to sell this place. It has your name stamped all over it. I didn't know Drew knew you so well."

"I didn't either." It was kind of scary. Skye rubbed his day-old beard. He needed a shave. Scratching his chin, he wondered if he could sell the house. It felt too much like home.

Skye shrugged. "I'm not sure I want the upkeep of two places."

"Live here during the summer. It's too hot to stay in Manhattan."

"The heat forces me to say inside and paint."

"Let me remind you. One of your best pieces you painted right here."

Skye frowned. He went over to the fridge, glad to find bottled water. He tossed one to Carl. "Let's go to the Roadhouse tonight."

"Is it game time?" Carl winked.

Skye ignored Carl's black, black eyes, too sharp by half. "Tonight, winner takes all."

Carl left with the promise to pick Skye up at his hotel around nine o'clock. Looking around the empty rooms, he realized he'd have to buy furniture if kept the place. Maybe save a piece or two in remembrance of his parents. Tomorrow he would go to storage and sort through the boxes.

Locking the cottage, he debated if he should visit Drew at his office. To let him know how much he appreciated what he'd done. Skye flipped the house key in his hand. He wasn't fooling himself with that flimsy excuse. All he could think about was Drew. A part of him hung on to the belief that Drew couldn't live without him after sharing such a wonderful day together. He scoffed. What romantic dribble. Drew was as stubborn as a pit bull. And, the day ended with a sock to his jaw.

Yet, Skye couldn't avoid him forever, not in such a small village. They'd run into each other at the Coffee Zone or a restaurant, and how awkward would that be.

Drew threw the file across his desk. It slid across the top and landed on the floor, papers flying in all directions. He stared at the papers scattered across the plush carpet. Absent-mindedly, he swiveled around and gazed out the picture window, needing to calm the turmoil knotting his stomach.

The last time he had seen Skye it had been stormy weather. Not today, the sun blasted through the window showing off a pristine sky. He swiveled around and grabbed the edge of the mahogany desk, startled when his assistant opened the door to his office, and poked his

head around the doorframe.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Adams, but what should I tell Skye... ah, Mr. Taylor?"

Martin Pierson adjusted his tortoise frames and frowned at the papers on the floor. He knelt and shoved them into a manila folder. Looking at Drew, he grimaced. "He's been patiently waiting for over an hour."

What the hell was Skye doing coming to his office? They agreed to all correspondence by email or phone.

"Did he mention why he's here?" Drew adjusted his silk tie. He glanced over at the heavy ornate mirror, but refused to smooth out his hair. His cowlick stuck straight out but what did he care how he looked?

Martin fiddled with his gold cuff links and patiently waited for Drew's answer. Always presentable, Drew had never seen his assistant wear anything but an impeccable suit and silk tie.

Drew tapped his fingers on the desktop. "Well, what is it? Why are you standing here?"

"Mr. Taylor said it's rather important and he'd wait." Martin looked at the two empty leather chairs in front of Drew's desk. "Since there's no one here, don't you think—"

"Don't think, Martin, that's my job."

"Well, you don't have to get all in a twist about it."

"Send him in. But wait. Give me five minutes." Drew nodded a dismissal. "Oh, and sorry. I spoke out of line," he quickly added, hoping he sounded sincere. Not good to get his efficient assistant's nose out of joint. Martin Pierson was too talented to send packing.

Martin tossed the file on his desk and smirked. "Apology accepted. If I got all bent out of shape every time you made a derisive remark, I'd never get anything accomplished. Besides, as you know, you need me, Mr. Adams."

"Go, before I fire you. Remember—"

"I know, five minutes." A laugh escaped Martin as he closed the door behind him.

Muttering a curse word, Drew flinched from swearing too much. Usually he held his tongue, and nary a bad word passed his lips, but Skye Taylor brought out the worst in him. And the best. But better to shove that thought to the recesses of hell.

Drew took the moment to straighten his tie, again. A growl rumbled across his stomach from too much coffee and no lunch. Taking out a power bar from his top drawer, he munched it down in three bites.

The door cracked open, and a piece of almond stuck in his throat. He wasn't ready for this, and hurriedly grabbed a glass of water, swallowing down the annoying lump in his throat. The water sloshed over the rim, and he set it down, frustrated that his hand shook.

Skye walked in and all the reasons why Drew didn't want to see him flew right by, and didn't stop. His gaze followed down to Skye's tight jeans hugging sleek, muscular thighs. A naked Skye flittered across his mind, and caused a stuttered heartbeat. Oh boy, he needed a stronger drink than water.

Finding his manners, Drew motioned for Skye to sit, and scooted his chair forward to rest his hands on the desk.

"You saw the cottage?"

Skye sat, crossing his leg over his thigh. He gave Drew an unforgettable smile. "I froze at the sight."

"I take it, that's good."

"Yeah, very good."

Swelling at the compliment, Drew pushed aside this feeling. He was good at what he did, and he knew Skye's taste. One look at the New York loft told him all he needed to know.

"I know of a realtor who'd get you the best price."

Skye looked tired, or maybe, resigned. "If you wanted to get rid of me, why did you create the perfect studio?"

Drew picked up his pen, flipping it between two fingers. He had to find a way to get through this meeting without giving in to Skye.

"I thought you wanted to sell?"

Skye rose from his chair and stalked toward him. He leaned his hands on the desktop, and stared into Drew's eyes, the color deep and challenging. The diamond stud glistened from his ear, and Drew wanted to touch the stud, and trace the shell of Skye's earlobe. The 'v' of Skye's white t-shirt showed off a wisp of dark chest hair. Drew's lips parted, his breaths short, as he recalled the taste of Skye's skin.

"We need to talk about the last time we saw each other," Skye said, shattering Drew's fantasy.

Drew withdrew his gaze and gulped down a sip of water. His cheeks heated from the memories of that day. Hot, moist, skin-on-skin. Wiping the sweat beaded on his brow with the back of his hand, he glanced at his wristwatch, relieved. Good. Five minutes, and he'd be safe. The mayor was a stickler for arriving on time.

"Don't make a scene. The mayor will be here any minute."

"Screw the mayor."

"I can't take any theatrics right now. So drop it."

Skye picked up a silver frame. "Displaying a picture of the dutiful wife."

"I don't care what you think of my marriage."

Skye's glare pinned Drew to his seat. "You do care. You care so much you're willing to ruin your life." Skye slammed the photograph on the desk, and turned his back. "Email me the realtor's phone number." He strode to the door, and stumbled into Martin as the assistant walked in.

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Taylor." Martin pushed up his glasses, his free hand on Skye's elbow. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Skye chuckled. "Call me Skye."

Martin smiled. "If you call me Martin."

Drew cleared his throat. "What do you want, Martin?" He barked, his cheeks suddenly flaming hot.

"Mayor Redman is here to see you."

Skye put his hand on Martin's shoulder. "How about going to the Roadhouse tonight? You look like you could use a change of scene. I'd like to see you out of a suit."

Drew fisted his hands, rising in his seat. Skye's confident swagger was in full swing. Was Skye propositioning his assistant? His mouth fell open when Martin blushed and nodded. The two of them walked out together shoulder to shoulder, the door closing behind them.

What the hell? Was Martin Pierson gay? Drew hired him two years ago, right out of college. Martin was well-qualified, probably over-qualified for the job, and he proved to be an excellent assistant. Drew had seen Martin around town, but now that he thought about it, never with a girl.

He was Skye's type. Slender, and an inch or two shorter than Drew, Martin had a narrow, almost pretty face, and intelligent pale eyes behind those tortoise frames. The man was smart, and had a wry sense of humor. Hell, he liked him. As a friend, of course, and not like that. But Skye liked to play games.

Drew's mouth tensed, a tick to his jaw adding to his irritation. He turned to his laptop and typed in 'The Roadhouse' in Google. Too close to home, he'd never ventured there. He scribbled the address on a piece of paper and folded it before shoving it in his pocket. He wasn't jealous. He was concerned for Martin. Pushing down the annoying pang in his chest, he pushed the com button.

"Martin, send in Mayor Redman."

He wouldn't stand by and let Skye put the moves on his assistant. He had to protect the poor kid. If not, he'd get hurt in the end. But Drew wasn't quite sure who he meant to protect—Martin or himself.

## Chapter Ten

The Roadhouse survived Prohibition and the Depression of the 30's, reinventing itself until its last transformation into the only gay bar within sixty miles of Woodland Village. A rough-hewn wood facade added to the roughhouse ambiance far from the pretentious gay bars in New York City. The crystal clear sky and the full moon lent an eerie landscape to the scrub brush and gravel parking lot. The bar sat alone in a marshy field. The smell of wet grasses and the croaking of frogs fought with the booming base of the music.

Skye sat on a rickety bench with his legs resting on the wood railing. Drinking a beer, he let the sounds of the night relax him. Martin Pierson had surprised him. The true Mr. Pierson, when out of his tailored suit, was a cut above average. Definitely his type, and he and Carl had immediately set the rules. First one to get Martin to bed was the winner.

Skye smiled slow and easy toward Martin who perched on the railing, his bronze skin sweaty from dancing. Skye let his gaze sweep in the whole picture before him, studying Martin as if he was a model for one of his paintings. Nice. More than nice; very, very nice. Especially once he stripped him of his clothes.

"You've been here before," Skye chuckled, admiring Martin's muslin drawstring pants riding low on his slim hips, a very tight sleeveless tank emphasizing muscular forearms and a snake tattoo on his left arm, curling seductively around his bicep.

Martin's mouth slithered into a seductive smile "It's the only place within miles of the Village. Not much choice around here."

"Why do you live here then? Don't you get bored not having a scene? You're too young to hide yourself away."

"I love the ocean."

"Do you scuba dive, sail, ride the waves?"

"All of the above," he grinned, setting Skye's heart racing. "I'm a Southern California boy. Nothing to do except surf and get stoned."

"You certainly don't look like a surfer dude." Not with his rich brown hair curling at the nape of his neck. No glasses tonight, but contacts heightening the silvery green hue of his eyes. Yes, very nice indeed.

"I couldn't pass the chance to work for Mr. Adams, gay scene or no gay scene." Martin rubbed his hand along his snake tattoo. "Seems like a fair trade. I go into the city when I need to get good and fucked."

Skye's smile broadened. "You said the magic word."

"Your place or mine?"

Skye drank back the rest of his beer, and set the bottle on the bench. "I have a room at the Marriott. We can christen the Jacuzzi."

Martin laughed, and Skye's cock reacted to the carefree exuberance of an openly gay man. Not afraid of his sexuality, not hiding behind a steel trap door, not ashamed. This is what he needed. Away from Drew, Martin might be the one to help him get his equilibrium back.

Skye ambled over to Martin, took the bottle from his hand, and kissed him. He stroked Martin's cheek, barely a downy stubble. So young, barely out of college, but the boy knew how to kiss.

Skye sucked in Martin's tongue, grinding hips and groins. Hard and hot between them, heat blistered his skin, and intensified as Martin's strong fingers massaged his cock. Skye groaned in Martin's ear, untying the drawstring to reach beneath the waistband, wanting to touch skin. Moist skin met his fingers. Fingers weaved through crisp curls to reach for what he wanted.

The crunch of gravel alerted Skye to an intruder. His hand flying out of Martin's pants, he stepped back. Even on this sultry night, Drew stood at the foot of the steps in a suit, arms crossed, legs set apart. A scowl ruined his elegant face.

Martin quickly retied his pants, his face red. "Ah, Mr. Adams. I'm surprised to see you here."

Skye recovered and pasted on an insolent grin knowing it would irritate the hell out of Drew. "What's a guy like you doing in a place like this?" he drawled, stepping under the porch light.

Drew looked over at Martin ignoring Skye. "Do you mind getting me a beer, Martin. Bud Light is fine."

Martin glanced at Skye as he pushed off from the railing. Skye pressed his palm on Martin's chest. "You're not at work. Don't let him bully you."

Martin ran his fingers down Skye's hand. He gave it a squeeze before letting go. "Looks like you two need to work things out," he whispered before taking a nip at Skye's earlobe. "Whatever it is."

Skye turned a heated glare on Drew. This homophobe ruined his evening. "Why are you here?"

"What are you planning on doing with my assistant?"

"I plan to fuck him"

"I see. So you won tonight. Poor Carl. Where is he licking his wounds?"

"On the dance floor with a cute redhead." Skye rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't worry about him. He manages."

Drew stayed by the step, refusing to back down. "I don't want you screwing around with Martin."

"You ever take a good look at him? The boy's gorgeous and willing. He's of age, so lay off."

"Not this time. I'm taking him home."

Drew strode toward the front door but Skye grabbed his sleeve, yanking him to the bench. Furious, he wanted to extract pain, so he kissed Drew with no finesse. Different from kissing Martin, Drew's lips were desperate and angry. They fought, like they always fought, for control. Teeth nicked at his lower lip drawing blood. He yelped at the sharp pain.

"That hurt." He wiped the blood with the back of his hand, staring at the red smear.

"You deserve worse." Drew handed Skye a handkerchief from his side pocket.

What man carried a handkerchief? Skye took it, pressing it to his cut lip. Anger drained from Skye's body leaving him numb. Being upset at Drew got him nowhere.

"Why did you really come?" Skye said. "You care shit for Martin."

Drew looked down at his clenched hands. "But I care shit for you." He lifted his chin, his eyes defiant. "You're doing this because of me."

"Don't flatter yourself." Skye didn't want to hear the truth, especially from Drew. "I wanted to screw him. Like I screwed you."

That tempting mouth snarled, "I hate when you lie to me."

Martin walked out juggling three bottles of beer. He stopped when he caught sight of Drew. "Ah, now's not a good time?" Drew tossed him a lethal glare. Martin set the beers by Drew's feet, grabbed one bottle, and flew back inside.

"You scared the poor boy." Skye bent around Drew to grab one of the beers, his chest pressed into Drew's leg, his one hand reaching for the backrest to maintain his balance. The man smelled too good.

Trapped in, Drew shriveled back.

Skye turned his head and grinned. "Making you nervous?" He snatched the bottle and resumed his slouch on the bench.

Skye raised his beer. "Let's drink to a truce. At least for tonight. I'm too tired to argue with you."

Drew raised his bottle in a mock salute. He removed his suit jacket, and folded it by his side. Scooting back onto the bench, he sprawled his legs out in front, and crossed his ankles.

They drank in silence. The music drifted into Skye's consciousness. He closed his eyes to soak in the beat. His muscles clenched with Drew so near, his expensive cologne swirling around him. The warmth of their bodies, all reminders of their day spent making love.

It was love, not fucking, no matter what Drew believed. Skye knew he didn't present himself as a trusting, loving partner. Not after Drew caught him with his hand down Martin's



pants. But, damn, Drew never gave him a reason to be faithful. But he would, for Drew. He'd be satisfied spending the rest of his life getting to know this man.

Not thinking about the consequences, he stood and grabbed Drew's hand, yanking him to his feet. "Come on, you owe me a dance." Skye laughed at Drew's round eyes and slack mouth.

Skye overpowered Drew in sheer muscle, and had no problem dragging him inside the bar. The dance floor was jammed. Several men had taken off their shirts, showing off glistening pecs and seductive dance moves. The music pounded in Skye's ears, heating his blood.

"You can keep your shirt on," Skye goaded, pulling Drew across the floor by his blue-striped tie.

Carl danced with the redhead he latched onto for the night, and Martin had snagged a hot blond. Skye's guilt subsided as he noticed Martin's obvious interest in his dance partner. 'Hot blond' looked happy to keep Martin company for the night.

Skye jostled and pushed and shoved, until he maneuvered to a quieter space on the edge of the dance floor. So far so good. Drew hadn't bolted or socked him in the jaw. Instead, he stood with his hands at his sides, a look of disbelief in his eyes.

Skye stepped forward, and put his arms around Drew's neck. He brushed a strand of hair behind Drew's ear, and placed a kiss beneath the lobe. A sensitive spot, Drew let out a whimper. Good. He wanted Drew to whimper.

Swaying his hips to the pulse of the music, Skye danced closer, slowly, until their groins met, seducing Drew into his arms.

"Relax, babe. No one cares here."

Tentative hands clasped Skye's hips then circled his waist. Skye chuckled as he hugged Drew until there was no space between them. He snuggled in, laying his head on Drew's shoulder, synchronizing their movements. He knew how Drew felt, tasted, loved. The memory of that day was never far from his thoughts.

Tonight, Skye wasn't about to let Drew drift away. He was snagged in by the hot spicy scent of Drew's skin, the stiff roughness of his starched shirt, the firm slender arms. All of these sensations turned his burner to high heat.

Lost in the rhythm of their bodies, Skye absorbed the warmth. Drew's breath moistened his neck when he nuzzled his face into the curve of his nape. Finally, Drew relaxed. Soft, smooth strokes glided down Skye's back, inching down but stopped before reaching the curve of his ass. They stayed this way, slow shifts of their bodies intensifying Skye's desire.

Skye grabbed Drew's hair and gently tugged his head back. "This isn't so bad?" He caught Drew's mouth in a heated kiss.

Drew's eyes flared as he pulled back. "I like dancing with you."

Skye bit Drew's neck, sucking his skin. His lips reached Drew's ear, licking the delicate shell, inhaling his warm scent. They danced, and held each other tightly, afraid to break the spell. The music stopped, and Drew moved to leave, but Skye held onto Drew's hips. He concentrated on that beautiful face, never breaking contact as he unknotted Drew's tie and swung it around his own neck.

"Now I claim you as mine."

Drew chuckled, his hand flying to his bare collar. "Because of a damn tie?"

"Think of it as the victor's right to spoils."

Drew laughed; a full-throated sexy growl. "Your ego is atrocious."

Skye held onto Drew's hips. "If you think you can escape, think again."

Drew dragged his fingers through his hair. "What if I don't want to escape?"

A hot spasm washed over Skye. Drew's teasing manner would spoil him for sure.

Skye studied Drew to search for the truth. Did Drew want him? The signs were there; flushed skin, eyes round, fingers fidgeting. Did Skye dare take it as a come-on?

"Drew? I want you. Do you want me?"

Drew stiffened, but only for a moment. He relaxed and smiled, his eyes bright and willing. "Yes, yes, yes."

That was all it took. Skye clamped Drew's wrist and dragged him across the floor, down the hall to a backroom. Drew didn't try to pull away, but let Skye lead him inside. The dim-lit room reeked of sex, the grunts of men left no confusion of why they were there.

Skye pressed Drew against the wall, and used the length of his body to hold him. He lifted Drew's arms and held his wrists. Slim, pale wrists, easy to overpower.

Desire rolled off Drew, hitting Skye head-on. He smelled it on him. Skye's fingers wandered along Drew's collar. "I'd rather do this in full light where I can see all of you."

"There will be plenty of light, later."

"You mean we can do this more than once?" Skye hummed in Drew's ear.

"You talk too much."

Taut muscles pressed into Skye's legs, groin, and chest. Drew didn't move but remained strained against the wall, strained against Skye.

Even in the low light, Skye could see Drew's panting mouth, the tip of his tongue pressed to his upper lip. Drew closed his eyes. Skye leaned in to kiss those thick lashes. Then Drew's eyes flew open, and Skye saw it. His heart lurched from the sight of lust in those dusty blue eyes. Deadly and very sexy.

Drew's lips curled. "Fuck me, you idiot."

As soon as the words slipped from his mouth, Drew bucked up his courage. There would be no turning back. He knew what happened in the backroom of gay bars. This room was no different. He had smelled the aftermath of sex as soon as his back hit the wall. He would be taken right here, and no one would pass a glance.

Skye fiercely smiled. "I want to see your face when I take you."

Oh, Christ, that meant... Drew shuddered, not with fear but anticipation. Licks of pleasure flickered along the length of his cock already too hard.

Skye released Drew's arms and went right to his shirt. Tiny white buttons flew in all directions, along with chunks of his heart. Humid air hit Drew's chest, his shirt tugged half off his shoulders. Skye went for his own fly then went for Drew's, unzipping his pants, tugging them around his knees along with his boxers. Drew blushed when his cock sprung erect. No hiding what he wanted. Not with the betrayal of his body screaming he wanted to be fucked, and fucked hard.

A deep heat traveled down to his toes. Exposed in a public place, how could he think of fucking in a bar like a whore? It shamed him how excited he was at the very idea of Skye taking him like this. He glanced at Skye's dark shadowed cock.

Skye's fingernail trailed down Drew's cock, teasing the slit, drawing out a pleasurable ache, fingers brushing his tight balls. Drew's shoulders slumped, his knees buckling, but tough hands gripped his ass. How could he think of not fucking? His insides were all fluid motion. The half-clothed devil taunted him, stroking his butt cheeks, a finger-teasing slick along the cleft of his ass.

The wall pounded against his body, and so did his heart. Drew let out a deep-throated groan. Skye's artful hands stroked the muscles in his neck, his ass left alone, at least for now. He shivered when Skye's powerful hand clenched the base of his cock. Both of them were hot and sweaty, and the pumping motion felt great. He did the same for Skye, both of them shifting their weight to get comfortable and to keep pace.

"Good for you?" Skye muttered between intakes of breath.

"Yeah, don't stop."

Skye slowed his motion to a crawl. Drew growled under his breath, pumping into the sleeve of Skye's hand.

"Damn you. You're punishing me?" Drew panted.

Skye stopped his motion. "What if I am?"

The sudden halt of sensation left Drew's nerves firing blanks. "Don't stop, perv."

"I love it when you say such nasty things."

Skye's splitting grin gave Drew a start. He met that grin when he squeezed Skye's cock and made his lover moan. Skye looked wild and feral, his hair streaming down his shoulders,

his mouth tight in pleasure, eyes half shut. Drew kissed Skye, yielding to those wily lips. He didn't fight this feeling of love, but inhaled it in, and held it tight to his chest. He'd think about it later, much later, when he had a brain.

Skye pressed his palm to Drew's cheek. Drew had never seen such need in Skye's eyes. They stared at each other, and the outer world fell to pieces.

"Love me, Skye."

Two bodies moving in sync, two bodies sweaty, half clothed, the friction of Skye's hand set Drew's groin on fire. Drew held on to Skye's shoulders, barely able to stand. Sensations fed the hot fire of lust in his belly. He grimaced, unable to hold out.

"Oh, fucking a..." His orgasm rattled every bone. Waves of sweet bliss swept over him. He moved back and smiled at the semen creamed on Skye's stomach. The smile didn't last when Skye swabbed a dab of semen on his middle finger and reached around Drew's hip.

Skye's body was nice, solid and warm, but not his intention.

Skye's finger slicked Drew's crack, his finger probing against his tight hole. Drew's stomach knotted, his teeth set on edge. He was going to be penetrated. The final giving-in to Skye Taylor, and the admittance of truth to his orientation.

Skye slipped in his finger, the pain exquisite. The finger moved inside of him, replacing pain with a sweet dull ache. Under Skye's expert motion, he relaxed.

"Ah, that feels weird." Drew breathed out.

"Babe, I'll go slow for your poor virgin ass."

Not one, now two fingers inside, working him over. Skye was skillful and gentle. So this is how it felt to be possessed by a man. Better than he expected, much better. He breathed in Skye's skin. The smell of a man was raw and real. Everything came down to this moment. All his secrets spilling out.

Skye paused. "Am I hurting you?"

"No, keep going." Drew licked his lover's collarbone, adding a love bite in confirmation.

Skye shivered in his arms. "You have no idea how long I've wanted you."

Fingers pushed in and out. Skye used Drew's ejaculation for the lubrication, keeping his ass moist. Another finger, stretching Drew from the inside, pushing past one muscle to reach another. Skye prepared him with care.

Skye's fingers worked his ass, their bodies pressed so close, the spicy, humid air around them... ah...

Skye continued his attack on his ass. He plunged three fingers deeper. Dizzy and sweaty, Drew lost all awareness except for Skye and his expert fingers. He felt his cock enlarge, his balls heavy and swollen with lust.

Another plunge, deeper, the tip of a finger scraping his prostrate. Drew shouted, hitting his head against the wall. It didn't faze him. Finally, it began to feel... incredible.

A moan pushed out of Drew's throat. Too good, too good, Christ, too good.

Skye pulled a condom from his back pocket. He stepped back to tear the foil. As Skye did this, Drew shoved his boxers and pants over his shoes, kicking them off. When the condom snapped in place his head shot up. Confronted with Skye's erect cock nestled in dark curls, he swallowed the lump in his throat. His heart pounded, his hands clenched, he never wanted something so badly as Skye inside of him.

Skye lifted Drew by the cheeks of his ass, forcing him to snag Skye's shoulders in a tight grip. Hooking his legs around Skye's waist, he gave clear access to his sphincter. Skye positioned his cock. That ring of muscles was going to give in.

Drew tensed. Skye pressed. Drew pushed.

No going back. He wanted this man inside of him. To be claimed, marked, possessed.

A low vibration hummed in his ears. The hard slap of flesh, harsh grunts, every noise fed his lust. Skye buried his head in Drew's shoulder, tickling his skin with his lips. His thick muscle pushed in and out, hypnotic, sizzling, sending chills straight to Drew's heart. He would have bruises on his butt cheeks, Skye gripped so hard.

"Ah, Christ, Skye..."

Harder, faster, deeper...his cock against Skye's stomach pulsated, his balls ready to burst. Skye filled him, possessed him, wanted him. He grit his teeth, the cords of his neck taut. Skye groaned a deep rumble. Drew clenched his ass and Skye went rigid and shouted. Followed by a warm pulsing in Drew's ass, intimate, and illicit. One sweet sensation. Skye impaling him with his cock, coming inside of him, sent him over the edge. He sailed downward, toward oblivion into a blinding white light.

"Sweet Jesus," he shouted, and creamed all over his lover's chest, not caring who heard.

Skye crumbled to the floor taking Drew with him. Drew lifted his head. He hadn't noticed the other men crowding the room until one gave off a pleasurable scream. Drew stiffened once reality came crashing over his head.

"Whoa, don't lose me." Skye cupped Drew's chin. "Spend the night with me."

"I can't believe we did this in public."

"That's all you can say after that mind-blowing fuck?"

"In public..." Drew shook his head, his skin flushed. He couldn't believe he stooped to fucking in a gay bar, but when he saw Skye's concern, he relented.

Caressing Skye's cheek, he smiled. "Yes, dear, it was mind-blowing. Now let's go to my place."

Skye's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure that's a good idea? What about Sam?"

Drew flinched at his wife's name. He refused to think about his marriage, or the consequences of spending the night with Skye. This felt too good, and too right to shut it out.

"She's out of town."

"Okay, if you're all right with it." Skye stood, helping Drew up. "Let's clean up and then I'll tell Carl and Martin we're leaving."

Drew got his pants back on, and tucked in his torn shirt the best he could. Skye brushed a few errant strands of Drew's hair, and kissed his damp cheek. "You're beautiful. I want to paint you."

"Hell, no."

No way would he pose. Talk about announcing to the world he was Skye's lover. He had his position to maintain in the community and a father to appease. He could never come out to the world.

Skye chuckled. "You know how many guys would give their right arm to have me paint them."

"I'm not your average guy."

"That you're not," Skye said before walking off.

Drew grabbed his jacket from the bench on the way out. Before he could change his mind, he hurried Skye to his BMW sports coupe, opening the passenger door. Skye raised his brows at the gesture but he got in, letting Drew close the door. Drew started the motor, but let the engine idle.

He turned to Skye, his hand resting on Skye's thigh. He started to say all the reasons why they needed to take things slow, but he couldn't find the words. Not with Skye so near. Not with the dull ache; a reminder of what they did in that backroom.

Drew put the coupe in first gear and started across the dusty parking lot, letting the roar of the motor shut out his guilt.

## Chapter Eleven

Skye woke to a glaring sun that felt like it was cooking his skin. Groaning, he turned over stealing the sheets and getting a jab in the side from his lover's foot. His lover. Looking over at Drew, curled on the right side of the bed, Skye couldn't help but watch him sleep. Drew's worry lines were all but smoothed out.

Skye planted a kiss on Drew's shoulder blade. He got the reaction he wanted when Drew moaned and reached for Skye's waist, burying his head in his chest.

Skye loved the intimacy between them. He loved holding him. He loved feeling his body heat.

He loved Drew.

A shock jolted his heart. If Drew left him stranded, not wanting a relationship, he'd be forever lost. Drew was his family now, the link to his childhood, and the dreams they once shared. He had to be careful and never, ever mention love. At least not yet, not until he knew the extent of Drew's feelings for him.

Skye untangled himself from Drew's arms, and sat, shoving a pillow behind his back. He looked around the bedroom, taken in by the sleek clean lines of the furnishings and the monk-like atmosphere. What astounded him was that the room appeared to be floating above the ocean. Glass walls opened to the sea and the sky. The house showcased Drew's talent, and Skye couldn't wait to see the rest of it. It had been too dark when they had stumbled up the stairs to the bedroom, shedding their clothes along the way, too much into each other to turn on the lights.

Skye quietly crawled out of bed to use the bathroom. A blue robe hung on a hook on the back side of the door. Once he put it on, he inhaled Drew's scent embedded in the soft fabric. The scent stirred memories of last night. Once Drew had shed his inhibitions, he let it all go. They tried several positions, coming several times, proof in every one of Skye's aching muscles. He smiled at the large Jacuzzi tub, saving the possibilities for later.

After washing, he made his way downstairs in bare feet, careful not to wake his sleeping beauty.

Taking in the living room, an uneasiness crept in as he viewed the paintings, the deep red leather furniture and all the knickknacks couples gathered during their years of marriage.

Drew lived in this house with Sam. He ate, slept, and made love in this house, with Sam. How did Skye fit in this house, with Drew?

Skye cuddled a throw pillow to his stomach and sat on the leather sofa. He gnawed on his thumb and stared at the ocean. The bright sun cast a teal hue on the surface of the water. He visualized the individual paint strokes of creating water on canvas. Hard to do, but he'd mastered the technique. In order to paint abstract he'd first learned to paint realistic. Tedious,

but necessary lessons, first taught to him by his dad.

The modern paintings on the wall surprised him. Kapoor, De Kooning, Hockney... He didn't know Drew had such good taste when it came to art, or maybe it was Sam who purchased the paintings.

"Good morning." Drew stood on the top landing naked. His cowlick stuck out, and he grinned sleepily at Skye, resting his chin on the banister.

The sight made Skye's heart race. "Hope you don't mind I borrowed your robe?"

"Looks good on you."

"It smells like you."

Drew exaggerated a frown and disappeared back into the bedroom. Skye didn't move from the sofa, wanting Drew to come to him. Minutes later, Drew appeared dressed in gray sweats and a black t-shirt. After descending the stairs, he headed for the kitchen. Skye smelled the aroma of freshly ground coffee and his stomach growled in approval.

"I'm starving," Skye shouted above the grinder.

Breakfast was served on a large wood tray. Fresh mugs of steaming coffee, toasted 7 grain bread, almond butter and fresh sliced cantaloupe. One whiff of the aroma and Skye's mouth watered.

Drew sat cross-legged on the floor next to the coffee table. Skye dug in, too hungry to care about getting crumbs on the sofa. They ate in companionable silence. Skye rubbed his stomach. He could get used to this life. He sighed, releasing his contentment.

"Have any plans for today?" he asked.

"Just dinner with my father." Drew paused, his toast poised half way to his mouth. He set it down, brushing the crumbs on his plate. "It's always an ordeal, but a necessary evil. We go over my clients then he asks when he can expect his first grandchild."

There went the pleasant feeling. Skye didn't want to discuss Sam or Drew's need to be straight and married. "Are you working on it?" He winced, knowing his voice sounded too sharp. Ryan had said that Drew and Sam hadn't slept together in years, but did Ryan really know what went on behind the closed door of Sam and Drew's marriage?

Drew barely looked at Skye, tugging at the hem of his t-shirt. "Well, we haven't, you know, had sex in quite some time. But she wants a baby."

"What do you want?" Skye wanted to shout 'what about us' but pressed his lips to keep the words sealed in.

Drew touched Skye's knee, his fingers restless. Those same fingers, which a few hours ago explored every inch of Skye's body. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Is this a brush-off?"



"There can't be a future for us."

Skye sat very still. A burn in the back of his eyes forced him to blink. He wouldn't cry tears for a man who didn't love him. Never loved him, apparently. Skye slid down by Drew, and clutched his arm, giving him a rough shake. Every part of him trembled. He didn't need this. The hiding behind lies that Drew thrived on.

"Come out. I'll help you through it. Don't do this to yourself."

Drew's voice rose in panic. "Don't ask that of me. My father would never accept it."

"You're a grown man afraid of your dad. It's insane."

"I won't divorce Sam."

Skye had enough. He'd never been a very patient man. Cupping Drew's neck, he held him. He attacked Drew's mouth, pulling Drew's t-shirt from his waistband to get to his bare skin. Skye brushed his fingers against a warm stomach. Skye couldn't walk away from Drew, wouldn't walk away. They belonged together. His kiss fell silent as the door slammed somewhere in the house.

"So, Skye Taylor came back for his man."

Startled, Skye jumped and frowned at a defiant Sam standing with her arms at her sides, hands clenched, a leather handbag slung over one shoulder. Dressed in a red power suit, she stood ready for battle.

Sam was a beautiful woman, more beautiful than her photograph, or Skye's memories. He pulled the robe tighter across his chest, feeling exposed. No hiding what he and Drew had been doing.

"It took me a moment to recognize you." Sam kicked off her heels and hung her purse on the hat rack by the door. She primped her hair in the mirror and turned, her gaze fierce.

"Nice to see you, now get out."

Drew stood, the lines around his eyes deep. His voice schooled in perfect composure. "Skye's my guest. There's no need to be rude."

Sam's chin jutted at Drew's remark. She strolled over to the wet bar and poured herself a brandy. She drank it back. Then she sat in a chair across from Skye, crossing her leg, the swish of silk the only sound. A stiff smile made her eyes squint.

"You wouldn't want daddy or the town to find out about your sexual preference," Sam said, not bothering to hide her insolence. "I'll keep your secret, if you keep your agreement."

A ball of anger burned in Skye's gut. "Why stay in a loveless marriage? Let him go." Skye stood and reached to take Drew's hand, but was swatted away. "Drew? Are you willing to live like this?"

Sam steeled her gaze on Drew. "Darling, it seems Skye has the impression you're the victim?"

Drew rubbed his hand down his face. Skye remained frozen, his heart tapping too loud. He wanted to shake Drew out of his stupor. "What is she talking about?"

Drew collapsed on the sofa. His eyes pleaded, "Skye, I'm sorry. Just go. This is impossible. We're impossible."

"Tell me what the hell's going on?"

Sam let out a ruthless chuckle. "This is rich. Tell him, Drew. How you used him."

Drew turned to Skye. "Go, I'll explain later."

"I want to hear it now." Skye's stomach soured at the implication. He went from anger to a horrible disbelief that he'd been played. "If you don't tell me, then Sam will." Surely, she'd delight in digging the knife a little deeper. He already felt gutted.

Sam's laugh held no humor. "This is very entertaining but I have an engagement, so let's get this over with. Drew will never divorce me, nor will he leave the closet. He used you to get off, but he never had any plans on leaving me for you. I agreed to step aside so he could get you out of his system. Now that he has, he won't be seeing you again."

Skye's head reeled. He turned to Drew, his face blazing hot. "You don't love Sam."

"Go home." Drew stacked the dirty plates. "And you," he glared at Sam, "get out of my sight."

Drew disappeared into the kitchen with the dirty dishes.

Skye's body turned from fire to ice. He faced Sam, barely able to speak. "What's in it for you?"

Sam shrugged her elegant shoulders. "We've agreed to have a baby. I want my child to have the best, and the Adams' inheritance will help. Father Adams loves me, and he'll dote on his grandchild." Sam's face softened. "You might not believe me, but I love Drew. I always have."

"Then set him free."

Sam jumped from her chair, her hands fisted. "I can't! I won't! Not to the likes of you." She took an angry step forward. "He'll forget about you, and when he does, I'll be waiting."

Skye turned his back, sick of looking at Sam. He hurried for the stairs. He had to get out of this house. The room was shrinking, ready to suffocate him. He pressed his hand to his chest, thankful his heart still beat. The first stages of a panic attack hit hard and fast. His chest tightened, the edges of his vision blurring. He clung to the rail and forced his legs to climb the stairs.

Somehow he managed to get to the bedroom. He plopped on the edge of the bed and steadied his rapid breathing. One step at a time. He had to get dressed then make it down the stairs and out the door. He could do this.

He slowed down his heartbeat by concentrating on his breathing. Sweat beaded on his neck and he lifted his hair to cool his skin. He heard Drew and Sam arguing downstairs. What an idiot for not seeing through the con.

The air held the scent of their recent lovemaking. The reminder crashed over his head how close he'd been to getting what he wanted. He didn't know who had it worse. He had lost a lover and best friend, but Drew had lost himself.

Skye dressed, leaving the robe on the bathroom hook. A wave of dizziness came over him, and he sat back on the bed, waiting for it to pass. Skye shuddered as he felt a presence in the room. Drew sat next to him. Skye stared at the thick carpet. God, how he still wanted him. Drew's hand lay a hair's breadth from Skye's leg. They didn't dare touch each other.

"I'm sorry I misled you," Drew said. "You're everything I want in a lover. Everything."

That didn't salve the hurt. "Have there been other men?"

"There's been a few, but long before us. Carl, well, we kissed, nothing else. That's the truth."

Skye rubbed his forehead to ease his throbbing headache. He let out a tight laugh. "So you accept you're gay, but you're willing to play it straight?" He shook his head. "What does your dad have over you?"

"Try to understand. You know my father, how it's been since we were kids. Ever since I can remember, he hammered into me, duty above all else." Drew took in a breath, paused, and exhaled slowly. When he spoke, his angry tone vanished, leaving shards of bitterness. "He hated that we were friends. But that's the one thing I defied him on. I had refused to give you up. And then you left."

Skye turned to finally look at Drew. His body was bent and slightly rocking, his arms crossed over his stomach. Skye reached to hug him, but stopped, shocked at how easily he could give in. Wearily, he rose, having nothing left to say. Drew knew what Skye wanted, but he wasn't willing to grasp for happiness. Or maybe he couldn't. Skye obviously had nothing Drew needed.

Drew's hand shot out to stop him. "I'm sorry I can't be who you want me to be, but it's my choice."

The finality of Drew's statement finally sunk in. Skye walked out of the room, down the stairs and left by the front door. He would not look back, afraid his weakness for Drew would ruin him. He forced every breath, even and steady.

Steady would get him home. Home was New York. New York was where he belonged. He'd sell the cottage and never, ever return. But all that had to wait. Now he was going to get stinking drunk.

## Chapter Twelve

Drew sat stiffly across from his father. The formal dining room with its dark wood and heavy brocade curtains was bleak. Grim, Drew thought, much like his mood. His rage against Sam had astonished him. He wanted to strangle her, but most of all, he wanted his freedom.

Drew kept his face neutral while his father droned on about his investments. Ryan rolled his eyes but kept eating. It was the three of them, Father and his two sons, as it had been since their mother died twenty years before.

When the last of the dishes were cleared, Andrew Senior lit a cigar and began his weekly interrogation.

"Drew, did you get the Weinberg project?"

"Yes Father. I'm flying to London on Monday."

Andrew turned his attention to his youngest son. "When do you plan on dating a woman you can actually introduce to me?"

Ryan shoved back his chair and crossed his leg over his thigh. He yawned. "Aren't you bored with asking me this? You already have one son who's fulfilled familial duty. Leave me out of it."

Andrew bit the tip of his cigar, his eyes narrowing on Drew. "I want a grandson. You've been married long enough."

Drew clenched his jaw. "I don't want children."

Andrew Sr. pushed away his plate, and set his cigar in a crystal ashtray next to him. Steeped fingers was a sure sign he was about to demand an explanation. Before he could get in a word, Ryan butted in.

"Bro, something's eating at you? Is this about Skye Taylor?"

Drew glowered at Ryan. While he loved his brother, he didn't care for the mind games Ryan found amusing, especially at his expense. How much did he know?

Andrew Sr. picked up his cigar and puffed heavily. His dark blue eyes pinpointed on his oldest son. "Skye Taylor?" he said, gruffly. "I didn't know he was in town? Isn't he some queer artist now? I never approved of him. He's not the kind of man you should associate yourself with."

Ryan laughed, shaking the room alive. "Yeah, he's gay, Father, and proud of it. I respect the guy for not hiding who he is."

Drew pulled at the knot of his tie. He knew the comment was aimed at him. He was ashamed. He'd hurt the one person who dared to love him. The one person he dared to love.

"I'm thinking of divorcing Sam." There, he said it, and once said, it felt good.

Drew's father shifted in his seat, stubbing his cigar in the ashtray. "Certainly not. We've never had a divorce in this family."

Ryan snorted. "For god's sakes, this isn't the stone age. Everyone does it. If Drew doesn't love the bitch, then why stay married?"

"Ryan, watch your mouth," Andrew Sr. snapped, the whip in his tone arrogant.

Drew's stomach knotted, the meal suddenly dead weight in his stomach. "We're not happy."

"Happiness? Marriage is a duty, a responsibility. It has nothing to do with happiness."

Ryan rose from the table and stretched his arms over his head. "I've had enough for one night." He placed his hands on the table and leaned toward Drew. "I think you need to face the truth, bro."

The doorbell broke into the conversation, an insistent ring echoing from the hallway. Voices were heard, and Drew recognized father's valet. Heavy footsteps followed and Drew's heart jammed as Skye stood in the archway, hair tangled, t-shirt wrinkled, his stormy expression passionate. Skye looked ready for a fight.

Unsteady on his feet, Skye stumbled but caught the back of a chair. It was obvious he'd been drinking, Drew smelled the alcohol from where he sat.

Skye pulled out a chair, and sat with an undignified plop. He brushed his hair behind his ears, revealing his diamond stud. Andrew Sr.'s mouth dipped at the sight. Drew would have found this encounter amusing if the stakes weren't so high. Skye knew the truth about him.

"Hello, Mr. Adams," Skye slightly slurred the words, but hung on. "I'm Drew's high school friend. Skye Taylor. We've met once or twice, when I forced Drew to introduce me to his family."

"You're drunk," Drew hissed. Skye's shit-faced grin warned Drew things were going to get worse.

"Yeah, had to be after this morning," Skye barked.

Drew pushed back his chair and grabbed Skye's arm, ready to oust him out of the house. He never was able to hold his liquor well, and he feared what Skye would say next.

Skye wrenched out of Drew's grasp, turning to the father. "I'm in love with your son, and he feels the same about me. Let him go."

Andrew Sr. shot from his chair, bringing his hand down on the table, sending the silverware rattling. "What's the meaning of this? Get this... this man out of my sight."

Drew went rigid. He balled his hand into a fist. Blood pounded in his ears, his fury pointed directly at Skye. The pervert outed him in front of his father! His fist slammed into Skye's jaw, sending Skye flying backwards, along with the chair. A crash reverberated across the room as Skye hit the wall. Drew cradled his aching hand. Christ! That was twice he'd attacked Skye since their paths had crossed again.

Ryan rushed to help Skye, pressing two fingers to his neck. "He's alive, thank god."

All eyes turned toward Drew. A butterfly pinned to a board had to feel more comfortable. Defenseless against his father's cold stare, he swallowed the bile burning the back of his throat. Shaking his aching hand, it hurt like hell. He frowned at the bruise forming on Skye's chin. What an infuriating, arrogant, selfish idiot, declaring his love like that.

Ryan smiled, a curious twist to his lips. "Have you been sleeping with this joker?"

A groan whistled through Skye's teeth as he tried to rise, falling back to the floor. Ryan braced Skye's back with his arm and helped him sit up. Skye peered at Drew through half-mast eyes, massaging his chin. "That hurt."

Drew snarled, "You bet your ass. Ryan, get him out of here before I call the police."

Ryan helped Skye to his feet, and led him away. Drew refused to move. He refused to disobey the man he obeyed all his life. The pressure in his temples increased, his body shutting down. Everything around him dissolved.

"Drew, you will forget all about Skye Taylor. We will never discuss this again."

He found his voice, but barely heard himself speak. "Father, we need to talk."

"No, we will never talk about this again."

His father stared at him as if he wasn't his son, as if he'd spawned a stranger. Well, he didn't feel like himself, he didn't even know how he should feel. He turned sharply and strode out the door. Skye had just outed him, and in his weird way, set him free, but he felt more alone than ever.

## Chapter Thirteen

Skye pressed his fingers into his right temple and rubbed gently. He stared at the canvas as his headache scraped his skull. He'd been painting for weeks straight, no breaks except to go down the street for coffee and fast food. Carl called daily to check on him, as if he'd do something stupid like slit his wrists. After what he did to Drew, it was tempting, but not necessary. His guilt was enough to shame him into becoming a recluse.

Franc knocked on the door before he walked in. "You haven't left that spot since yesterday. Have you eaten?"

"Not hungry."

Franc swept his gaze over the painting. "Brooding over closet-man?" Skye stepped back from the portrait. Franc ran his hand over his buzz cut. "Does he really look that good?"

Skye dropped his paintbrush on the table then glanced at Drew's portrait. "Yeah. Actually better than this sad attempt."

"You going to tell me what happened? Ever since you've come home, you've been a pain in the ass."

"It's not your problem."

"Yeah, well, it is. I'm your friend and you look like shit." Franc walked over to Skye and pulled at his loose t-shirt. "You've lost weight..." He let the question hang.

Skye shook his head. "I don't have AIDS, so don't look at me like that."

Skye tied his hair back and sat on the stool. He curled his legs behind the bars and stared at the painting. Not bad, for a realistic piece, but he struggled with the area around the eyes. The eyes staring back at him held a long-borne pain without hope.

"I did a shitty thing." His mouth twisted along with his heart. He rubbed his jaw as the awful memory assailed him of Drew knocking his lights out. Well deserved, but he hated that this was the last time Drew had touched him.

The biting edge in Franc's voice softened. "It's about this architect, isn't it? He really did a number on you."

"I outed him to his father."

Skye would have laughed at Franc's stunned expression if it wasn't so deplorable. Franc muttered under his breath, "What a shithead."

"I got mad. I got drunk. I got obnoxious."

Franc shook his head. "No one deserves that."

"Yeah, well I told his father I loved him, and he loved me. I was drunk out of my mind."

"Tell me you're not that much of a bonehead." Franc stared at his friend. "Have you two talked since?"

"Sure, he calls me every day to say how glad he was that I outed his ass."

Franc laughed so hard tears wet his eyes. He couldn't stop and Skye was getting irritated. Drew hadn't tried once to contact him. Not that he didn't blame him, but he'd hoped. Hoped and hoped, and then hoped again. Nothing came of it. Nothing would. But he couldn't let go of this deep-seated belief that he and Drew belonged together.

No longer in the mood to paint, Skye dropped his paintbrush in a jar of turpentine. "Stop laughing, it's not funny."

"No, it's a goddamn tragedy." Franc sniffled, waving his hand toward the painting. "Why paint his portrait?"

"Think of it as an exorcism." Skye threw him a rag. "Blow your nose and get out of here."

Franc took the rag and left, promising to order take-out.

Skye flopped on the bed. He hooked his thumbs in his jean pockets. Mike Cole had called the moment he heard the rumors that Drew had left Sam. The village residents had been twitting with gossip. When Mike told him the news, a sliver of hope had broken through his misery. Then, reality had sunk in. The humiliation Drew faced, having to work and live in a small town where everyone knew everyone's business. Drew would hate it, and he'd hate Skye for causing this change in his life.

Three months later, and Skye was still a coward, still hiding in his loft. Painting saved his sanity, and he poured his soul into his work. Scattered around his room were several new paintings. His heartache was hidden in the darkness of tones buried beneath layers of paint. Every stroke had purged his guilt until he felt numb. He lived this way now, feeling nothing.

Skye let out a long sigh, bringing his hands to his head. He had enough of this self-indulgent pity party. Either he moved on, or took a chance at happiness.

He reached for his cell phone on the night stand. Before he could change his mind, he punched in Drew's office number. Martin answered in two rings.

"Martin, hi, this is Skye. Skye Taylor. I wondered if we could meet this weekend in the city?"

Skye met Martin at Steiner's Deli over pastrami sandwiches and kosher pickles. Skye smiled at Martin chomping down the thick meat between bites of pickle.

"You have to agree it's the best in the city, like I promised."

Martin nodded, licking his fingers. "So why the call? This is about Mr. Adams."

"Sorry, yeah."

"Even before you ditched me at the Roadhouse I figured you had a thing for him. Then, there's the rumors."

Skye flinched at the implication. "How is he?"



"What is it with you two?"

Martin brushed his bangs away from his eyebrows. He looked like the surfer dude he'd claimed to be, now that he let his hair grow longer, gentle reddish-brown waves barely touching his shoulders. The man was attractive. It didn't help that Martin sucked his fingers to lap up the last drips of pickle juice. Skye looked away to clear any sexual thoughts he might have of fucking this wire-roped bundle of energy. His heart wasn't in it anyway.

Martin scoffed, bringing Skye back to attention. "Why use me as a middle-man? There's the phone, even email."

"I tried calling, left a couple of messages. He didn't return my calls."

"This usually means the person doesn't want to talk to you." Martin didn't bother hiding his sarcasm. "What you did, well, I'm not sure it's excusable. You forced him into a bad corner."

"Yeah, well, I was drunk." Although that excuse was getting old. When Sam revealed Drew would never leave her, a knife-like pain sliced through his heart. Sliced nice and clean, right in half.

"Okay, I'm bad. But Sam was forcing him into a loveless marriage. If he came out, he'd be free of her."

"Yeah, and throw himself right into your arms. You're a hopeless romantic. I didn't think there were any of you left in this world." Martin didn't hold anything back. "Coming out was his choice, not yours. In your foolish wisdom, you made the decision for him. I don't call that love, I call it selfish."

Skye pushed away his half-eaten sandwich. "Cut me some slack."

Martin eyed the sandwich and licked his lip. "Ah, you're not going to finish it?" Before Skye could answer, Martin grabbed for the plate.

Despite the tension between them, Skye laughed at the young man's healthy appetite, betting his sexual appetite was just as healthy. "I enjoy watching you eat. Are you always this hungry?"

"Can't get this back home," he mumbled between bites.

Skye's voice slipped a notch. "Yeah, there are lots of things you can't get in Woodland Village."

Martin wiped his mouth with a napkin and tossed it next to his plate. He sat across from Skye, his arm draped casually along the top edge of the booth. He wore a Coldplay t-shirt and faded jeans, no jewelry, not needing any adornment. His best feature was his striking green eyes, a color Skye would have difficulty getting right in paint. He wondered if Drew had set his sights on his assistant, and a pang of jealousy startled him.

"How can I help you win back your true love?" Martin smiled, letting his question go unanswered. "It's why you invited me here. Not to get me in your bed."

Smart young man, or a smart-ass, Martin Pierson had his number. "It's been months, and not a word. I know my actions deserve this cold treatment, but I need to speak to him. Try to explain, apologize. I need to know if I have a chance."

"He's getting a divorce."

Excited at this bit of news, Skye felt a weight lifting from his heart. "Is he seeing anyone?"

Martin's brow hitched. "He hasn't told me if he is. We're all business."

"I can't get anyone to tell me his address. Even Mike won't spill."

"He'll fire me if I tell you."

"He won't find out."

Martin spread out a napkin. He got a pen from his cloth messenger bag. "You're too handsome to say no to." His voice carried a wave of annoyance.

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Martin scribbled the address and shoved the napkin across the table. Now that Skye had Drew's address, he let the paper hover in his hand.

Martin reached across the table and squeezed Skye's arm. "I haven't told you everything."

Skye's heart lurched. He knew. Knew as surely as if Martin had confessed. "You've slept with him."

Martin pulled back his hand. He slumped in his seat, crossing his arms across his chest. "Yeah, once. We were working late." He lowered his eyes. "He looked so vulnerable."

"A pity fuck. How kind of you." Skye's cheeks blazed. He clenched his hands, trying to control his temper.

"Like you wouldn't have slammed my ass if Drew didn't interrupt us that night. It didn't mean anything. He needed someone, and you weren't there."

Skye's anger fell away. It was true. He would have taken Martin to bed and not thought anything about it. He had no exclusive rights to Drew's body. Certainly not now. Certainly not ever. His relationship with Drew was a phantom dream.

Martin slipped out of the booth. He stood next to Skye and peered down. "Drew's having a hard time coping. He doesn't show it, but it's there. In those sky blue eyes of his." Martin patted Skye's shoulder. "The villagers don't like it when one of their own goes AWOL. Take responsibility. Help the poor guy deal."

Skye watched Martin walk out the door, and retreat around the corner. He pocketed the address, paid the bill, and took his time walking home.

He had left Drew alone to face his worst fear, being labeled gay by his peers, his family and friends. Friends forever. That's what they vowed as teenagers. A vow Skye had promised never to break. But now he had, in the worst way, when Drew needed him the most.

Skye made a mental list in his head. Pack his bags, call Carl to let him know he'd be in town, tell Franc to watch his place. A rush of adrenalin heightened his determination. He would set things right between them. No matter what the outcome. As lovers or friends.

## Chapter Fourteen

Skye paced in front of the Coffee Zone windows, his hands shoved in his pockets. He closed his eyes to the cloudless sky and let the ocean breeze cool down his face. It was a perfect day for a picnic, or to sail out in the bay. He wouldn't be doing either of these things. Instead, he waited under the Coffee Zone awning, too nervous to enjoy the view, or the sunny day.

Once Skye had driven into town, he went directly to Drew's apartment and waited for him on the front steps. Drew tended to keep late hours, so it wasn't until after eight P.M. that he'd showed. When he saw Skye he halted, and almost turned around, but something stopped him. Skye had no idea what changed Drew's mind, but he didn't push it.

At first, Drew had been angry but then resigned when he realized Skye wasn't going to leave. Skye then suggested they meet the next day in public, at the Coffee Zone after work. Expecting a flat-out refusal, Skye had been relieved when Drew had agreed. Now he wondered if this was such a great idea. He rubbed his chin, remembering their last encounter.

Skye glimpsed at the figure turning the corner. His breath hitched at the sight of Drew dressed in khakis and a striped shirt, his casual look finished off with a linen jacket. The man knew how to dress.

Drew stopped a few feet from where Skye stood.

A skitter of nerves hit Skye. "Ah, thanks for meeting with me. I didn't know if you would show."

"We're not children anymore."

"No, but what I did was childish."

"True."

Drew's hair shifted in the breeze, the setting sun glowing in the golden highlights of his hair. Skye's stomach fluttered at the scent of Drew's cologne. His tongue seemed too thick to speak; he worked his jaw but no words came out. Too tongue-tied, Skye racked his brain for something to say. Before he had a chance to speak, Drew brushed past him, and disappeared inside the Coffee Zone.

Skye followed Drew to a table at the far end of the shop. It was after work, and only a few tables remained empty.

"What will you have?" Skye said, taking out his wallet. "My treat since I asked you here."

"Coffee, black."

"Right. I'll be right back."

Skye surveyed the desserts, but decided to hold back. Drew didn't like sweets. He ordered two coffees and turned to view the room while he waited. Two men dressed in suits glanced Drew's way, laughing as they turned back to their conversation. Skye clenched his hands, hoping Drew didn't notice the men's curious glances. Living in Manhattan made him numb to

the homophobia evident in many small towns and cities. Drew must feel like the whole world judged him.

Skye set the coffees on the table and sat across from Drew. Steam rose off their mugs. Drew blew into the dark liquid before taking a careful sip.

He looked at Skye, his eyes shuttered. "Say what you have to say, and be quick. I'm leaving for London tomorrow and have things to do."

"But I just got here." Skye grimaced at his outburst. "Sorry. I know your schedule doesn't revolve around me. I took a chance you'd be in town. I wanted to apologize in person."

The edges of Drew's mouth whitened. "What you did was shitty. My father hasn't spoken to me since that night. Sam is smearing my name around town, and I..." His voice caught. "I'm not sure who I am anymore."

"I know who you are. A damn fine architect, an intelligent man..." Skye's voice cracked, unable to snuff out his emotions. "Ever since we were kids, I understood this talent you carry inside. This beauty...I tried to paint it, capture it on canvas, but I failed. It eludes me."

Like you elude me.

Drew banged his mug on the table. "Didn't you forget my most important trait. I'm gay."

Skye understood Drew's sarcasm but he refused to cater to it. "Trust me, it'll become easier. Let me help you," Skye hurried to add, "...as a friend." Not wanting to put pressure on a skittish 'barely out of the closet' gay man.

Drew stared into his coffee mug. "There's nothing you can do to help."

Skye wanted to hold Drew's hand, touch him, but he didn't dare comfort him in public. "I didn't sell the cottage. It'll be a great retreat when I need to get away from the city. I'm sticking around." Enough of circling the truth, Skye had to say it. "I want us to be together." The love word would come later.

Drew didn't acknowledge Skye's confession, he didn't look up from his coffee, only drank in silence, silence turning into awkwardness. Skye touched Drew's hand briefly hoping to catch his attention.

"Are you ever going to forgive me?"

Drew rubbed the back of his neck keeping his eyes downcast. "How I feel about you is complicated." A blush spread across his cheeks.

"Are you saying you care for me?"

Drew sniffed, pushing away his mug. Finally, he met Skye's eyes. "You know I do, but I'm still angry with you."

"I'm sorry. I can't say it enough. I wish I could take it all back."

"Then why did you do it?" Frustration edged Drew's tone.

"I was drunk. All I could see was Sam sneering at me. I hated you for allowing them to use you, bending over for Sam, for your father, baring your throat." Skye bit his lip, sucking it in. "But I hated your father more, for forcing you to live a lie."

Drew reached across the table and held Skye's hand. Skye was thankful for the small gesture of peace.

"I can't stay mad at you. Never could. In some ways, you did me a favor. I'm finally free of my father. And, my clients don't care who I sleep with, my friends, well, Mike and Tamara are fine with it. Ryan has taken it well."

"So I'm forgiven?"

"You'll have to make it up to me. Can we go to your place?"

Skye inhaled too quickly, choking on air. Taken aback, he didn't know how to interpret Drew's request. Did he want to... no... no way.

Drew repressed a smile, barely. "You look flustered. Did I say something wrong?"

"No, but why my place?"

"I'd like to see how you furnished the cottage. And, we can, you know, talk."

"Right. Talk. Sure."

Drew glanced over to the two suited men and frowned. "I think it's better to hash things out in private."

Skye heartily agreed.

Drew and Skye lounged on the sofa, Skye's arm lazily draped along the backrest, Drew's head resting on Skye's forearm. They'd been at it for hours until words were no longer adequate to define their relationship. Drew looked toward the bay window, slightly ajar to let in the breeze. He sniffed the sea air. The roar of ocean waves crashed on the shore and echoed throughout the room.

"You really outdid yourself," Skye said, contently. "I love being here, but I especially love being here with you."

"I see you kept your mother's antique mirror." A round mirror bordered in gilded gold balls with an eagle perched on the top, hung in a prominent position on the opposite wall. "I thought you hated it."

Skye shifted, snuggling closer to Drew. "It's so ugly its kitsch. I also kept my dad's easel and favorite brushes, mom's kiln. Stuff I couldn't bear to part with." Tears misted Skye's eyes. "God, I thought I was over it."

Drew stroked Skye's cheek, wiping away the escaped tears. "You never get over the loss. Not really."

"Do you feel the same about your mom?"

"Sometimes a scent or sound reminds me of her, and I find myself falling slowly into my memories. I wonder about a lot of things. If she would have accepted me, or if my life might have been different if she were alive."

Skye kissed Drew quietly, and gently. He pulled away to say the most frightening words in Drew's vocabulary. "I love you."

Drew's earlobes burned. He looked down at his hands clutched in his lap. I love you, too. Yes, yes, I love you. But he couldn't say it.

Drew checked his watch. He was taking an early morning flight. He tugged at Skye's hand draped over his shoulder, and brought it to his lips. He kissed the bony knuckles, comforted by the scent of oil paint.

"I'm taking a flight to London in the morning. Come with me. We can spend a week there; really get to know each other again. What do you say?"

"You're paying?" Skye teased.

"On my company account," he quipped back.

"You're on. It'll be great. There's a Francis Bacon at the Tate, and the British Museum has a--"

"Slow down, cowboy. I have other plans besides spending every second in a gallery or museum."

Skye wiggled his eyebrows. "Like what?" And he kissed him. Not gentle, not quiet, not kind. Their tongues weaved and tangled; all the tension between them in that kiss. Drew could feel his erection growing hard. He clawed at Skye's shirt, not able to get enough of him. Practically in Skye's lap, he shifted to bring down the heat. He gazed at Skye's clothed body.

"You have too many clothes on," he growled, running his fingers through Skye's hair. "Strip. Right now."

Skye wiggled out of Drew's arms, and slipped his t-shirt over his head, his hair flowing across his shoulders. Drew's eyes were drawn to the sight of Skye's sculptured chest and muscular pecs, and the intricate tattoo bolstering Skye's artistic mystique.

"You never used to work out," Drew said, squeezing Skye's strong, solid forearm. "As a kid, you hated physical activity of any kind. Your nose was always buried in your sketchbook."

Skye grabbed Drew's chin, lifting it close to his mouth. "This nonsense from the smartest kid in class? I recall you were too delicate for such activities."

Drew scowled. "Delicate? There you go again, making me sound like some hothouse flower."

Skye ruffled Drew's hair. Up went his wicked grin. "You're prettier than most women I know."

"Screw you." But Drew laughed, shaking his head. He couldn't keep up with Skye's teasing. Maybe instead, he should try acting like a man in charge. He rubbed the sexy bulge of Skye's jeans. Skye yelped, tightening his grip on Drew's chin.

"Strip, right now, while I watch." Drew's demand stern. "And, make it slow."

Skye pursed his mouth. "Giving orders now?"

"Damn right. It's my turn to be on top."

Skye narrowed his eyes, unable to hide a flash of doubt. "I've never--"

"Been a bottom? Trust me. You'll like it." Turning the tables on his lover gave Drew courage. He wanted to please Skye, to give him pleasure beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

Drew moved to the far end of the sofa, his hands folded in his lap. A smile lit his face. "I'm ready to watch the show." He'd enjoy it. Even as teenagers, he loved watching Skye play with abandon.

With a sinful grin in place, Skye sauntered toward the bay window. He positioned himself in front of Drew. He thrust out his hip in jest. Slowly, he pulled down his zipper, pushing back his fly. Eagerness made Drew's mouth twitch, his eyes glued to the beautiful man in front of him.

Sweeping up his hair, Skye's smile turned devious. He turned around, the tight fit of his jeans showing off his ass. Wiggling his butt, he thrust his thumbs into his waistband and slowly slid down his jeans. No boxers, only skin. Drew blew out air held in too tight. Oh, what an ass. Drew knew exactly what he wanted to do with it.

Skye turned around, showing off his cock springing from a flock of dark curls. Wrapping his fingers around the hard muscle, Skye began pumping, driving Drew's heart into overdrive. Determined to stay in control, he swallowed, easing the dryness of this throat.

"Kneel on all fours, your ass facing me," Drew commanded, his voice husky. Skye's shoulders hitched but he did as Drew ordered.

Drew's cock stiffened even more at Skye's vulnerable position. Keeping his gaze on that round firm ass, he kicked off his shoes, and shoved down his pants, leaving them crumpled on the floor. Shoes were kicked beneath the sofa, shirt tossed over the back of a chair, boxers and socks piled on the floor.

His hands itched to run his hands up and down those steely thighs. Tired of being compared to a delicate woman, he would show Skye that he was all male.

Drew sauntered over, kneeling before Skye. He lifted Skye's chin. "Have condoms, lube?"

"Nightstand drawer." Skye's voice strained, eyes zeroed in on Drew's erection. "What are you planning?"

Was that a taint of fear in those feral gray eyes? It must be true. Skye had never been topped. A rush of compassion washed over Drew followed by an incredible sexual thrill of be-



ing his first.

"Deal with it." Drew kissed Skye's mouth, lingering before pulling away.

The light in Skye's eyes flashed. "Do you know what you're doing?"

Drew chuckled.

By the looks of Skye's attentive cock, this role reversal excited him. Drew made haste to the bedroom. He shuffled through the nightstand and found the needed items. Hurrying back, he knelt behind Skye, enjoying the view. He dropped the lube and condoms next to him for easy access. He didn't want to hurt Skye, but God, he wanted to take him in the ass; to possess this arrogant beautiful man, and brand Skye forever as his.

With confident strokes, he ran his finger along the slick crease, pleased to see Skye's body tense. More than this, he wanted to force raunchy noises from Skye's so-sure mouth. He parted Skye's cheeks and blew a puff of air on the puckered hole. He had ass-fucked a couple of men who enjoyed this position. But doing this with a person he loved took it to another level.

Skye shoved his ass in Drew's face. "Ah, shit, man..."

Drew massaged the cheeks, and got a thrill from Skye's harsh breathing. "Easy boy..."

Skye twisted his head around, his eyes dark as sin, his hair plastered around his face. All of Skye was panting. "I've never let anyone—"

"Do you?"

He gave Skye's butt cheek a quick bite, and Skye growled. "Fucking tease."

"What I like to hear." Drew bent over Skye, the touch of skin a blast of heat between them. It felt good to hold Skye, so good...but he wouldn't last long if he didn't get on with it.

Drew leaned back on his legs. He squeezed a glob of lube in his left palm and wet two fingers of his right hand, getting them good and moist. Taking a deep breath, he gently shoved the middle finger in Skye's ass, wiggling it slightly. So tight, and resistant, and sexy. Skye let out a sharp groan, jerking his head back, his hair slithering down his strained back.

Drew licked a dimple above Skye's crease, working his finger in slow motion. He pushed to his knuckle. Such a scorching, tight hole. Never had he felt this powerful in giving someone pleasure. No man compared to Skye's trembling body, and the ravenous pants gasping from Skye's mouth.

Drew slipped in a second finger, stretching him wider, careful to watch for signs of discomfort. "How are you doing?"

"Ugh, burns but..."

"Want me to stop?"

"Hell no."

"Good, I like doing this to you." Drew wanted to make Skye feel good, not send him screaming out of the room.

Moisture seeped from Skye's ass from the lube Drew was working into it. He went for a third finger, using a scissoring motion. Drew curled his fingertip, hitting the prostrate. Skye arched back, fast, driving Drew's fingers to hit it again. Skye's hands splayed flat, every muscle taut.

Removing his fingers, Drew curled his arms around Skye's waist, and pressed his hand flat on Skye's rock-hard stomach. He breathed in his spicy hot skin.

"Feel good?"

"Oh, yeah, babe..."

Drew chuckled, sweeping Skye's hair aside to get to the sensitive nape. Being the same height had its advantages. "Glad you like it. Tell me what you want."

"You... I want... you." Skye's voice breathless.

Drew patted Skye's butt cheek. He scooted close to nudge his cock head near Skye's hole. "You want me?"

Skye sucked in air, almost choking. "Oh, babe I do. Yeah."

Sweat beaded on the back of Drew's shoulder blades, his hair damp from the excitement. His cock twitched at the thought of being squeezed by Skye's tight ass muscles. He tenderly kissed the small of Skye's back, breathing in his scent, the smell dizzying and hypnotic as Skye himself.

One smooth, slow thrust, and Skye met it.

"Fuck me, dammit," Skye ground out.

Needing no other encouragement, Drew buried his cock deep, their balls colliding. The friction braded bone-deep. He reached for Skye's cock as he wiggled his ass until buried completely in.

"Lover, how are you doing?"

Skye gasped. "I... like you calling me... ahh."

"Yeah, then lover, I'm going to ride you hard."

"Just do... it."

Drew dug his fingers into Skye's hips to get leverage while stroking Skye's cock with his free hand. Thrusting deep, he began his assault. He wasn't gentle but demanding. Skye growled and squirmed, but met him thrust for thrust. Drew's body shuddered. The tightness, heat and impact tremendous. No, better than tremendous. Unreal. Their bodies moved in rhythm. No one ever made him feel this powerful, this excited; every nerve frying until he felt he was going to completely short circuit.

His orgasm hit first, flipping him inside out, followed by Skye's loud cry ripping across the room. Hot cum seeped in ribbons over his fingers as Skye's cock pulsed within his hand.

Muscles heaved and settled, breathing slowed, the room grew quiet.

Skye slumped to the floor, Drew's cock still impaled within him. They stayed pressed to each other, Drew's arms wrapped around Skye's waist and chest, neither pulling away. Drew listened to Skye's breathing, the noises in the room, the buzz in his head. He poked the side of Skye's head, wondering if his lover fell asleep.

"Hey, are you alive?"

This was met with a grunt.

Drew kissed Skye's ear. Reluctantly, he sat back. It was late, and they did have a plane to catch the next day. He slipped off the condom, dropping in a nearby waste basket. Skye groaned as he turned to lay on his back. He lifted up onto his elbows. They stared at each other, daring the other to speak first. Drew straddled Skye's waist, bringing his lips close to Skye's mouth. They exchanged breaths.

Skye rested his hand on Drew's cheek. "Say it."

Drew moved to get off, but Skye was too strong, and held him using one arm. "Say it. I need to hear it. Do it for me."

Drew relented, and released his heart. "I love you, Skye."

Met with a brilliant smile, Drew blinked. Too bright, too beautiful, but Skye would give him everything if he asked. He brushed the start of tears from Skye's lashes.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" A little late to ask now. Drew had been too wrapped in lust to concern himself then, but he hoped Skye enjoyed it as much as he did.

"Having you inside of me felt..." A blush crept across Skye's cheeks.

Drew smirked, glad to see Skye squirm for a change. "You're embarrassed."

"Now I belong to you."

The thief of hearts stole Drew's heart, again.

THE END