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The implication made Joe shift awkwardly in his seat. Unable to completely meet Israel's eyes, he stood and started to pace, rather than fidget in front of him.

"If by some long shot this ever got to trial, I might not be able to defend you, Iz."

"Why not? Oh. Because you'd have to go back to LA."

"That, and the fact that I can't actually practice law in the state of Illinois."

"What? But you're—"

"In the state of California, yes. And in states that have reciprocal agreements, yes." Joe shook his head, still marking out the perimeter of the room. "Illinois and California don't. I'd have to petition the court for an exception, most likely."

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ALSO BY VIVIEN DEAN

Blood Of Souls Born To Be Wild Bridge Over Troubled Water Crave Interlude Ruby Red Rebels What We May Be

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CHAPTER 1

* * *

[&]quot;You want me to beat him up for you?"

[&]quot;You shouldn't. Your mom'll beat you blue."

[&]quot;So?"

[&]quot;So it's not fair. We shouldn't both get in trouble, Iz."

[&]quot;I don't like seeing you scared."

[&]quot;Well, I don't like being scared. That doesn't mean beating up Spencer Elliott is the answer."

[&]quot;Says you."

[&]quot;Says a lot of people."

The line for the O'Hare taxi rank crawled along slower than traffic on the eastbound I-10 during evening rush hour. Joe Grace stood behind the elderly couple he'd helped at the baggage terminal, grateful the roaring jets overhead prevented any lengthy conversation. Their questions had started getting nosy. Why was he in Chicago, how long was he going to be staying?...nothing he could answer without lying or looking like he was avoiding the truth. He was a master at bending facts, but only when he had faith in his subject on his side.

Right now, Joe didn't have faith in anything. He'd spent all night on a red-eye based on a single news item he'd seen online the night before, but until he confronted it on his own, he had no idea what to trust.

He shifted the weight of his backpack over his shoulder and shuffled forward, one spot closer to mobility. His suitcase had been too heavy at LAX; he'd had to pay extra for being over the weight limit. He didn't even remember packing very well. Everything after confirming the details of the article was a blur. He'd had only one thought—get to Chicago. Hopefully, he remembered to throw in socks when he'd apparently been shoving everything else he owned into the black case.

When the bow-backed pair in front of him waved goodbye from the open door of the taxi, Joe waved in return. Habit. *No bad ever came from having good manners*. If his mother said that to him today, Joe would have to correct her. He'd seen a lot of good people get mowed over by those who cared more about getting what they wanted than being polite, especially in his profession. Yet, he still waved, and he still held open

doors, and when someone called him a cocksucking attention whore, he held his tongue and just smiled for the camera.

Power came in succeeding in spite of the assholes determined to hold you back.

As soon as the attendant waved him up to an empty cab, Joe bolted, his suitcase bumping across the seams in the sidewalk behind him. The driver, an older Hispanic man with a handlebar moustache worthy of twirling with the best of them, popped the trunk and waited to help him get it in.

"Where to?"

"The Marriott Suites." Joe slid into the back, ignoring the duct tape sealing a torn seam. While he waited for the driver, he pulled out his wallet. He'd hit the ATM in Los Angeles for reasons just like this. "I need you to wait for me there," he said, passing over three twenties. "I'm going to check in and change."

Though the driver took the money, he frowned and shook his head. "I still need to keep the meter running."

"I know. And I'll pay that, too. That's for your trouble."

With a grunt of approval, the driver turned back to the wheel. The ride to the hotel was swift and silent, and Joe was opening the door almost before the cab had rolled to a stop. He fished around for another twenty and traded the bill for his suitcase.

"I should be about ten minutes," he said.

The driver nodded and pointed to an empty spot at the visitor's parking. "I'll be over there."

Check-in was painless. Finding his room was, too. Joe

wasn't thrilled with the creases in the suit he'd left on top of his case, but he changed his clothes without fussing with them, making sure to grab an extra handkerchief to polish his shoes along the way. By the time he stepped out of the hotel twelve minutes later, his briefcase replacing his backpack, he stood a little straighter.

When he slid into the back seat this time, the driver's brows shot up. "Where to this time?"

Joe had memorized the address for the police station before getting off the ground in Los Angeles. Rattling it off, he lifted his foot to rest his ankle on his knee, the handkerchief already in hand.

"No offense," the driver said once they were on the highway, "but are you a lawyer?"

Joe concentrated on putting the shine back on his Paul Smith's. "Yes."

"I'd ask if you got a client in lock-up, but considering you flew in..." His dark eyes kept darting to the rearview mirror, clearly trying to assess his fare. "Guess you gotta interrogate a witness or something, huh?"

"Or something."

He said nothing more, focusing on his shoes and ignoring the curious glances the driver continued to shoot his way. If the story had made his news feed all the way across the country, there was no telling how big it was here in Chicago. Until Joe knew whether this was some news agency's attempt to fill its quota of daily headlines or important enough to merit national attention, he would keep his mouth shut. He was an

old pro at it, after all. One of his better attributes that made him an excellent lawyer.

The police station could have been in any major city as far as Joe was concerned. He barely noticed the new façade, or the morning sun scaling its way into the sky between the tall buildings surrounding it. His thoughts were on what lay inside, what he might expect to see when—and if—they had him wait in an interrogation room. Nerves twisted his stomach into knots, but his eyes were steady, his mouth firm, when he stepped inside.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes. My name is Joseph Grace. I'm here to speak with someone being held for questioning."

"Are you the attorney?"

"Yes." For now, anyway.

The uniformed officer behind the counter shoved a clipboard closer to him. "Sign in. Who is it you're here for?"

Joe clicked the top of the pen. "Israel Jones."

The name evoked the first genuine response from the cop. The eyes beneath the bushy brows widened, then narrowed as they swept in careful appraisal over Joe's attire. He took back the clipboard far more deliberately than he'd offered it, and his gaze lingered on the information Joe had filled in.

"Is there a problem?" Joe prompted, his voice cold.

Reaching to the side, the cop pressed an unseen button. A low buzzer echoed from the other side of a door to Joe's left, choked into silence when the door opened.

"Legal counsel here to see Israel Jones," the cop behind

the desk announced to the uniformed escort.

Joe ignored this startled glance as well. He had a feeling he was going to be getting a lot of those before the day was through.

The windowless interrogation room held only a small table and three chairs sitting awkwardly in the middle of the floor. Recycled air blew from a vent in the ceiling, but stuffy and uncomfortable was preferable to lack of privacy. Setting down his briefcase, Joe scanned the corners quickly for cameras or microphones, spotting nothing that might be used to record anything that might transpire within the four walls. That was good. He would be able to speak freely. Better yet, so could Israel.

When the door opened again, Joe snapped straight, desperate to quell the tightening of his gut. It didn't matter. Everything inside him froze at the man standing with the uniformed cop in the entrance.

Israel Jones filled the doorway. He'd always been the sort of man people noticed, the sort who walked into a room and commanded second glances without doing anything but being there, but time had carved away the excessive muscles of his youth to leave behind a body hewn for labor. Faded jeans molded over powerful thighs, with faint splatters of color staining the worn denim, and his navy T-shirt hung untucked over the waistband. His skin was lighter than Joe remembered, warmed to a soft toffee by the passing years, but the hazel eyes, wide-set and intelligent, were straight out of his best—and worst—memories.

Right now, they regarded him. Unwavering. Unblinking. Only a shadow of momentary disbelief flashed in their depths before that, too, disappeared.

"You can leave us now," Joe said to the uniform.

Israel had to venture farther into the room in order for the cop to close the door behind him. He never looked away from Joe.

"How'd you know I was here?"

The soft baritone sent an array of goose bumps down Joe's spine. He smiled, hoping he didn't look as nervous as he felt. "You made the news, Iz."

Joe meant it as a little joke. The way Israel crumpled at the brief statement told him something about it wasn't very funny.

"They said my lawyer was here." Israel stepped to the edge of the table so they were toe to toe. Twenty years earlier, Joe had had to tilt his head in order to look his best friend in the eye. Now, that was unnecessary, but no amount of gym workouts would ever bulk him up in the same way Iz was. "I guess you got what you wanted."

"Yeah." You didn't.

"You live in Chicago?"

"No. LA. When did you leave Arcola?"

"When Richelle decided to move here. It was the only way I could see Teddy."

They were getting ahead of themselves. So much time had passed, so much they had to catch up on. But right now, Joe only had one item on his agenda, even if it killed him to ignore all the other details he was dying to know.

"Tell me one thing, Iz." Resting a hand on Israel's shoulder, Joe squeezed it gently, all too aware of the muscles bunched beneath his grip. "Did you do it?"

Israel didn't blink. "No."

Relief flooded through him, washing away the fear that had festered all the way from California. Deep in his heart, he had wanted to believe Israel was innocent, but hearing the truth come from the one person who would never lie to him made it better. He would've helped Iz anyway, even if he'd said he was guilty, but this gave him even more reason to throw himself into the case.

"Sit down," he ordered. "And don't talk to anybody but me until I tell you to."

Israel frowned but did as he was told, taking the chair facing the door instead of the nearest one to him. Joe waited until he was settled, his hands folded in front of him, before stepping into the hall and finding the uniform who had escorted Israel in.

"I want to see the detectives assigned to the case. Now."

His tone brooked no argument, and the young man scurried off. Joe glanced back into the interrogation room, but finding Israel staring at him with what could only be called hope in his eyes almost made his knees buckle.

Hang in there, he wanted to say. I'm going to fix this.

The soft cant of Israel's mouth erased twenty years from his face.

"Can I help you?"

Joe turned back to face a man in his fifties, his nearly bald

head glistening with a sheen of perspiration. His ruddy complexion would have looked perfectly at home in an icy windstorm, but from the sag of his stomach over his belt, it had been years since this particular man had done more than climb a flight of stairs.

"Joseph Grace." He held his hand out in greeting, not surprised when the handshake was perfunctory at best. "I'm legal counsel for Mr. Jones."

Muscles tightened in the round cheek. "Detective Ott."

"Has Mr. Jones been formally charged?"

"If he had, you think you would've gotten to see him so fast?"

Joe refused to rise to his bait. "Then unless you're planning to do so very soon here, I'll be leaving with him this morning. Your forty-eight hours to detain him for questioning are nearly over."

"Now, hold on—"

"No, I'm afraid you're the one who has to hold on here. The fact of the matter is, if you had any evidence to prove Mr. Jones guilty, you wouldn't have waited this long to make it official. Which means you don't, or it's circumstantial at best. Either way, you're not going to charge him. *And*, the longer you detain him, the guiltier he's going to look to the public, which will damn his chances even further should this ever go to trial. So I'm going to ensure nothing like that happens."

Ott stabbed a thick finger past Joe's shoulder. "Do you have any idea what that guy did?"

"That's my point. He didn't do anything."

"Because he said he didn't?" Ott rolled his eyes. "You lawyers are all the same. How in hell is this one even paying you to get you to lie for him?"

"He's not. I just know what kind of man Israel Jones is."

"And I know what kind of a rap sheet he's got. A history of assault and battery looks pretty damn good to a jury."

"But apparently, it does nothing to strengthen your evidence." Joe looked back at Israel and jerked his head. "Come on. We're leaving."

Slowly, Israel rose and joined him in the hall. As Joe led the way down the hall in the direction from which he'd come, Detective Ott huffed after them.

"Don't even think about leaving the city, Jones," he warned. "This isn't over."

"Mr. Jones plans on cooperating fully with the investigation," Joe replied. "It's in his best interest to."

"Riiiight. Because he doesn't think Glen Marsh got exactly what he deserved. Save the story for the judge."

Joe nudged Israel as soon as he felt the man tense, but their pace didn't falter. Ott followed them all the way out, standing on the sidewalk even while Joe pulled his phone out to get a cab.

"Some people might think this is harassment, Detective," Joe warned while he waited to be connected.

Ott sucked at his teeth. "How come you're not bugging me about the evidence we do have?"

"Because if it was any good—hang on." He stopped and quickly ordered a taxi, snapping his phone shut when he was

done. He exchanged his phone for a business card he had tucked in his pocket and handed it over to Ott. "If you need to get a hold of Mr. Jones for any reason, call me first. He won't be talking to any more police officers, or God forbid, the DA, without me sitting next to him."

It didn't surprise him Ott zeroed in on the one thing that could potentially hold him back. "Wait a minute. This says you work for the system in Los Angeles." His frown screamed with confusion. "You're one of us. You should be helping us get him behind bars instead of walking him out of here."

"I only prosecute the guilty." His frayed nerves demanded he get out of the man's presence before something snapped. "Come on, Iz. Let's grab a coffee while we wait for the cab."

This time, Ott let them go.

Joe couldn't get Israel away from there fast enough.

CHAPTER 2

[&]quot;I know you."

[&]quot;No, you don't."

[&]quot;Do so. You always sit with your mom in the pew next to us at church. You never sing. And you're always drawing on the collection envelopes."

[&]quot;That don't mean you know me."

[&]quot;I know your name. Your mom must've loved God a whole lot to name you Israel."

[&]quot;Yeah, well, it's better than Joe. Everybody's named Joe."

[&]quot;How do you know my name?"

[&]quot;Same way you know mine, I reckon."

* * *

From his seat on the small couch, Joe drank in the broad expanse of Israel's back, outlined against the gossamer curtains at his hotel suite's wide window. The edge of a black tattoo snaked beneath the collar of Israel's T-shirt, unseen, unknown. At some point in the last eighteen years, he'd inked his skin. Joe would bet everything he had Israel had created the design himself.

"Chicago looks different from up here," Israel noted quietly. "I must've driven past this airport a hundred times and not even thought about what the perspective might be."

Joe smiled. "You still talk like you're in art class. It's good to know some things haven't changed."

"That's because that's what I do. Or did, anyway."

The low declaration reminded Joe of just how little they'd spoken since leaving the police station. They had sipped their coffees in near silence, waiting for the cab, and the only exchange in the car had been when Joe told the driver to take them back to the hotel.

Israel had glanced at him and said, "I have to go home sooner or later."

"I know. Let's cross that bridge when we get to it."

That had been that. And now, sitting in the luxury of a suite Israel could probably never afford, Joe realized just how many bridges stretched out in front of them, not to mention how many other ones rested between them.

"We need to talk about what happened, Iz."

The broad shoulders collapsed, and Israel finally

abandoned the view to return to the small sitting area. Taking the chair perpendicular to the couch, he slumped down, resting his head on the low cushioned back to stare up at the ceiling.

"You saw it on the news, you said. What did it say?"

"Not much." Israel Jones, the father of gang violence victim Theodore Becker, has been taken in for questioning regarding the murder of sixteen-year-old gang leader Glen Marsh. While no charges have yet to be filed, inside sources are convinced the grief-stricken Jones wasn't willing to wait for Marsh to face justice and decided to take the law into his own hands. Marsh was found shot in his home two days ago... "Other than the obvious, why are the police so sure you did it?"

Israel sighed. Each breath out of him made him seem smaller and smaller. "You're not going to like it."

"I'll like it even less if you hold back on me. What do they have?"

"The gun. It's mine."

Joe tamped down the curse that rose automatically to his lips. "But you didn't shoot him."

"No. They did that test on me, the one where they spray your hands? Came back negative. Ott wasn't too happy about that."

A GSR test wasn't nearly enough to exclude Israel. "They must have something else."

"Yeah. A smudged fingerprint, Ott said. And it wasn't mine or Glen's or anybody else in the system."

As quickly as the fear had latched onto its heart, this tidbit

slashed it away. Physical evidence put the gun in someone else's hand. That was reasonable doubt for any jury.

"So who had access to your gun?"

Israel shrugged. "I didn't think anybody even knew about it. I only have it for emergencies, and I sure as hell don't keep it loaded."

"Could it have been stolen?"

"It would've had to be, if the killer used it on that kid."

Which meant someone could be setting Israel up. Joe sank back into the couch, rubbing at his jaw as he mulled it over.

"Ott said you were one of them." Israel's soft question pulled Joe out of his reverie. His pale eyes were now fixed on him instead of the ceiling. "What did he mean?"

"I work for the DA's office in Los Angeles."

Israel whistled under his breath. "And now I have you on my side? Someone up there really is looking out for me."

The implication made Joe shift awkwardly in his seat. Unable to completely meet Israel's eyes, he stood and started to pace, rather than fidget in front of him.

"If by some long shot this ever got to trial, I might not be able to defend you, Iz."

"Why not? Oh. Because you'd have to go back to LA."

"That, and the fact that I can't actually practice law in the state of Illinois."

"What? But you're—"

"In the state of California, yes. And in states that have reciprocal agreements, yes." Joe shook his head, still marking out the perimeter of the room. "Illinois and California don't.

I'd have to petition the court for an exception, most likely."

"But, back at the police station..." Israel looked like he had when they'd sat next to each other in American History in their junior year of high school. Facts would fill his head, but applying them to theories or grander pictures was not his strong suit. "If you can't defend me, why did you come, Joe?"

Because I thought maybe you needed a friend, not just a lawyer.

What came out was, "Just because I can't actually try a case here, doesn't mean I don't know how the system works. Or how the cops work. Or what the DA is going to need to do to get charges filed against you." He stopped and jabbed a finger at a now alert Israel. "You could still be sitting down there in lock-up right now and you're not. You're out. And the police know now you're not some patsy they can roll over in order to get this case off their books. I can do a hell of a lot more than talk down some detective, you know. You and I are going to track down who did this and get your name cleared, once and for all."

It wasn't until it was all out that he realized how much he'd been holding inside. There was more—he could taste it in the back of his throat—but the slow grin that spread over Israel's face stifled any and all of it.

"Same old Joe. You always did dig in your heels when you got cornered. Just like the Elliots' Rottie." His gaze flickered over him in a deliberate assessment Joe felt all the way to his toes. "You must've had a late growth spurt like that dog did, too. You don't look like someone can push you over

anymore."

"Well, they try. Plus, it helps I've learned how to push back."

"Using that big ol' brain of yours."

"It's all I've got."

"Now we both know that's not true."

The slight reminiscences drew Joe back to the couch, easier to sit now that the truth was out there. "I really can help, you know. What I did at the police station might not have been the most ethical decision I've ever made, but that doesn't mean it was wrong."

"I know." A broad thumb picked at one of the paint flecks on Israel's jeans. "When I saw you standing there in the interrogation room, I thought, 'Finally, something is going my way. Joe'll fix it."

Joe ducked his eyes, hiding the swell of emotion Israel's trust evoked. "That's what I'm hoping."

"How long are you staying?"

"My boss gave me a week. I've got three weeks accrued, so if I need longer, all I have to do is call."

"You think you'll need that long?"

"I don't know. I hope not." A yawn caught him by surprise, and he covered his mouth, embarrassed at the obvious evidence of his exhaustion. "Sorry. I didn't sleep much on the plane."

"So why don't you take a nap now?"

Israel's gaze lacked guile. His suggestion was genuine.

"I can sleep tonight," Joe replied. "I need to find out as

much as I can about what's been going on so I can actually be of some help to you."

"You'll be better help if you rest." Israel jerked a thumb toward the other room. "We could both use some sleep. I haven't slept great ever since Teddy."

The suite only had one bed. King-sized, yes, but only one. Joe wanted to say yes, but a lot had happened since the last time they'd shared a bed. A lot of years had disappeared.

"You think I won't be able to keep my hands off you if we do that?" Israel smiled, his eyes twinkling for the first time since seeing him at the police station. "I'm not some horny teenager anymore. I've learned some control."

"Maybe your control isn't the one I'm worried about."

"Then we don't-"

Joe's cell phone chirped from where he'd emptied his pockets onto the coffee table, and he leaned over to pick it up. The name on the screen made his stomach sink.

"Sorry," he said, rising to his feet. "Gotta take this."

He left Israel behind as he bustled to the bathroom, not answering it until the door was shut behind him.

"Hi, Gareth."

"Joe! Where are you?" Even on the phone, Gareth Buckley oozed energy. He was the kind of guy who went through life with an exclamation point as his best friend. "I called your office, and all that bitch of a secretary would tell me was you took an emergency leave of absence." His voice suddenly lowered, suitable for any respectable funeral home. "You're not in the hospital, are you?"

"No, it's not that kind of emergency."

"Then where? What could possibly be so important you disappear in the middle of the night?"

How did Gareth know when he'd left? Rubbing his tired eyes, Joe said, "An old friend from high school. The only flight I could get was the red-eye."

"From high school? You're in Iowa?"

"Illinois."

"Same diff."

"Not really, Gareth." Sighing, he stared at his reflection in the mirror. He looked as tired as he felt. Shadows beneath his blue eyes heightened how little sun he actually got, even living in southern California. Hollow. That was the word to describe it. And it surprised him.

"Well, I hope you're going to be back by Thursday. I scored two tickets to a premiere. You have to be my date."

Only because he looked good in a suit. Their relationship was casual enough for Joe to know the personality of every other guy Gareth went out with. The list was a lot longer than usually made him comfortable.

"I won't. I took the whole week off."

"A week? For someone you haven't seen since high school?"

"It could be up to three, depending on how things go."

"Three?!?"

Wincing, Joe switched ears and edged farther away from the door, as if Israel could hear the other end of the conversation anyway. "I'll call you when I get back. Have fun

at the premiere."

"Hey..."

Disconnecting left his head pounding. He and Gareth had been casual dates and fuck buddies for a few years now, but the reminder of everybody who wasn't Israel rested heavily on the back of his neck. Iz had been the first, though there had never been anything casual about their relationship. Best friends. Lovers later on. Joe had had a lot of relationships since fleeing the stifling borders of Arcola, Illinois, but he wouldn't abandon his life at the drop of a hat for any of them. Only for Israel.

The man in question stood in the tiny kitchenette, looking at what scant supplies it carried. The stretch of his arm dragged memories out of the ether, endless times when Joe had watched Israel at work. He had been fascinated by the muscles then, and he was fascinated by them now, how they shifted from stone to sculpture to sinew in the blink of an eye.

"That coffee made me hungry," Israel said. "How about I don't bug you about the nap and we go find some food?"

"I don't know what's around here." He shoved his hands into his pockets to hide the way Israel affected him. Still. "We could always get room service."

"Well, I know what's around here." Shutting the cupboard door, Israel moved on to the refrigerator. The look on his face pronounced it as bare as everything else. "And if you're sticking around, you can't be taking cabs everywhere. We should go rent you a car."

"I planned on that later."

"Now's as good a time as any."

"What happened to you filling me in on everything so we can clear your name?"

"We can't talk over food?"

Joe sighed and pulled his phone out of his pocket again. "Fine. You win. I'll get a car, and then you can tell me what I need to know over lunch."

Israel didn't move as he made the quick call. He leaned against the counter and watched, his soft gaze more than contemplative. "What kind of things are you going to want to know?" he asked as soon as Joe was off again.

"Well, it would be nice to start with the Marsh murder. I can't really ask the police about all the evidence, and the crime scene is going to be off-limits, but the more information I have, the better we can aim them at someone who isn't you."

"Is that what we're doing?"

"That's what I'm doing."

"Then I should probably show you why the cops think I'm the one who did it."

Joe's heart twisted. "Iz—"

"You gotta find out about Teddy some time." Somehow, his sad smile only made Joe feel worse. "And nobody knew him better than me."

"Okay." He agreed for one reason only. He didn't want to argue about it and cause Israel any more pain. "If that's what you think is best. I'll trust your instinct on this one."

"You would've liked him. Teddy was a great kid."

"Of course he was. He was yours. Though I still can't

believe you knocked up Richelle Harvey. Richelle. Of all people."

Israel laughed. "Who else would've had me in that Podunk town?"

I would've. I did.

Until he left. For college, for his future, for a life that only included Israel—the man who'd been his right arm and other half since second grade—for the year they'd kept up letter writing.

"Let's go downstairs and wait for them to deliver the car." Joe scooped up the key card and slid it into his pocket. He was halfway to the door when he realized Israel hadn't moved. "What's wrong?"

"Um...no offense, Joe, but maybe you should change first."

Joe glanced down at his suit. In spite of the mild creasing, he'd thought it had come out looking all right. "What's wrong?"

"Remember how much we stuck out in Arcola? Where we're going, it's going to be ten times worse for you."

With a grimace, Joe headed for the bedroom. "Got it. Give me five minutes."

If he needed any kind of reminder that more than time had separated them, that was it.

CHAPTER 3

Silence. The scratch of Iz's pencils across the paper made all the hair on Joe's bare arms stand on end.

[&]quot;Sit still."

[&]quot;My back itches."

[&]quot;That's because you're not paying attention."

[&]quot;I am. I've sat here for the past hour, haven't I?"

[&]quot;Can I see it?"

[&]quot;You're moving again."

[&]quot;I'm talking. If I have to be tortured like this, the least you can do is let me see how it's turning out."

[&]quot;It's not done."

Joe sighed. "You always say that."

"Yeah, well, this time I mean it."

* * *

For as necessary as it was to drive in Los Angeles, Joe usually avoided it as often as he could. He got himself to work, ensconced himself in his office, and if he had to go to the courthouse or somewhere for a deposition, he often tried to bum a ride with somebody else. Or bribe his secretary or one of the paralegals to drive instead. It wasn't that he wasn't any good. It felt like a waste of time. If he was a passenger, he could get some work done, and the minutes—sometimes hours—wouldn't just be gone. Others tried to engage him in conversation, but they'd caught on quick enough not to bother him

Following Israel's directions kept him mostly distracted from the need to talk, but the potential was there, in every breath, in every moment, in every sweep of Israel's arm when he'd point out a landmark or gesture for Joe to make a turn. Israel helped by focusing on their destination. Joe wasn't sure if he was aware that he was helping, though.

As they turned the corner onto a crowded block of aging apartment buildings, Israel went silent. His mouth thinned, and his eyes went hard, fixed on the tallest and most timeworn halfway down the street.

"Keep going." He bit out the words.

Joe frowned. "I thought this was it."

"This is. I don't feel like dealing with other people right now."

Not even a quick scan revealed who Israel might be talking about, but Joe did as he was told, turning right at the end of the block.

"There's an entrance into the alley on the other side. We'll use the fire exit to get in."

There was an entrance, but there wasn't anywhere to park, and even for a compact, the rental car stood out like a rainbow against a cloudy sky. Joe settled for pulling up behind the Dumpster, unseen from the street though anyone walking by would notice it right away.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going now?" He'd been asking the same round of questions ever since they'd picked up lunch at a McDonald's drive-thru. Israel had yet to give him an answer.

"My place." They reached the door, and Israel had to slam his shoulder against it a few times in order to get it to open. "Seventh floor."

All of a sudden, Joe didn't want this. Part of what had made the past eighteen years bearable was not thinking about all the possible permutations Israel's life could have taken. Their growing apart was all Joe's fault; he knew that. He was the one who had slowed down writing letters, using school as an excuse. He was the one who'd refused to go back to Arcola, who'd encouraged his parents to come visit him in California instead. He'd done it for selfish reasons, like wanting to forget about the narrow-minded little town he'd grown up in, or becoming too enamored with the rush of his new life. The distance between them, over the years and now,

rested squarely on his shoulders. He did not want the reminder that, while he had been climbing the ladder in LA, Israel had struggled just to make it here in Chicago.

"Why don't I wait in the car?" he said. "You get whatever it is you need, and we'll take it back to the hotel. You can stay with me until this mess blows over and the press stops bugging you."

He knew the moment the words came out, he'd said the wrong thing.

"That's not why we're here," Israel said. He wore his disappointment like a heavy cloak, in spite of his soft tones. "You want to help me, you gotta know what this is all about."

"I know—"

"You don't. Maybe you would if I'd really done it, but..." He stepped into the dank interior, falling into shadows. "I won't ask, Joe. I wouldn't have asked for your help, even if I'd known you were some hotshot LA lawyer. Just remember you're the one who offered."

He had, and now he felt mildly ashamed at his own cowardice. He followed after Israel, grateful for the darkness that hid him from inspection.

The elevator creaked, and the scent of ammonia overpowered the clean scent of Israel standing alongside him. Joe's head was starting to ache by the time they reached apartment 712, but he held his tongue as he followed Israel inside. The moment he crossed the threshold, though, he stopped, thunderstruck by the room stretched out before him.

Most cheap apartment housing sported cream walls, beige

carpet, and boxed rooms without personality. Bastions to homogeny that epitomized the worst of American traits. Israel's didn't. The floor had been stripped of its carpet, with laminate flooring put down instead, while the walls...

Joe stared at the cornucopia of color, his mouth agape. Every square inch had been painted, teeming with life that could only be created by a true artist. Here, there was a park, lush and green. There, it segued into a jungle, with golden eyes peeking through the foliage, a taloned bird in flight as it swooped down to meet its prey.

Venturing farther into the room, Joe followed a winding trail—intentional, he was sure—that led him to a small child on his hands and knees, sifting through dirt Joe would've sworn he could smell. He crouched down, tilting his head as if that would give him clearance to see the boy's downturned eyes. Long lashes. A pouty lower lip. There was even a fading scratch on the child's arm, an injury gone unnoticed while it healed.

"That's Teddy." Israel's voice was thick with emotion. Somehow, Joe wasn't surprised. "Did you do this?"

"No. He did." Now *that* surprised him. When he glanced up at Israel, however, the other man only shrugged as if it wasn't anything unusual. "He took a picture Richelle had and used that as a guide. He could do anything he set his mind to." His gaze wandered to the other walls. "This is half me, half him. I started it, but as soon as he could hold a paintbrush, we worked on it together."

"You taught him."

"It's all I could. This...it's the only thing I've ever been good at."

Joe disagreed, but he wouldn't venture that opinion now if his life depended on it. This moment was too important to Israel.

"He was a natural," Israel went on. "The fact that he got so much attention for it is the only reason Richelle let me have him over here as often as she did."

"You two don't get on?"

"Oh, it's okay, I suppose. We've had our ups and down. She gets lonely working so many hours, that's all. Girl doesn't know how to relax when she has to so she ends up working more. It's a bad cycle."

Ups and down. A long time had transpired since they'd left Arcola.

"If you followed her here, why didn't you ever marry her?"

Sad hazel eyes swung back to Joe. "Because we both knew I could never love her."

Joe resisted the urge to stand up and go to him, like the years had never passed, like he even had the privilege now. His eyes burned, and he had to blink more than once to shatter the spell. "Where's Richelle now?"

"She lives around the corner. It worked out good, since she needed someone to babysit when Teddy was little. I made sure I always had jobs that didn't interfere with her shift work so I could be here for him."

"Did Teddy have a room here, too?"

Israel hooked a thumb down the hall. "There's not much in there, though. And we couldn't ever paint its walls like we could out here. The manager would never give us permission for anything but this one room."

"But it's a phenomenal room." His knees protested slightly as he straightened, and he skimmed his fingers over the rough paint. "This is better than any picture stuck on a refrigerator."

"Oh, I've got some of those, too. But this is how Teddy preferred to work."

"What do you mean?"

"This." Israel gestured around the room. "Larger than life. What Teddy loved most were murals. He kept saying that he was going to find a way to paint the whole city if he could."

Joe smiled. "That's pretty ambitious."

"That was Teddy. Nothing could hold him back."

Except something had. He saw the second that realization returned to Israel's awareness.

"Can I see his room?" Joe asked, desperate to banish the haunted shadows in Israel's features.

"Sure."

But Israel didn't go in when they reached the door. He stayed out of the way, leaving plenty of space for Joe to enter on his own.

Compared to the energy of the living room, the bedroom was as dead as its owner. This was what Joe had been expecting. The detritus of being fifteen. The posters that hung on the wall were prints from the Art Institute instead of movies, and the easel in the corner took the place of a beat-up

guitar, but the mussed sheets were the same, and the pile of car magazines by the bed, and the schoolbooks buried under a pile of dirty clothing.

"I haven't really had a chance to clean," Israel said in unnecessary apology.

"I was just going to say it looks just like your old room in Arcola."

The only thing under the bed was dust, and the sticky drawers of the dresser held more art supplies than clothing. Teddy had clearly held only one interest—or maybe it was an obsession. Which led Joe to wonder how exactly a boy like that had ever gotten involved with gangs.

"It looks like you had a lot to be proud of," he mused.

"Yeah." Israel gripped the doorjamb, his knuckles white. It rattled Joe to think he might be using it to stay upright. "He wasn't that book smart, but damn if he knew how to use color. He had a way of making the ugly beautiful. He was better at fifteen than I'll ever be."

"How did it happen?"

He didn't need to clarify he was speaking of the murder. They had danced around the topic as much as they possibly could.

"He was shot. Walking home from the community center. He'd been working on a mural for them, something for the preschool kids, and he'd stayed late. Richelle was at work, and I wasn't home, so he told Una—that's the director down there—that he'd just hoof it." Israel sagged against the door. Holding it wasn't enough any longer. "She tried to get him to

wait so she could drive him home, but he wouldn't listen. And on the way home...the people on the street said it was a driveby, but nobody heard more than two shots. One of them went right into his brain."

Jesus. Joe wasn't a stranger to violent crime, not as a prosecutor in LA. And he'd deposed his share of grieving families. But this was different. This was Israel. He had to choke back the bile that rose in his throat.

"Tell me he didn't suffer."

Israel shook his head. "Doctors said he must've died instantly. A freak accident, because it was just too perfect. Those boys that run around with Glen Marsh are dangerous, but not because they're sharpshooters."

"Did they come forward and take responsibility?"

"Are you kidding?"

"So how did the police know Glen was the one who did it?"

"Witnesses. They were working on connecting the dots for an arrest when he got shot."

And the next dot led straight to Israel. If this had been Joe's jurisdiction, and he'd been handed this case to prosecute, he wouldn't have hesitated to believe Israel was the guilty party. The one thing he would've done differently, however, was keep it as much out of the public eye as possible. If this case went to trial, Israel would make a powerful witness on his own behalf. Juries would sympathize with him. It would be next to impossible to get the maximum penalty. Better to bargain down if possible, though any decent defense attorney

would probably advise Israel against it.

"I still can't believe it happened with your gun. Did you keep it here?"

"Where else would I have it?"

"Under lock and key?"

"Everything's under lock and key in this neighborhood."

"Did you know it was gone before the cops found it?"

"No. And I haven't had a break-in here in years, otherwise I would've gone straight to checking."

That meant the killer had to have a key to the apartment. When Joe posed the question, Israel actually paused to consider it. "Me. Richelle. The manager has one for emergencies, I think. But that's it."

Joe sincerely hoped that wasn't. With that field of suspects, Israel looked guiltier and guiltier.

His phone interrupted his train of thought, and he scowled as he pulled it out of his pocket. "Sorry," he said when he saw his secretary's number. "I'm going to turn it off after this."

Israel shook his head. "You're an important guy. You do what you have to."

It wasn't a matter of have to, but Joe had left explicit instructions not to be bothered unless it was an emergency. He accepted the call as he slipped past Israel into the hall, stepping into the dark kitchen for a little bit of privacy.

"This couldn't have waited?" he asked.

A rustle of papers. Julia never stopped. They made a great team most of the time. "Judge Barker called about your motion on the Costello burglary. He's going to throw it out

tomorrow, but he said he owed you a heads up in case you had some last minute arguments you wanted to make."

Joe swore under his breath. Pinching the bridge of his nose did nothing to lessen the full-blown headache he had now. That was a favor gone wasted. "Is there any way he'll delay until I get back?"

"I asked. He said no."

"What about Aaron? What's he doing tonight?"

"He's left for the day already. I can try reaching him if you want."

"Please. Ask him if he minds seeing what he can dig up that might help. He was going to court tomorrow for me anyway, so if he manages to get Barker to change his mind, tell him I'll make it up to him. A weekend in Mexico on me."

Aaron was one of the juniors with more ambition than money right now. He also had a wife with expensive tastes. Bribery went a long way with him.

"I'll see what I can do." He heard her nails clicking on her keyboard as she typed herself a note. "Do you have any better idea when you're going to be back?"

"No," he sighed. "Things are...a little tricky here right now."

Only Julia and the DA knew the truth about where he was and why he'd gone. She hadn't been thrilled about being woken up in the middle of the night to find out, but she had taken it in stride, just like she took everything.

"If you need anything, just call me," she said.

"Thanks. Can you try to hold off on business for me until

the end of each day? Unless it's vital, but I'd rather just deal with one big interruption than a dozen small ones."

"Not a problem. Take care of yourself, Joe."

Her concern dug in deeper than casual words. The fact that he'd disappeared in the middle of the night for a friend nobody knew about had her more worried than she said aloud.

Joe disconnected and leaned heavily against the counter. He had no regrets coming out to help Israel. It just would've been a lot easier if he didn't have so many damn responsibilities back in California.

"Iz?" He rolled his neck, focusing on the crack of joints and stretch of muscles to tear his thoughts away from the Costello case. "I think we need to talk to Richelle. Any chance she'd be..."

The words faded as he emerged from the kitchen and saw Israel slumped against the wall outside Teddy's door. His head was bent, and his shoulders heaved in silent sobs.

"Oh. Iz..."

Joe touched his arm, afraid to startle, ready to retreat at the slightest signal of unwant. The muscle flexed beneath his fingertips, but Israel didn't push him away or do anything but lift his head.

The grief in his eyes savaged any thought of abandoning him now.

They moved together, arms circling, bodies colliding. Joe could barely breathe from the desperation of Israel's embrace, but he could breathe enough. He inhaled the sweaty scent of Israel's neck and lost eighteen years.

CHAPTER 4

"If you say I don't have to one more time, I'm going to tie you to the tree and dump your clothes in the river."

"I didn't do it so you'd do it to me." Joe dropped his head to his folded arms as Iz ran his palm over the swell of Joe's naked butt. Summer sun beat down upon his shoulders, but he still managed to shiver at Iz's silken touch. "Don't stop."

"I'm not going to. You going to roll over so I can do this right?"

"Eventually."

Soft lips tickled along his back. They both sighed. "I can

[&]quot;Roll over."

[&]quot;Iz, you don't—"

wait."

* * *

Joe took his cues from Israel. When Israel let him go, Joe backed off. When Israel disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door behind him, Joe went out to the living room and studied the mural. When Israel emerged and said Richelle was off work because of Teddy's death, Joe simply nodded.

He had done what he could. If Israel needed more, he would offer it. But there were only a certain number of steps to be taken at any single time. The trick was to make them count.

Israel tossed some clothes and toiletries into a large Target bag before they left. He didn't say he was accepting Joe's offer to stay at the hotel with him, and Joe didn't ask. There were too many memories in the apartment still. Time would work its magic more effectively if it had a little bit of distance on its side.

They tossed the bag into the car and opted to walk since their next destination was only around the corner. Joe hadn't thought about Richelle Becker once in all the time he'd been away from Arcola. It wasn't until Israel had said she was the mother of his child that memories had started drifting back. Her family had been as poor as Joe's. Too many children, not enough money coming in. It was the curse of a lot of families living in small rural communities.

He remembered her as a pretty girl, with serious brown eyes and dark hair that always looked like she'd stuck her

finger in a light socket. She was bold, too, bolder than a lot of the other girls in their school. She was one of the few who ignored the disdain of the grown-ups to express her interest in the half-black son of the town's ex-golden girl. Back then, that was how people in Arcola thought of Israel. None of this politically correct African American lingo. Nicki Jones had gone off to Chicago to earn her stripes onstage before going to New York and returned three years later with her tail tucked between her legs and a little brown baby. Arcola turned its back on her. They didn't want to think that their little homecoming queen wasn't as perfect as they'd hoped. They had enough reminders living in town of just how desperate things could get.

But Richelle hadn't cared about any of that. She'd been one of the few other than Joe to openly defend Israel. Her interest was obvious, even though Israel had never done anything more than be nice to her. She'd praised his artwork when it got shown at school, and she batted her eyelashes every chance she got. She didn't really care for Joe, but he'd never been bothered by that. She saw him as competition for Iz. She'd been right.

Her apartment building wasn't quite as low-rent as Israel's but it wasn't far off. They took the stairs to the third floor, too, a choice made when they waited for the elevator for several minutes and it never budged from the eleventh. Joe hung back as Israel knocked on 303, trying not to let the guilt get to him. He'd worked hard to break free of his roots. It wasn't his fault if others didn't make it.

It was a little too hard to swallow, though.

A lock turned, and the door opened. "Oh, hey, Iz." Joe caught a glimpse of dark hair before Richelle turned away, letting the door swing wider in her wake. "Didn't expect to see you today."

Israel faltered on the threshold until Joe rested his hand in the small of his back. They both entered a tiny but spotless living room, the scent of lemon cleaner still lingering in the air. No mural here, but there were endless empty nails on the wall from pictures that had hung there. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out of what.

Time had not been kind to Richelle. The curves Joe remembered from high school were gone, replaced with hard lines and angles. Her luxurious curls were now a frizzy mass pulled back into a ponytail, and telltale gray strands slivered in and out of the dark hair. Even her hands looked old. Knuckles knobby. Skin dry. She labored for a living. A lot. Israel had not been kidding about that.

Where Joe was regarding Richelle, Israel stared at the blank walls. "You took them down. All of them?"

"I couldn't look at 'em anymore." She turned around, ready to flop into the faded couch, when she noticed Joe for the first time. Her eyes widened upon immediate recognition, and she took a half-step closer, only to check the approach and retreat again. "Holy shit. Joe Grace?"

Joe gave her a smile. "Hi, Richelle."

"What're you doing here?"

"I came to help Iz."

Her gaze jumped to Israel. "You dug up Joe Grace to post your bail?" She almost sounded hurt.

"There wasn't any bail."

"And Iz didn't ask me to come," Joe cut in. "I found out what happened and flew out on my own."

Richelle still stared at Israel, as if she didn't really know him. "How'd you get out of bail?"

"They never charged me."

"What? Are they stupid or something?"

"No, because I didn't do it."

Her bark of contempt cut deep. "So they're stupid."

"If Iz says he didn't do it—"

"Because you know him so well?" It was Joe's turn to come beneath her scornful eye. "Where the hell have you been for the past twenty years? You don't get to say shit like that anymore, Joe. I don't care if you flew in on your own jet plane to ride to the rescue."

"I came to help."

"So where were you when I got the call they'd shot my little boy? How much help can you honestly be if you weren't even here when I had to tell Iz?" She stepped up and jabbed him in the chest, her bony finger unyielding. "You do not get to come waltzing in here like you own the place, like you're so much better than us. We're not in high school anymore."

"Richelle..." Calmly, Israel took her wrist and pulled her away. "I'd still be at the police station if it wasn't for Joe. He's a lawyer now. He's going to help us figure this all out."

She struggled to be released, but Israel wasn't letting her

go. "What's there to figure out, Iz? Teddy's gone. Nothing's going to change that."

"I don't want to sit in jail for the rest of my life."

"Who's going to put away a man grieving for his son? You did what had to be done. If I had access to a gun, you can bet I would've done the same thing."

"Except I didn't do it."

"You told me the police had your gun. You expect me to believe you didn't pull the trigger?"

"He probably expects you to believe him." Joe was tired of standing on the sidelines. Watching the domestic drama was hard enough; he didn't need to listen to her disrespect Israel at the same time. "What's so hard about that?"

Her lips pressed into a white line, pinched and hard like the rest of her. With one last yank, she tore away from Israel's hold and retreated to the far end of the couch. "If Iz didn't do it, Mr. Hotshot Lawyer, then who the hell did?"

"That's what we're going to figure out."

Carefully, Joe sat down on the opposite end of the sofa, even though he hadn't been invited to. Any questions he'd had whether or not Richelle was involved fled. Her reactions were too raw, too genuine. She believed—and probably would until they found the real killer—that Israel had done it.

"I'll get us some coffee," Israel volunteered.

Richelle's eyes flickered in his direction as he left for the kitchen, but returned all too quickly to fix on Joe. "I can't believe how selfish you are," she hissed.

Joe blinked. "What're you talking about? I have a job, you

know. It wasn't easy for me to come out here."

"And when you're done, you're going back to that job, right? You're going to show up, twist Iz up all over again, and then disappear. Just like you did before." She sniffed. "Like I said. Selfish."

"I didn't disappear. I went to college."

"You left him."

"I left Arcola."

"For you? All Arcola was, was Israel Jones."

In that moment, Joe hated her. He hated that she had a point. That maybe, just maybe, she might not be as wrong as he wanted her to be. He hated that she had known Iz all these years and he hadn't. That she shared more time with him than Joe ever could. That even now, she and Israel would always have something he could never touch. He hated that he was still going to sit there, and that he was going to break his back to clear Israel's name, and that when he had to leave, she was still going to have Iz. And Joe wouldn't.

She slid back into the cushions, her eyes darting past his shoulder. He didn't need to look to know Israel had returned, though he was grateful for the coffee handed to him. It gave him time to swallow down the bitter resentment threatening to march him out the door and straight to the airport.

"Who else might want Glen Marsh dead?" Joe directed the question to both of them. Though Israel had already voiced his own lack of opinions, he knew from experience that sometimes the comments of another might trigger memories.

Richelle rolled her eyes. "Who didn't? His gang pushed a

lot of wrong buttons."

Which reminded him of his earlier question. "Did they have a problem with Teddy? Is that why they killed him? Was he trying to get out?"

"He was never in. Glen respected that."

"You talk like you were on a first name basis."

"I was. Glen and Teddy were friends all the way back to first grade."

That was new information. Joe looked to Israel for confirmation.

"She's right. Glen used to be around here a lot."

"Used to?"

"Boys grow up," Richelle said. "They get different interests. Glen fell in with the gang, and Teddy always had his art."

"But if Glen and Teddy were friends, it doesn't make sense that he'd be responsible for shooting him."

"Things had cooled between them recently." Israel wasn't drinking the coffee he'd brought for himself. He kept turning the mug around between his hands, scraping it over the scratched coffee table. "Glen was getting into more dangerous territory. Teddy thought he could save him."

"Gee, I can't imagine where Teddy got that from," Richelle commented dryly.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to help people, Richelle."

"There is if it gets you a bullet in the head for your trouble."

If he didn't keep them on track, Joe would end up witness to the same kind of domestic squabbles he'd run away from by going to college. "When was the last time you saw Teddy and Glen together?"

Richelle and Israel exchanged a look, silently doing the math. "Probably a month or so ago," Richelle answered. "After Teddy got the notice."

"What notice?"

"About his scholarship. He was so excited, first thing he did was call Glen."

"Okay, back up. What scholarship?"

"You didn't tell him?" Richelle directed the accusatory query to Israel. "What's the point of having some fancy schmancy lawyer if you're not going to give him the whole story?"

Sighing, Israel finally abandoned the pretense of his coffee and stood back up. "How long do you think Joe's actually been in town? We haven't gotten around to it yet. He picked me up, we went my place, then we came here."

Joe tried not to watch Israel pace around the room like a caged animal. "I still don't know what scholarship you guys are talking about."

"Teddy got a full scholarship to this private school for the arts," Richelle explained. "He applied last year on a whim, not really thinking he'd get in. Hell, none of us thought he'd get in."

"I did," Israel interjected.

Richelle ignored him. "When he got shortlisted, we

thought that would be it. That was as far as he was going to get. But he got it. Surprised us all."

Except Israel. Somehow, Joe managed to keep from glancing in his direction.

"So he was going to be starting at this new school when he got killed?" At her nod, he added, "Did Glen not like the idea or something?"

"Glen thought..." Her gaze slid down, her fingers twisting together. "He told Teddy it was a pity thing. That the school was just interested in filling some liberal quota, and that it had nothing to do with how good Teddy might actually be. Needless to say, Teddy didn't want to hear it. That was the last I heard of Glen until Teddy got shot."

As a motive, it seemed pretty weak to Joe, unless there were more fights outside of his mother's hearing that had exacerbated the bad feelings between the boys. Then it could have been a gang honor thing that had prompted Glen to lash out. None of that explained why someone had then gone after Glen. Another gang looking to cover their tracks? Possibly.

None of this really got him much closer to having a lead. If it did anything, it just ruled out Richelle as a possibility.

"What does any of this have to do with Glen?" she demanded. "It's not like Teddy could've done it."

"I'm just trying to get the big picture here. The more information I have, the better I can figure out how to keep Iz out of jail."

"You want my advice, you go talk to his gang. They'll know."

"They think I did it," Israel said. "They're not going to tell us anything."

"They don't know Joe."

"And they're more likely to talk to a skinny white guy who sounds like a cop?" Israel finally sat down again. Exhaustion pushed him deep into the seat cushions. "Those boys are only interested in vengeance right now. There is no way they'll listen to anything me or Joe have to say. We'll end up just as dead as Teddy and Glen."

Neither one of them wanted to deny Israel's doom-filled declaration. Richelle even curled in on herself until she was a tiny ball on the couch, disappearing almost as effectively as Israel did. The similarity between the two—whether they realized it or not—was everything Joe did not want to be reminded of, and he rose from his perch, looking around the apartment.

Joe nodded down the hall. "Do you mind if I take a peek at Teddy's room?"

Richelle waved him off. "Go ahead. But I still don't see what any of this is going to do."

He fled their presence, frustrated that he couldn't deal better with seeing them together. It was stupid to be jealous; he didn't wish to be in Richelle's place for all the money in the world. He just wished he didn't feel like such an outsider. Even if—according to Richelle—it was his own doing.

Like the rest of the apartment, Teddy's bedroom was immaculate. The scent of lemon cleaner was even stronger in here, and the wooden headboard and dresser gleamed from

polishing. If there had ever been any physical evidence the police could use, Richelle had destroyed it with her cleaning mania. No fingerprint would be able to survive her heavy touch.

The bed was made, a navy and green patchwork quilt that had to be at least twenty years old laid perfectly across the narrow surface. None of the accoutrements that littered his room at Israel's were out here. More schoolbooks were stacked, squared and ordered from large to small, in the corner of his desk, and a corkboard was mounted on the wall behind it.

Joe stepped closer to look over what the pins held.

A picture, the edges just starting to curl, of Israel with a young boy on his shoulders. Teddy. He couldn't have been more than five in the photo. His skin was lighter than his father's, but his eyes were brown like his mom's. The smile was gap-toothed and broad, his delight at being so high in the air palpable.

Joe tore his eyes away. He didn't know how Israel and Richelle were dealing with all this. He hadn't even known Teddy and this meaningless death was getting to him.

Two letters shared space at the bottom of the board. The watermark came from The Whitlow Academy of Art. Joe took out the thumbtack holding them in place in order to read them more carefully.

The shortlist really had been short. Theodore James Becker had been one of seven contenders for an apprenticeship with the Academy's elite staff. The apprenticeship included three

years of full tuition, with exposure to some of the best artists living in Chicago, culminating in a show featuring his final projects.

It was a dream come true for a kid like Teddy. A big step up in the world.

Had Glen taken the desertion personally? How close had the boys remained that something like this could have been so serious to them?

Would he have acted similarly if Israel had been the one with the opportunity to make something of himself, leaving Joe behind in Arcola to fend for himself?

No.

Because Israel's happiness had been as important as his own at that time in his life. It hadn't been until months later, when the allure of freedoms he'd never had before grew too great, that Joe abandoned what had always been most precious to him.

Richelle had said the boys were growing apart. Teddy was moving on to bigger and better things. Glen was getting deeper into the gangs. A boy steeped in a violent culture might lash out differently than Joe had. Joe had simply stopped writing.

Teddy's five-year-old smile remained frozen in time.

CHAPTER 5

"Is that a lizard?"

"Yeah. Wanna pet him?"

"I shouldn't."

"He don't bite."

"Did I say I was scared?"

"No." Deliberately, Joe reached into the shoebox and stroked the lizard's rough back with his index finger. "My folks say I can't have a dog. So I have Wizard here instead."

"I like his skin. He really lets you pet him like that?"

"Yeah. But I keep him in the box because if I don't, he'll run away."

"Pets do that. Or they die."

"Yeah. You got a pet?"

"We could share Wizard if you want." Israel grinned.

* * *

Leaving Richelle's was a relief. Even though Joe had nothing more to talk about, Israel did, and he and Richelle fell into a quiet conversation sorting out what to do with all the condolences. Joe had nothing to contribute to that. In fact, he felt decidedly awkward being privy to the discussion in the first place. It was a family matter. Israel and Richelle's. It didn't include Joe. Even if Richelle hadn't made that perfectly clear, he would have felt that way anyway.

She let him take the two letters. He didn't know what use they might be, but coming so close to the end of Teddy's life, knowing about the disagreement with Glen, his gut wouldn't let them go. Israel frowned at his request, but didn't disagree. He didn't speak at all as they walked back to the rental car. At moments, it didn't feel like he was actually there at Joe's side.

But once they were both in the front seat, he was at a loss. He had more information on Teddy, some on Glen, and near certainty Richelle had nothing to do with the gun going missing from Israel's apartment. That left the apartment manager, but Israel's continued silence didn't encourage Joe to bring up the subject.

He backed out of the alley, taking his time in hopes Israel would say something. Then he crept down to the corner,

[&]quot;Not anymore."

wishing he had the balls to shatter the silence. Without any other direction, he turned to retrace their steps, taking the path back to the hotel.

Neither one of them said a word until he was on the highway.

"Richelle's not always this angry." Israel gazed out the window, his voice soft and distant. "Don't judge her based on today."

"I don't."

"She's had it rough since the shooting," he continued, as if Joe hadn't protested. "I worry she's not going to know what to do with herself now. Teddy was her whole world."

"He was your son, too."

"I'm better at coping than she is. She closes herself off. Gets buried in her work so she doesn't have to think about stuff"

Richelle and half the rest of the world. But Joe didn't want to talk about her. He'd rather they went back to the fraught silence than that.

"We should track down your apartment manager and see what he has to say about your key. Somebody has to know what's going on."

"I'll call him when we get back to your hotel. He probably wouldn't talk to you if you tried."

"Why-oh."

His knuckles went white on the steering wheel. He had a job to do; didn't these people see that? He got more cooperation from LA's elite the few times he crossed paths

with them.

"If you want to go-"

"No." Joe cut that thread off before Israel let it fester into something problematic. "I'm here, and I'm helping. We'll find a way to work around everything else. Somehow."

The soft rush of Israel's sigh made his skin prickle. "I appreciate it. Nobody else might tell you it, but I will. I don't...I haven't been thinking too straight since everything went to hell."

His big hand rested between them, and on a whim, Joe reached over and covered it with his own leaner one, squeezing gently. "Maybe you were right about that nap. We could both probably use some sleep."

"Probably." Israel didn't pull away from his touch. "We could go out, too. Do something not related to any of this shit. Get our minds off it." His thumb caressed the side of Joe's, faint and fragile. "Get to know each other again."

It shouldn't have aroused him. Hell, he was exhausted, and he was scared, and he was pissed off that Richelle had every right to be angry with him, that her words might not have been so empty after all. He should be on the phone, digging around in Glen Marsh's downhill life, trying to find other suspects to throw in front of the police. He needed to focus on making sure Israel did not go to jail over this, and yet, just the heat from Israel's hand was enough to make his entire arm feel baked in the sun.

"We could do that," he managed to say evenly. "I think that's an excellent idea, actually."

"Wanna get out of the city?"

"God, yeah."

Israel chuckled at how swiftly Joe answered. "Get on 290 west."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

You'll see turned out to be Cosley Zoo, a five-acre spread in Wheaton that boasted a historic train station and no fees for families. Joe dropped a twenty in the donation box anyway, drinking in the site of all the parents and children scattered around the entrance. He didn't understand how seeing other people so happy could possibly be good for Israel. Everywhere he turned, there was another reminder of what he had lost, and yet, as soon as Joe parked the car, Israel hopped out with a huge smile on his face, the widest he'd seen since picking him up at the police station.

"It's mostly farm animals," Israel explained. They strolled along one of the winding paths, partially protected from the beating afternoon sun by the ample foliage. "But it's got a good share of wildlife, too. Stuff you find native in Illinois. Kind of an animal heritage zoo, if you know what I mean."

A bird of prey swooped overhead, not part of the refuge but close enough to the trees for Joe to make the connection. "You brought Teddy here."

Israel slid his hands into his pockets, averting his eyes as he gazed at the pen they passed. "Yeah." Lambs bleated in the distance, calling to unseen adults. "We could come out here and spend the day. Bring lunch. He liked to hear stories about

Arcola, even though I told him over and over again I didn't live on a farm."

"Didn't you ever take him there?"

"Richelle did. A couple times."

"What about your mom? You didn't go see her?"

"She came up here to visit when Teddy was little. But she passed away eight years ago. Breast cancer. After that...there wasn't any reason to go back."

Joe glanced over at Israel, but his head was still turned, his face still closed. So much death. So much loss. Did he have anybody left in the world? Richelle, maybe. They might not have ever married, but there was a bond there Joe couldn't deny. She had every right to see Joe as an interloper. Moments like this, he felt like one.

"I'm sorry about your mom. She was always good to me."

Though he didn't look at Joe, Israel smiled. "That's because you were good to me."

"Did she ever know?"

"About what?"

"Us."

One broad shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. "I don't know. She never said. And she never gave me a hard time about not getting married, so maybe she guessed it."

"Considering what she went through, marriage was probably on her list of stuff to protect you from."

This time, Israel laughed. "Yeah. Maybe."

They walked along in silence, arms occasionally brushing against each other, paces evenly matched. Every once in a

while, Israel guided Joe to a fence to get a closer look, but other than sharing the odd animal fact, they didn't speak. Joe wished fervently he had the guts to ask Israel what he was thinking, but guilt tied his tongue. It was easier to let Israel take the lead, follow where he went, work from his cues. If Israel didn't want to discuss their personal lives, Joe was okay with that.

They stood in front of a pen of goats, Israel leaning against the white wooden fence that separated them from the animals, when Israel broke the silence.

"Do you have anyone? In LA. Are you seeing someone?"

He posed the question without meeting Joe's eyes. He might as well have been asking about the weather for as casual as it came across. Except Joe knew better. He had danced this particular waltz on many occasions. It was one of the few he knew all the steps to.

"Not really." Which was the truth. Gareth was nothing compared to what he knew Israel was truly asking.

"But you've been in relationships. You haven't been alone all these years."

"Well, yeah, though maybe not as many as you might think. I work an insane number of hours, and college wasn't much better. Most guys don't want to put up with a partner constantly cancelling on them."

"Yeah, I can see where that might be a problem."

Do you? he wanted to ask. But he didn't. He was almost afraid to know the answer.

Instead, the question that popped out was, "You haven't

been alone, have you?"

Israel took longer to answer than Joe had. The proud sculpture of his profile softened as memories took over, and Joe watched, fascinated, as Israel visibly weighed his response.

"The longest relationship of my life is the one I have with Richelle," he said. "So in a lot of ways, no, I haven't been alone." His broad thumb picked at something underneath his nail. "There haven't been any other women, but being in the city, well...it's not so hard to find someone willing if I get an itch."

"Of course it's not. You're still one of the most gorgeous guys I've ever seen." As soon as he blurted it out, Joe colored and became enamored with his own fingernails. "Jesus, can I flame any more than that?"

Israel's chuckle surprised him. He glanced up to see the other man finally regarding him, laughter in his pale eyes.

"You think I can't handle hearing I'm fine? You been gone too long, Joe Grace."

"I did not use the word 'fine."

"No, you used a flaming word."

"It's not the word—" He bit off the rest when he realized he'd fallen for Israel's goading. Laughing, he shook his head and turned his attention back to the goats. "The longest relationship I had lasted almost three years. But that was when I was in law school. There hasn't been anybody that stuck around for more than a couple months since then."

"Did you love him?"

"I thought I did."

"So what happened?"

Joe sighed. "I didn't love him enough, apparently. He said he couldn't be with somebody who put things as intangible as education ahead of actual people."

"Huh? That doesn't make sense. You were going to school so you *could* help people."

"That's what I said."

A group of small children crowded up to the fence, nudging against Israel's leg as they tried to get a good look at the goats. Israel abandoned his space and, together, they resumed their trajectory through the zoo. The silence that fell between them was warmer now, softer most definitely. It was the quiet of friends content to simply be together, neither one needing to speak, everything important having been said for the moment. Joe wasn't sure what had prompted Israel to bring up the issue of their private lives, but the relief he felt discovering Israel had never really found another man to share things with didn't really surprise him. He'd been selfishly hoping for years that what they'd had mattered as much to Israel as it did to Joe. Confirmation was more than welcome.

"You've never said what it is you do for a living," Joe commented after their path had naturally found its way toward the exit.

"I work at the Avalon Gallery downtown." At Joe's surprised glance, Israel shrugged. "I don't show or get involved in any of the sales stuff. I help with deliveries and getting things set up. Grunt work mostly."

"But still, that's great. That's a lot closer than you ever thought you'd get."

"It beats the hell out of working at Wal-Mart, that's for sure. And it was good for Teddy."

"Teddy? Why?"

"That's how we heard about the school in the first place. One of the gallery's biggest clients saw one of Teddy's murals and pushed me to get him to apply."

That didn't exactly match Richelle's description of applying on a whim, but it certainly made more sense. A kid in Teddy's kind of neighborhood had to get some kind of outside exposure most of the time in order to break free.

"I should probably call Sarah and let her know I'm okay," Israel was saying. "I didn't even think about it until now. She's probably worried."

"Is Sarah your boss?"

He nodded. "She owns Avalon. She gave me a job a few years after I moved to Chicago. She's been a rock for me."

Another woman in his life. Another person to give him strength when he needed it. Was this someone else who had different aspirations for her relationship with Israel than the one on the surface? It was possible. Israel had a way of drawing people who wanted more from him. Joe was a perfect example of that. He'd flown across the country on a whim for the man, after all.

"We could swing by the gallery so you can see her," Joe offered. "Before or after dinner. Your pick."

"No, that's all right. I'll call."

"I'd kind of like to see where you work."

"Maybe tomorrow."

They passed beneath a row of heavy trees, the sun almost completely eradicated from sight. The air was cooler there, but the fresh scent of the earth compensated for the lack of heat.

"Is there something else you want to do tonight then? Because I was thinking—"

"I don't want to go out." Israel's arm brushed against Joe's as he took a deep breath. "I'd like to get something for supper and just stay in the room tonight."

Joe nodded. If he'd been under the same kind of scrutiny Israel had, he'd want a quiet night in, too. "I guess we could both use some good sleep."

"I didn't say anything about sleeping." The soft intent in his voice crept across the minimal space between them and seeped into Joe's skin, enough to warm him all the way to his marrow in spite of their cooler environment. When Joe glanced sideways, Israel still regarded the path ahead, but his color had deepened with some unknown emotion.

Or maybe not so unknown. Just forgotten. Dormant for eighteen years.

Revenants scattered in the face of the desire surging through Joe's flesh. He tried to tamp it down, or to call them back to drive it away, but he'd been fighting the same urges for most of the day, ever since Israel had stepped into the interrogation room and the past had devoured all the time in between. It was a losing battle.

Israel's knuckles brushed against the back of his hand.

Careful. Fleeting. Discreet.
Like no time had passed at all.
Not a losing battle.
A lost one.

CHAPTER 6

"No." Israel smoothed his broad hand over Joe's naked flank. "Just glad you're here."

Israel's bed felt different than his. Softer in the middle, like he spent all his time there and not on the edges. Joe buried his face in the sheets and inhaled.

Iz laughed. "What're you doing?"

"They smell like you."

"I smell like me, too." He tugged until their hard cocks nudged against each other. "And see? Not shaking anymore."

[&]quot;You're shaking."

[&]quot;So are you."

[&]quot;You scared?"

* * *

No matter what Joe did to clean up in the suite's kitchenette, the sound of the shower filtering from down the hall overwhelmed all of it. The faint patter was louder than the water swirling down the stainless steel sink as he rinsed off the last plate. It was warmer than the white paper bags he tossed, still greasy from their chili fries and gourmet burgers. It was more rhythmic than the hum of the refrigerator when he stowed the food they hadn't been able to touch. If he could carry a tune at all, he might've broken out into song, just to drown out the reminder of where Israel was, what Israel was doing, what was likely to happen when Israel came out again. But he couldn't, and besides, the edge of expectation the shower drew was worth balancing upon for lifetimes.

The absence of sound was almost worse. Joe fumbled with the plates as he put them away, chastising himself for overreacting. It was entirely possible he'd blown Israel's words at the zoo way out of proportion. He could be reading into them what wasn't really there. Wish fulfillment, perhaps, because he hadn't been able to get thoughts of Israel out of his head, no matter how much minutiae about the case he stuffed into it. Nothing more had been said, and even in the car, when it was just the two of them and no possible witnesses, Israel had kept his hands to himself.

"That's better." Israel filled the small doorway to the kitchenette. The threadbare blue T-shirt he'd pulled on had damp patches on his shoulders and chest where he hadn't dried himself off well enough. "I'm starting to feel human

again."

Joe stared for a second too long. He dropped the last fork into the drawer and pushed it shut. "How's the water pressure?"

"Good. Hard. Almost better than a massage."

Joe could use one of those, too. Because Israel still blocked the way out, though, he picked up a towel and started wiping down the counter.

"The kitchen's clean, Joe. Come out and get off your feet. You look exhausted."

Being in the living area with Israel wasn't much better than the kitchen. Sultry air drifted from the open bathroom door, clinging to Joe's skin and making his forehead damp. Israel sat on the opposite end of the couch and stretched his legs out on the coffee table in front of him.

"Why're you so nervous?" Israel phrased the soft question without looking at him, his head resting on the back of the sofa, his eyes shut. "You're not doubting me, are you?"

"What? No! God, no." Though it didn't escape his notice that Israel asked specifically about himself and not his guilt.

"I'm making you uncomfortable."

"You're not."

"You never could lie to me, you know. I don't know why you're trying now." He smiled as he turned to face him. "Is this one of those lawyer things you've learned?"

"It's not..." Joe stopped when he realized Israel was teasing him. "I'm just tired, I guess," he tried instead. "And I wish I could figure this out so it wasn't hanging over your

head."

"You will. I know you will."

Joe watched the hand that reached for him like it was moving in slow motion. Broad fingers, hard and healed many times over. The pinker palm, the lines etched deep into the flesh. Old lady Harkness had once told Iz and Joe the way their lifelines forked meant great changes would forever alter them. They had laughed it off at the time because if there was anybody crazier in Arcola than old lady Harkness, they were tucked away in a straitjacket and padded room where nobody knew about them. Now, the memory made him freeze, just as much as the knowledge that he was here, and Israel was here, and neither one of them were going anywhere in the foreseeable future.

Israel wrapped his fingers around Joe's arm and gently pulled, asking without saying the words for him to come closer. Joe complied. What else was there to do? He wanted this—had all along—and it was just everything he'd long ago buried finally coming to fruition that made him worry.

The heat seeping through his shirtsleeve erased it. Israel had never had to coax Joe closer in their youth; there had never been any need when Israel drew him like a magnet just by being there. Joe turned into the arms that waited for him, and their heads tilted in an unforgotten chorus, mouths meeting, lingering, indulging in what both had wanted from the start.

He tasted of the pineapple he'd had on his burger, sharpened by the chili, warmed by the flavor that had always

belonged to Israel Jones alone. No man Joe had kissed since had recreated that essence; he suspected no man ever would. It was an amalgam of sunshine and watercolors, sweat and smiles, memories of days upon innocent days Joe had always treasured. The first tentative contact of his tongue made Joe's head whirl, and he parted his lips further, inviting more, inviting all of Iz, like murder and absence and time had never happened.

Israel tugged him more onto his lap, forcing Joe to sit across his powerful thighs. It was awkward, and jarred their mouths, knocking teeth against teeth, against tongues. Israel chuckled and pulled back, shifting in his seat.

"You're taller than you used to be."

Joe smiled. "I'm not fifteen anymore."

"Thank God for that."

This close, Joe had an even better view of Israel's features, the rich skin unmarked by time. Though his position wasn't any more comfortable, he caved to the urge to touch him, his thumb tracing the full lower lip, the stubble roughing below. The lines might not be visible, but he knew they were there, keeping their secrets away from him no matter how many times he searched them out. He bore his own. If Israel asked, he would share them. He might even do so if Iz never said a word.

Israel smoothed a hand up Joe's back, sculpting muscles into new shapes with only the sweep of his fingers. The skin that touched his nape seared his own, but the danger only lurked in the contact between them, not in the weight of

Israel's gaze, or the confessions left unspoken. Joe leaned closer and breathed him in. Israel's nostrils flared when he did the same.

"We should move this to the bedroom," Joe murmured.

"Yeah. Probably."

Neither one of them moved.

"I like that you're taller." Israel skimmed his mouth along Joe's cheek. "I like that you're here better."

Joe liked a lot of things about that moment, that place, but the firm line of Israel's erection was very close to the top of the list. "Come on." He disengaged though it was the last thing he wanted to do, and climbed off Israel's lap, taking his hand to pull him to the doorway. His feet felt too big, his skin too tight, but they reached the dim room without tripping, which was all he could ask for right then.

The bed loomed in front of them, beckoning them nearer. Joe took a step toward it, only for Israel to loop an arm around his waist and draw him back against his larger body. He groaned at the first kiss pressed to the side of his neck, and his lashes fluttered shut. He shouldn't have been surprised that Israel remembered where he was most sensitive, but he was. His body shook from the memories.

Israel just held him tighter.

He looped an arm back over Israel's broad shoulder, finding the sinew stretched hard. His fingers slipped beneath the collar of his T-shirt, and the cotton scraped lightly over his skin. An image of the tattoo he had only seen the edge of flashed behind his closed eyelids. The thought of licking along

its inky trail to its source made him groan as much as Israel's kisses.

"You make sounds like that, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to stop," Israel said. He pushed his hand down over Joe's flat stomach, creating tiny quakes in the muscle along the way. "I've wanted to hold you like this all day."

Joe chuckled. "This isn't actually encouraging me to be quiet." His smile turned into a gasp when Israel's callused fingertips found the tip of his leaking cock.

It was Israel's turn to chuckle. "You think I forgot how to shut you up?"

No, he didn't, but it was the lightness in Israel's tone that stole the rest of his voice. The day had been a discomfiting amalgam of nostalgia, camaraderie, and grief. This was the first moment he felt actual joy coming from his old friend, and Joe didn't want to let it go for anything.

Blindly, he turned in Israel's arms, using the hold on his neck to keep him from pulling away. He took the promise of the smile and transformed it into a kiss, hot and wet and hungrier than anything they'd shared on the couch. Israel didn't protest. He opened with Joe, gripping his hips with hands as desperate as their mouths. Chest to chest, cock to cock, soon to be flesh to flesh as Joe tugged at the back hem of Israel's shirt.

Israel took the hint and released his hold to go to work on the buttons of Joe's shirt. Neither stopped kissing. Even when the caresses became clumsy, and they bit at lips instead of slipped against skin. They only paused long enough for Joe to

yank the T-shirt over Israel's head, discarding it to the pile that had started with his.

The damp air from the shower settled into his bare chest, cocooning him as much as the heat from Israel's skin. Contact grew slippery, and his lungs tightened, but Joe refused to part long enough to ease either sensation. Breathing wasn't necessary. Humidity was relative. The now and the here, with Israel in both, encompassed everything he needed.

Somehow, they ended up on the bed. He didn't remember moving. He didn't remember who led who. He only knew the sanctuary of kisses that made him burn and then the tangle of legs, long, powerful, determined to twist them together into some new form, some new creature. Their hands had room to explore, carving out limbs to replace the ones in memory. Israel toyed with the meager chest hair Joe had sprouted since puberty, while Joe molded his palms over the strength of Israel's bare skin.

He groaned when Israel ducked his head, licking along the sharp line of Joe's collarbone to the hollow of his throat. He had to tilt his head back to accommodate the space Israel filled, and lungs that had seized earlier now threatened to stop working entirely. When Israel sucked at the thin skin, Joe vibrated at an even higher frequency, and he cupped the back of his friend's skull in a vain attempt to temper the tremors.

Israel bathed his shoulders in thorough kisses, only venturing lower when Joe began to writhe atop the bed. He had to unknot their legs in order to move, but the vacuum he created with the loss drove Joe to hook his leg higher, around

Israel's hips, the heel of his foot digging into the promising swell. The new angle molded Israel's arousal into Joe's thigh. Both of them sighed. Both of them stilled.

Hot breath sank into his skin, stretching and softening the tympani of his heart. Israel might have been waiting to hold Joe all day, but this was what Joe had yearned for, this melding of flesh where it grew too difficult to discern whose limb was where, whose pulse created the most noise. He craved the deafening, those moments when the world went silent because it ceased to exist, when the currents rushed too loudly within them and swept all the rest of it away.

When Israel began kissing him again, each man was slower, more deliberate, seeking out every inch of bare skin to stake his own personal claim. Or rather, to take it back. That was probably more accurate. Joe wondered as he surged along the crest of his desire if he'd held the claim close for this very moment when he could give it back to his first and best friend.

Israel reached his stomach, circling the tip of his tongue around the slight rise of Joe's belly button. "You and your damn outie," he said with a smile.

Joe nudged at his shoulder, though with no actual intent to push Israel away. "We can't all be gods like you."

The mirth faded. The soft eyes visible through Israel's lashes made Joe regret being so flip.

"I want to see your tattoo," Joe said, hoping to shake the mood he'd unexpectedly evoked. Sitting up, he forced Israel to get up, too, clambering along the bed to kneel behind him.

"It's not anything special."

Joe disagreed. The design consisted of two figures, a horned demon and an angel, both with wings spread in flight, reaching out to each other across his shoulder blades. They created a V with the angle of their bodies that ended at the middle of his spine, but it was the intimacy of the hands that didn't quite touch, the torsos so close together yet so far apart, that Joe loved.

Bowing his head, he brushed his mouth over the edges he'd first spied peeking out of Israel's collar. A shiver went through Iz. Joe skimmed palms down his arms as if to warm him, but didn't stop his tender exploration.

By the time he reached the angel and demon's entwined feet, his lips tingled and his cock ached. The scent of the soap Israel had used kept making his mouth water, and he nipped at the taut brown skin in hunger yet to be sated.

Israel moved without having to be asked, his hands going to his waist to push down his sweats. Joe did the same with his pants, that swift shucking of clothes when both parties were eager to be rid of the last barriers in their way. While Israel stretched out on his side with his head near the pillows, Joe faced the other direction, face to face with Israel's gorgeous cock.

He whimpered when Israel touched him first. How many times had they done this as teenagers? Probably not as often as them taking turns, but more than penetration since they hadn't discovered that until they were almost out of high school. The thought of sinking between the firm cheeks of Israel's ass now brought goose bumps to the surface of his skin, and he dove

forward, grasping Israel's length near the base, and licked over the head.

His eyes closed. Easier to focus on the physical, easier to appreciate the leap of tastes on his tongue. Heat, so much of it, rolled off Israel's skin, and Joe pressed his cheek to the plane of his lower abdomen as he sucked the tip past his lips. That was better. The full contact of square inches meeting square inches. The stretching of muscle around throbbing flesh, all the while keeping even more contact with tongue and the edges of his teeth.

Israel was just as deliberate. His large hand held Joe steady, its mate caressing Joe's heavy balls. He had never been able to take Joe all the way in; not because of his size, but because of the gag reflex Israel hated so much. But his attention now was more thorough than Joe remembered, tighter, hotter, though Joe fully recognized that could be his own nostalgia coming into play.

Together, they moved, giving pleasure, taking. The muscles in Joe's thighs quivered incessantly, while the back of his knees prickled. He had the overwhelming urge to push deeper into Joe's mouth, but he refrained, settling instead to swallow more of the length in his own. When the tip nudged the back of his throat, he hesitated only long enough to take a deep breath.

A grunt echoed through his cock. Beneath Joe's hand, Israel's leg went rigid, as if the muscles were unbelieving of what was going on. The wiry hair at the base tickled the end of Joe's nose, but the scent was better than any dream, any date,

any possibility. Joe held him there as long as he could. Then he held for a moment or two longer.

"Joe...baby..."

The need in Israel's voice was stifled by his devouring of Joe's cock. He swallowed down the tip at the same time Joe pulled back to gulp for air, and then it was his turn to beg for release.

This was the rhythm they set, the give and the take, the pleasure and the plea, until neither could stay away any longer, both had to taste and savor and simply have as the desire coiled into an electric spring inside veins ready to explode at the slightest provocation. Joe didn't hold back—couldn't—thrusting in and out of Israel's mouth now, just as Israel pushed in and out of Joe's throat. He crashed and erupted from a faint rake of teeth, crying out around Israel's cock as everything went molten.

The vibrations set Iz off. Hot fluid splashed across the back of Joe's tongue, and he scrambled to take Israel the rest of the way in, burying his nose in the man's velvety sac.

They only parted because of basic human necessity, and even then, both twisted to meet halfway, mouths joining, arms enfolding, tumbling back to the bed in a sated heap.

The taste of his come on Israel's tongue made Joe's cock twitch. Silently, he told it to behave.

"God, I've missed you," Israel rasped. His damp forehead rested against Joe's for a moment before he claimed another kiss. And another. And then another after that.

Joe didn't get a chance to respond for a very long time.

CHAPTER 7

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"I can't, Joe."
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Joe glared at Iz from across the cafeteria table. "He's taking advantage of you, you know that, right? Are you getting overtime?"

[&]quot;What do you mean, you can't? It's the playoffs."

[&]quot;I gotta work."

[&]quot;Since when?"

[&]quot;Since Mr. Shields asked me to."

[&]quot;So tell him you can't."

[&]quot;No."

[&]quot;Doesn't matter."

[&]quot;Jesus, he's making you do this off the books again, isn't

he? Someone needs to—"

"Just let it go." The sudden strength in Israel's voice made Joe stiffen. "He asked, I agreed, and that's it. End of discussion."

* * *

Avalon was not what Joe expected.

Most art galleries he was familiar with were sterile and lacked personality. White walls to give canvases the proper focus, wide open spaces to allow people to view the art from close or far. Avalon was like none of them. If anything, it reminded him of the Frick Museum in Manhattan more than anything else, and he wondered if that had been the inspiration.

The outside looked like any business, but the interior had been refinished to look like someone's home. There was even a coat rack by the front door, with an antique bronze umbrella stand at its side. Joe stared in amazement as Israel wiped his feet on the mat, just as he would if he was visiting a friend, before venturing past the stairs that led to an upper level and down the hall. Joe followed. He peeked in the rooms they passed to see a living room, a dining room, a family room, all with art in every shape and form. A painting over a fireplace. A sculpture by the door. There was a mobile hanging from the ceiling in the family room. And everywhere, there were multiple places to sit. Couches. Chairs. Even an oversized bean bag.

They stepped into an open-plan kitchen. The temperature

was slightly higher in here, with the scent of freshly baked bread in the air. A row of bubble vases housing sunflowers, lilies, and other red and orange flowers decorated the middle of the heavy rustic table set off to the side, while at the butchertop counter stood Sarah Jager. She wasn't anything Joe had expected, either.

"Iz!"

She jerked her head up from the laptop she had resting on the island so suddenly, her fifties-style, cats-eye glasses slipped down her nose. Dark hair streaked naturally with gray fell in curls down her back, while pale blue eyes framed with the darkest, thickest lashes he had ever seen on a woman danced at the sight of Israel. Her skin was the purest porcelain he had ever seen, too. He knew a lot of women in LA who would kill to have Sarah's flawless complexion.

She swept around the edge of the island, the lace edging the flowing sleeve of her peasant blouse catching on her computer. The rest of her ensemble was comprised of faded Levi's and pink fuzzy flip-flops, with her toenails painted a dazzling electric blue. It should have looked odd on a woman in her fifties, but on Sarah, seemed like the perfect finishing touch to her zaftig form.

Her arms went around Israel's waist in a bone-crunching hug, the top of her head barely hitting his chest. "You should have called me."

"They were just questioning me, Sarah."

"You still should have called."

"You would have worried."

"I was already worried." Stepping back, she slapped at his chest. "You don't have to do everything on your own, you know."

Israel smiled. "I know. And I didn't." He nodded toward Joe, who had been standing off to the side. "This is Joe Grace. Joe, this is my boss, Sarah Jager."

She stretched her hand out to shake his, only to freeze halfway there. "Joe?" Her gaze shot to Israel. "The Joe?"

When Joe looked at him, too, Israel stuffed his hands into his jeans pockets and shrugged, his cheeks visibly heating in embarrassment. "Yeah. He heard about what happened and flew out from LA to help. He's a lawyer now."

Her even more curious attention swung back to Joe. "Well, I have heard some stories about you, mister."

He took her hand this time with a small laugh. "And I really hope Iz told only the good ones. It's nice to meet you."

"So did you bail him out or something?" Though she dropped her hand, she didn't retreat from his personal space. Joe got the impression personal space didn't mean a whole lot to her.

"I wasn't charged, Sarah," Israel repeated. "Joe just let them know they couldn't take advantage of me anymore by holding me. They don't have a case."

Well, they did have a case, but not a very good one. Joe kept that observation to himself.

"I'm going to try and find out who really did it," Joe said. "That'll clear Israel's name better than anything else."

"Is there anything I can do to help? I had a list of lawyers,

but I guess I won't need those now."

"You think I could have a few days off while Joe's here?" Israel asked.

Her brows shot up. "Why would I make you come back to work when you two haven't seen each other since high school?"

"That's not why-"

"It's enough reason for me." Looping her arm through Israel's, she pulled him over to the counter and aimed him at her laptop. "You can have all the time in the world you want if you just figure out where I went wrong on that stupid spreadsheet."

His rich chuckle filled the room.

"Meanwhile, I'm going to give this cutie-pie the grand tour," Sarah announced. Joe's arm was the next to get hooked, and he had no choice but to follow as she led him toward the hall. "Take the bread out when the timer dings, Iz. That's my lunch in there."

She wore a light floral perfume that whispered along the air as she guided him into the family room. Seeing Sarah now explained a lot more about the gallery's design. It suited her. He wasn't sure what the rationale was, but as she flopped down into the corner of a huge, overstuffed couch, pulling him down to sit next to her and gaze up at a gorgeous landscape hanging on the wall, he didn't really feel bothered to find out.

"I'll bet Israel was glad to see you." Her legs stretched out in front of her, her curls spilling over the back cushions. Though he didn't adopt her pose, it wasn't hard to relax in her

presence. "He needs all the friends he can get right now."

"I'm a little surprised he told you about me."

"Why? The way I heard it, you two were joined at the hip."

"Well, yeah."

"So that makes you important to him."

"Bosses don't always care about what's important to their employees."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, a smile haunting her mouth. "Do I look like the kind of boss who keeps her nose out of people's business? Besides, he's not just an employee."

Joe didn't think for a second that their relationship was anything more than a very deep friendship, but the pang of regret at not being there in all those intervening years came sharp as always anyway. The night before had been amazing, though they had both crashed in each other's arms after the blow jobs. Still, waking up with Israel spooned behind him had more than made up for the hours spent sleeping.

"You don't think he did it, do you?" she asked.

"I know he didn't."

She patted his knee with a smile. "I knew I liked you."

"Do you have any ideas what could've happened?"

Sarah shook her head. "Who knows what crazy things people think these days? I couldn't believe Teddy went and got himself shot, either, though I never understood how Glen could've done it."

Joe regarded her with surprise. "You knew Glen?"

"Sure, why not? Those boys were thick as thieves when they were littler. Iz didn't bring both of them around much because Glen always got bored too quick, but I saw them enough."

"When was the last time you saw them together?"

Her eyes grew distant as she thought about the question. "Oh, a couple years now. Teddy got more interested in his art, so when he came around here, he didn't want to play. He wanted to paint."

"And you let him?"

"Sure. The boy was good. Very good." She nodded toward the ceiling. "Iz and I redid one of the storage rooms upstairs so they could use it for their work. Iz didn't use it nearly as much as Teddy did, though. That boy lived up there when he was here. Forgot the rest of the world existed."

It sounded more than a little lonely to Joe. He hadn't been the most social of kids either, but at least he'd had Israel. It hadn't mattered to him too much then that he didn't have a wide circle of friends.

"I'd love to see some of his work," Joe said. "You still have any of it around?"

Sarah shook her head. "Israel took it all." A faint bell rang from the front of the house, and she twisted to look at the door behind them with a scowl. "Shit. I'm always getting people in when I have somebody interesting to talk to. Hang on."

She left him sitting there, his stomach rumbling slightly from the fresh bread smells still coming from the kitchen. Joe leaned his head on the back of the couch the way she had done

in order to get lost in the Alaskan landscape returning his attention.

Warm hands settled on his shoulders and began to knead. "Where'd Sarah go?" Israel's breath was soft in Joe's ear.

Joe's eyes drifted shut at the firm massage. "Customer. Don't stop."

"Wasn't planning on it."

"You told her about me."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"We're friends."

Joe tilted his head to the right so Israel could massage higher. "It sounds like you told her about more than just hanging out."

Rough calluses glided along his shirt collar, evoking the same shivers that had wracked Joe the night before when Israel had touched him. "Because Sarah doesn't judge people like that. And she didn't have the same baggage Richelle did about you." Israel squeezed Joe's upper arms before finally letting him go. "I didn't tell her right away. But she and I have been friends for a long time." He perched on the end of the couch, too far away by Joe's estimation. "You don't have a problem with her knowing, do you?"

"No, not a problem. It's just..." How did he put it? "Nobody knew. Not really. I guess I kind of liked that it was always just you and me."

The concern in Israel's eyes heightened, his mouth turning down. "You liked that I was your little secret?"

Joe saw where this was going and straightened, facing Israel more directly. "That's not what I meant."

"That's what it sounded like."

"We didn't really have much of a choice about that in Arcola. But what I meant was I liked that you had me and I had you. That we had each other."

Murmured voices from the front of the gallery drew Israel's attention to the door, though his mouth remained firm. "Needing someone doesn't mean you have to shut everybody else out, Joe. I'm not going to apologize for having friends I can talk to now."

"You're blowing this—"

But he couldn't finish the thought, not with Sarah appearing in the doorway. Just behind her was a bald man a good decade older than Joe, dressed in a crisply tailored pinstripe suit that he'd seen in more than one high-end fashion spread this past spring. The man had the face and body of a bulldog, albeit a smiling one, but the way Israel promptly rose to his feet in the newcomer's presence said the suit wasn't a fluke.

Compassion immediately softened his gaze as it settled on Israel. "I'm so relieved to see the police came to their senses." He strode over and took Israel's hand in greeting, his other clapping down on Israel's shoulder. "It's good to see you back where you belong."

"I'm not completely in the clear yet." Israel gestured toward Joe. "Joe Grace, Gavin Asbury. Joe's an old friend. A lawyer. He's helping me get this sorted out."

Joe stood as Asbury approached. They shook hands. He liked Asbury's grip.

"Where do you practice?" Asbury asked.

"I'm an assistant DA in Los Angeles."

His amused smile was friendly, not confrontational. "Decided to play for the other team, huh? At least you're going to know all the tricks when this goes to trial."

"No offense, but it's not going to trial. Israel didn't do it."

Asbury's mirth faded. "Of course not. And I sincerely hope you're right. There's been too much tragedy in this mess as it is." To Israel and Sarah, "Tucker still won't come back around Avalon. He's still too upset about Teddy."

"It's tough on boys that age," Sarah said. "He'll come around."

"Yeah, well, Tucker's never really been exposed to death before. He doesn't know how to deal with it. But we're coping. He's focusing on getting ready for school next semester. That seems to be helping."

"Well, he's welcome whenever he's ready. We've got a few new acquisitions he'll probably like. The ones in the front living room."

Asbury nodded. "You go do whatever you have to do, Sarah. I'll just wander around. I needed the distraction from the office today."

"I gotta show you where you messed up on that spreadsheet," Israel said to her. Together, the pair moved out into the hall, but Israel paused to glance back at Joe. "I'll only be a sec."

Asbury made no move to leave as well. In fact, he slid his hands into his pockets with a well-practiced air, and Joe immediately was set at ease. He worked with people like Asbury on a daily basis. This was far more familiar territory than Richelle's.

"So now that Israel is out of the room, how about you tell me what it really looks like for him?" He shook his head when Joe opened his mouth to protest. "I don't mean violating client privilege. Just the big picture. I was ready to jump in when Teddy got shot, so I know some of the details. But I want to make sure Israel isn't going to hang for something that's not his fault."

"He won't. I'll make sure of that."

"The cops don't seem to think so. That Ott definitely doesn't think so."

Joe's eyes narrowed. How did Asbury know the name of the investigating detective? "The cops have circumstantial evidence. There's no actual proof that links Israel to the scene."

"That's the lawyer rhetoric for his client. I want the real story, Mr. Grace."

"Why?"

That seemed to surprise Asbury. "Because Israel's a friend."

"A friend would be glad to hear I'm not going to let this get as far as trial."

"Okay. Then I'm an informed friend."

"And you couldn't press the issue while Israel was here?"

Asbury sighed. "I don't know where you've been for the past few months, but the last thing that man needs is more to worry about. He barely made it through Teddy's death, and now this? I would've hired a lawyer myself if I thought for a second he'd take it." His gaze hardened. "I still might."

"It's good to hear Israel has allies," Joe assured. "And I don't want Israel to have to go through any more pain, either."

"So we're on the same side."

"I never said we weren't."

Asbury waited for Joe to reconsider, but frankly, the fact that the man knew enough to have spoken to Ott made Joe reluctant to share his cards. When it became evident he wasn't going to speak, Asbury shook his head.

"You're making a mistake not trusting me," Asbury said. "I've never wanted anything but the best for Israel and Teddy. I would never have pushed Whitlow to give Teddy the scholarship if I didn't."

The casual reference to Teddy's would-be school made Joe blink. "You did what?"

For the first time, Asbury looked less than confident. Glancing toward the doorway, he took a step closer to Joe and lowered his voice. "Don't tell Israel. He doesn't need to know that detail. He's a proud man, and he wouldn't see it for what it was."

"And what was it?"

"That boy had a gift. A true gift. But there was no way the current board at Whitlow would've let him in if I hadn't insisted."

Anger flashed through him. "Because he didn't conform to some white bread standard, or live in a particular zip code?"

"You can't tell me that surprises you."

"No, unfortunately, I can't."

"I'm not exactly thrilled that the world still works like that in a lot of places, Mr. Grace. Hell, my son and Teddy hung out together from the first time I brought Tucker to Avalon. All I did was make sure the best boy got the apprenticeship. If that means I had to lean on a few people who think quality only comes with a pedigree, then so be it."

He still didn't like the fact that Asbury had gone and talked to Ott, but it made a little bit more sense now. And he was right about how Israel would react if he discovered how Teddy got selected. There was no reason to tarnish Teddy's memory in any way. If Israel knew the truth, there would always be that question of whether or not Teddy had earned the right to go to Whitlow on his own merits. Joe wanted him to believe that he had, regardless of what Asbury had done to grease the way.

"You don't have to worry," Joe said. "I won't say a word."

Asbury nodded in gratitude, but the wariness never left his eyes. "And you're not going to tell me how it really looks for him, are you?"

"No. I can't."

With a shake of his head, Asbury finally made a move to go check out the new art Sarah had mentioned. "I hope you're as good as you seem to think you are, Mr. Grace. For both of their sakes."

Joe was left with only one thought when Asbury walked out.

So do I.

CHAPTER 8

"Iz! What're you doing out here?"

"Going to the lake. Come on."

"But—"

"No buts. I'm not sticking around this. Come on."

Joe fell into step beside him. "Your mom went to a lot of trouble, you know."

"I know."

"So why aren't we going to the party?"

"Because it's just a stupid birthday. And I don't like most of the people she invited anyway. I should get a say on what I want to do."

"And what do you want to do?"

"Go to the lake with you. Just you."

* * *

Israel wasn't in the kitchen when Joe returned. When Sarah caught his confusion, she nodded toward a door nearly hidden in the corner.

"Richelle called." Her sharp tone said everything he needed to know about how she felt about Teddy's mother. "He should be right out."

Joe leaned on his elbows onto the counter. "You've met her."

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"You don't like her?"

Her pointed gaze lingered before flickering back to her laptop. "She uses Iz. Though he lets himself be used, so I suppose I shouldn't be so hard on her."

"She's had a thing for him since high school. And Teddy kind of made it necessary, don't you think?"

Another shrug. "She's the one who encouraged him to stay friends with that Glen kid who shot him, though. He was better off hanging out around here. He had a future here. Even Tucker was better than someone in a gang."

"Moms don't always have a say in who their sons are friends with. Take it from someone who knows."

"Yeah, yeah." The knowing in her eyes as she looked over the edge of the screen came with a small smirk. "Richelle must hate that you're here."

"I'm...not one of her favorite people, no."

"You got what she always wanted."

He laughed, a brittle, nervous sound. "This is so weird." "What?"

"The fact that you know so much about me and Israel. It was..." He drifted off, unable to find the words, which only made him chuckle again. Only Israel could get his mouth to disconnect from his brain.

"This isn't quite that backwater town you two grew up in," Sarah said. "Israel doesn't have to pretend anymore." Her smirk disappeared, replaced by a frown. "You're not, are you?"

"What? Pretending? No. God, no. I haven't done that since I moved to LA."

"So then, there's no—"

The door slammed open. When both of them snapped to see Israel storming out, he jerked to a halt and glanced back at it guiltily.

"Sorry about that." Israel closed it the rest of the way, sliding his cell phone into his pocket. "You need me for anything more, Sarah?"

"No, you two get out of here and relax. Go out for dinner, go to a movie, forget all about this for the night." She leveled a warning finger in Israel's direction. "I mean it."

In spite of whatever tension Richelle had twisted through him, Israel smiled at Sarah and came over to kiss her cheek. "Call me if you need anything."

She didn't let him go without another hug, though she had to shove her laptop out of the way in order to do it. "You

know I won't."

Joe wasn't really surprised when she pulled him into a hug, too. "It's good that he's got you right now," she murmured in his ear. "Don't let him be stubborn."

"I won't."

Halfway to the door, she called out to Israel. They turned around simultaneously, and Israel caught the keys she had tossed at him.

"I'm going to start stapling those to your clothes so you stop forgetting them," she admonished.

Israel simply smiled. Pocketing the keys, he grabbed Joe's hand and dragged him out to the car.

"Let's do it," Israel said, his voice unexpectedly firm. "Let's go out tonight. Find a club or a bar or something and just let go."

His grip was a little tight, bordering on painful. "If that's what you want. What did Richelle say to you?"

"Nothing important."

Joe waited until they were in the privacy of the front seat. "So what was it?"

"Like I said."

"Nothing important. Right." Easing into the heavy midday traffic, Joe reached across the distance to find Israel's hand again. Part of Joe wanted to press, to find something else to resent Richelle for. But Sarah's words floated back, the reminder that Richelle hated Joe's presence, and he held his tongue, content to let Israel caress the side of his palm.

They were halfway back to the hotel when Israel said,

"Richelle wanted me to go over to the community center and see the gals who run it. She said they've been worried and want to have a little 'welcome home' supper for me."

Joe frowned. "And you don't want the fuss?"

"I don't want..." Israel searched for the words, watching the scenery outside his window for nearly a minute. "I'm tired of being in the big window at the front of the store. Everybody stopping and staring at me. I don't get why they won't just leave me alone."

Squeezing Israel's fingers was meant to be reassuring. He wasn't sure Israel picked up on that. "People care about you. They're worried. Even Mr. Asbury is worried."

"You haven't."

"Because I didn't fly across the country to check on you as soon as I realized you were in trouble?"

"That's different."

"Not really."

"Joe..." Letting go of Joe's hand, Israel rubbed at his face, digging at his eyes like he was exhausted and trying to wake up. "I can't fight with you, too. I don't have the energy for it."

"That's not what I'm doing here."

"Yes, it is. I let go what you said back at Avalon, but don't nag me again about all this. I just...don't."

He thought Israel was more tired than he'd let on. Had Joe been selfish the night before with wanting attention? But they'd slept afterward. Great, he'd thought. Or maybe he had been the only one to sleep. He had no way of knowing for sure if Israel hadn't lain there all night wondering why his entire

life had imploded. And if he had, what did that say about Joe?

"I don't want to fight either," he said, keeping his voice as non-confrontational as he could. "Let's change the subject."

"Okay."

Only Israel stopped talking completely then. His gaze returned to the window, the corners of his mouth dragged down by whatever thoughts were still going through his head. Worry and anger and grief...each one was a potent enemy on its own. Rolled up together like they were in Israel's head, and he was a ticking bomb.

Israel's cell phone buzzed while they were on the highway. When he didn't answer it by the third ring, Joe glanced over at him with a frown.

"You should get that."

"If it's important, they'll call back."

Translation: *I don't want to talk to anyone*.

The phone stopped after the fourth, only to immediately starting ringing again.

"It could be Sarah," Joe said this time. "Or the police. You can't just shut them out completely, Iz."

With a put-upon sigh, Israel rooted around in his pocket to pull it out, scowling when he looked at the display. "Richelle." He looked ready to toss the phone aside, but on the fourth ring, he shook his head and connected to the call. "What now?" he said to her over the line.

Joe couldn't hear anything but the low buzz of another voice, but the droop of Israel's head spoke volumes. The problem was, he wasn't so sure Richelle wasn't right this time.

Isolating himself wasn't going to help Israel. When this was over, Joe would have to return to LA, and Israel would need to stay. He was still going to need these people.

"Fine." The defeat in his voice ripped Joe open. "I said, fine, Richelle, what more do you want?"

Without waiting for the conversation to be over, Joe took the next exit and turned around. They weren't going back to the hotel. Not yet anyway.

* * *

Joe lost count of the number of shades of blue in the mural's sky. It filled an entire wall, stretching six feet overhead, bleeding onto the ceiling and floor as if the community center wall wasn't nearly big enough to contain it. He recognized Israel's influence in the curve of the trees, or the shape of a hill that arose from the narrow painted streets, but the rest of it was pure Teddy.

Asbury had been right. The boy had had a gift. He wasn't surprised at all that Israel had taken one look at the room and fled to the tiny office in the back.

A plump figure appeared at his elbow, proffering a plate of lasagna and salad. Joe smiled as he took it, his brain scrambling to remember which community leader this was. Richelle had done the introductions, hastily so because she'd bolted to chase after Israel as soon as she saw him leave.

"None of us think Israel should have to pay for what happened," she said.

Joe focused on his food. The side of his fork sank through

the layers of pasta and cheese, releasing fresh steam and aromas that made his mouth water. They'd had to place the paper plate on a wicker holder because the juices had already seeped through. "He won't. He didn't do it."

"Of course not." She ran her fingers over the hard ridges of dried oil on the wall, caressing each sweep. "Damn gangs. They're bound and determined to ruin everybody else's lives but their own."

Her name came to him as he chewed the delicious lasagna. Una Wallace. The head of the community center. From the looks of her, she'd been around since its inception fifty years earlier.

"Is there another gang around here that would frame Israel for Glen's killing?" That was Joe's favorite of all his potential theories. It was completely plausible and the easiest sell to the police and a jury.

"Who knows? Glen was making enemies left and right. But even if Teddy was moving on up in the world, Glen wouldn't have turned on him. Those two weren't like that."

As she moved down the wall, lost in the mural's details, Joe followed, matching her pace. "You mean because of Teddy's scholarship?"

"That. And his new friends. He stopped bringing them around here after that first time, but we knew he was still hanging around with the lot. He talked about them all the time."

Like Tucker Asbury. For a brief moment, Joe wondered what Glen had thought of Tucker, and vice versa.

"Were you here the night Teddy got killed?" he said.

Una nodded. "And don't even ask how many times I've wished I drove that boy home. That's a regret I'll take with me to the grave."

Everybody had regrets. Choices they would like to change. Joe had lost count of how many he'd added just since coming to Chicago. He couldn't erase his own guilt; there was no way he could alleviate Una's.

"The thing of it is..." She was still talking. He turned away from the mural and its moody distractions in order to focus on their conversation instead. "Some of Glen's boys were around here earlier that day. Didn't make one peep about Glen being pissed at Teddy. But do you think the police would listen to me when I said that? Oh, no. They just wanted to take the testimony of those ninnies hiding behind their curtains. Idiots wouldn't know a gang car from any other teenager's around here."

Joe perked up. This was the first hint he'd heard that Teddy's death might not be gang-related. "You don't think Glen ordered Teddy's shooting?"

Shrewd brown eyes peered up at him. "Have you been listening to a word I've said? Glen might have been turning into trouble, but there's no way he would've ever turned against Teddy."

If that was the case, connecting Glen's death to another gang would be even easier. The one drawback was figuring out how Israel's gun got involved in the entire process.

"Richelle thinks Glen was angry about Teddy's new

school," he tested.

"Richelle needs to have answers that she can hold on to," Una shot back. "She don't need more questions trying to figure it all out. She's got enough of those already."

Joe swept an assessing gaze over Una. Mature. Strong presence in the community. Articulate. At first appearance, she'd make an excellent witness. A jury would want to believe her. He hoped she had kids of her own, even better if they'd grown up in the neighborhood. That would be an excellent sell.

"So Teddy never brought his other friends back?"

Una shook her head. "I can't say I'm unhappy about that. The way they acted, we might as well not have existed. Only that arty one paid us any attention, and then it was all Mr. Jones this and Mr. Jones that. No teenager needs to know that much about a grown man's business."

There were more questions on the tip of his tongue, but Richelle's sudden appearance at his elbow kept them from coming.

"Go talk some sense into Iz," she said, taking Joe's food out of his hands. "That man is out of his head right now."

Joe didn't wait for clarification. The simple fact that Richelle had come to him instead of anyone else said one thing.

Israel needed him.

CHAPTER 9

[&]quot;Joe? Joe...wake up."

[&]quot;What time is it?"

[&]quot;After one. Go home."

[&]quot;Shit. Mom's going to kill me."

[&]quot;Why'd you stick around? I told you I'd be late. Coach is crazy that way."

[&]quot;'Cause I told you I would."

* * *

Israel paced along the sidewalk, agitation in every step. From the darkened entrance of the community center, Joe waited to be noticed, but Israel was someplace else, in his thoughts, in his memories, anywhere but in the present. The urge to call out, to call him back, parted Joe's lips, but he closed them again when he realized how futile it might actually be. In his current state, Israel might not even hear him. Joe didn't want the reminder that he was a ghost temporarily made corporeal, walking through Israel's life.

Instead, he came out of the shadows. When Israel came close enough, Joe touched his elbow, ready for the startled jerk away from him.

"Let's go back to the hotel," he said.

The night made Israel disappear. Everything but the pale glow of his eyes.

When he didn't answer, Joe headed toward the parking lot on the corner on his own. He wasn't surprised when Israel fell into step beside him within seconds.

No more words passed between them on the long drive back to the Marriott. Israel drummed his fingers along his knee, which in turn jiggled against the floor of the car. Turning on the radio to something low key didn't help. Lowering the heat only made Israel reach for the dial and turn it back up again. Joe left him alone to deal with his demons after that.

Israel was still twitchy once they were safely ensconced in their room. He went straight to the window and stared out at

the glittering lights of the city, his reflection in the glass doing little to tell Joe what was going through his head.

"You thirsty?" Joe asked.

Israel shook his head.

"What about food? I didn't see you eat anything at the community center."

"I'm not hungry."

With a sigh, Joe emptied his pockets out onto the coffee table. "I'm going to the bathroom and change for bed then. I'll be right back."

Israel made no move to stop Joe, no sign that he would help Joe out of his clothes or join him in the bedroom. Joe shut the bathroom door between them and wondered what the hell he was supposed to do now.

Keep Iz out of jail.

Same mission. Same purpose. He didn't need Israel in a good mood to get his job done.

He took a leak and brushed his teeth, concentrating on the simple rhythms in order to clear his head. Changing into sweats and a T-shirt helped, too. He almost indulged in a shower, but the smell of Israel's deodorant lingering in the bathroom drew him back out to face the man himself.

Except the sitting area was empty. And the keys for the car rental, as well as one of the hotel keycards, were gone from the coffee table. Replaced by Israel's cell phone.

Joe flopped down onto the couch and grabbed the TV remote. Nothing to do now but wait.

* * *

The creak of the door woke him up. Blinking, Joe tried to focus on the slit of light pouring in from the hallway, but it was gone before his eyes obeyed, smothering him in darkness yet again.

"Īz?"

Keys jangled. Shadows shifted. Only the scant illumination from the still-open curtains gave any light at all.

When Israel didn't respond, Joe sat up from where he'd fallen asleep on the couch, his back cracking in mild discomfort. His legs protested, too. He'd turned the TV off around midnight and propped his feet up on the coffee table with a magazine on his lap. That same magazine now rested on the floor, where it must have spilled from his thighs as he slept.

The light in the refrigerator outlined Israel briefly as he reached in for a bottle of water. Joe hung back while he downed the entire thing.

"Richelle called. She wanted to know how you were doing."

Israel licked the stray droplets from his lips and tossed the bottle into the trashcan without looking at Joe. "What did you tell her?"

"That you'd crashed for the night."

"I went for a drive."

"Oh."

"Don't worry. I filled up again before I came back."

"I don't care about the gas. Did it help?"

"Not really." He rolled his neck. Joe heard every crack of the joint. "I need to get some sleep." When he tried to brush past, however, Joe blocked his way. "Don't do this, Joe. Not tonight. Not you."

He sounded so tired, so lost, Joe was almost tempted to give in. Almost. "Not me? What is that even supposed to mean?"

But questioning him only sent the walls from earlier slamming back up. Before his eyes, Israel stiffened, turning to stone that somehow managed to retreat back into the shadows of the kitchen and beyond Joe's reach. "It means I don't want to talk about this shit." The weariness was gone from his voice. That was hard, too, now. "It means you back off and let me go to bed."

"I backed off when we got here. You disappeared for eight hours."

"Eight hours is nothing."

"It is when you're the one stuck without a car, without a way to call the person you're worried about. Eight hours is plenty of time for a whole bunch of things to happen, Iz. And you didn't think for a second about at least telling me you were going out. You waited until I was in the bathroom, and just left."

"And what? You're the only one who gets to disappear? Eight hours is nothing compared to eighteen years."

The accusation stung. He'd understood Richelle's resentment, maybe even sympathized a little bit with her, but he hadn't expected this kind of attitude from Israel, not after

those first few minutes of seeing each other, not after everything in the past two days, not after what they'd once meant to each other.

When he didn't respond, Israel snorted and shook his head. He strode forward, clearly ready for the conversation to be over, and this time, pushed his way past Joe. It knocked Joe against the jamb, and he grabbed Israel's arm to stop him purely on reflex.

The sudden shove against the wall as Israel twisted and pinned him there knocked the air from his lungs. The powerful forearm braced across his shoulders and the lack of distance between his and Israel's all-too-present body got rid of the rest of his breath.

"Don't." Israel's hazel irises had darkened to a glittering shade of green, and his nostrils flared from how tightly he was wound. "Don't you dare try and tell me it's not the same. You don't get to do that. I won't let you."

Even with Israel leaning in, it was difficult to concentrate on what he was saying. The sharp contact of their bodies brought instant reactions, boiled blood, and hardened everything else. Joe glared at him as his brain worked to construct something—anything—that would sound coherent.

"There's a difference between common courtesy and growing up," he ground out. "Maybe you never learned that."

"I learned a lot of things while you were gone."

"Apparently, not how to ask to borrow a car."

Israel jabbed a finger in Joe's face, mouth tight with anger. The words battled within him. Joe saw it in the pinch around

his lips, the dangerous flash in his eyes. He could count on one hand how many times he'd been on the receiving end of Israel's darker moods, but that didn't mean he couldn't read what might be coming next.

"You know what your problem is?" Israel said.

"I'll bet you're going to enlighten me."

"You've never been satisfied just being there. You always had to speak up, step in, try and butt your nose in when I didn't need that. Or want it."

"You seemed awfully happy I butted in when I showed up at the police station."

"I was. Because I needed it then. Now? I don't."

Joe's shoulders were starting to ache from the pressure, but the last thing he needed to do was provoke Israel further by squirming. "I don't think you know what you need. I think you're so lost right now, you're desperate for anything that makes sense. Like getting pissed at me. You want me to leave you alone, maybe you shouldn't have me pinned to the wall like we're twelve again."

"I do that, and you'll just be in my face again. Trying to show me where I went wrong. Telling me how what I'm doing isn't enough."

Joe stared at him blankly. "What the hell are you talking about? Since when have I said a word that you've somehow fallen short?"

"Since you showed up in your fancy suit, and brought me back to your fancy hotel. You're not any better than I am, you know. Not you, not your new life."

He didn't want to be caught up in this whirlwind of grief. This wasn't his loss. This wasn't his pain. Except...hadn't he chosen to wear this mantle by showing up in the first place? He'd wanted to help Israel. He had known exactly what he was walking into. There was no shirking of responsibility now, not without being an even bigger hypocrite than others thought he was.

"It's not a new life," Joe said. "It's the same old life I always had. The same one I thought I left behind in Arcola. It's just better dressed now." He was on a roll, every pent-up emotion finding its voice and demanding to be heard. He pushed back against Israel's hold, a little surprised when he actually broke free. Israel looked surprised, too. "And you think it's so special? I don't have friends, not like you. I have fuck buddies. I have colleagues. I have a secretary who thought I was kidding around when I actually took personal time. I've had relationships, sure, but not one of them ever came close to what we had. Not one. So don't fucking tell me I think I'm any better than you are. You got the friends. You got the family. You even got a kid, for Christ's sake."

Mention of Teddy—if not by name—mottled Israel's cheeks. His eyes glistened, but even though he practically vibrated, he didn't let the tears fall.

"I would've traded it all just to get those years with you," he said.

It was the real meaning of Israel's words that pricked Joe's ire, once and for all. Because Israel *wouldn't* have traded it all. Just the grief. Just the loss. Just the knowledge that he lived on

while his son didn't.

"So would I," Joe confessed softly.

When Israel reached for him, hands clumsy, eyes broken, Joe didn't fight it. They came together with a crush of limbs, mouths seeking out the other, and shed the vestiges of their argument like an unwanted skin around them. He felt lighter. Devoid of the bitterness that had been eating away at him, the frustration he hadn't acknowledged even to himself that Israel would shut him out. They had both had losses. They had both had lives. They might resent the other's fortunes, but ultimately, those feelings were miniscule in the face of the connection they had always shared. The one forged from mutual need.

Being adults didn't erase that need. It just changed it to something else.

Israel cupped Joe's ass and locked his arms, refusing Joe the room to move, to escape, to do anything but rub against his hard flesh. Where else would I go? he wanted to ask. But that would have required tearing his mouth away, or finding breath to speak, and neither ranked high on his list of stuff to do in that moment.

A hint of coffee lingered on Israel's tongue as it swept inside Joe's mouth and demanded a response. Eight hours. Eighteen years. It had been naïve to think he could simply show up and everything would be okay. It had been greedy to expect Israel not to have his own needs as well. Joe cupped the back of Israel's head and opened to the rush, letting his hungers swell and spill over with the same boundlessness. His

nails scraped against skin. Israel's fingers dug into his ass even harder. Both would leave marks to remember in the morning. Joe looked forward to each and every one.

"Need you," Israel said. He pulled Joe back to the bedroom, their feet tangling and impeding their progress. The smart thing would've been to separate and travel those few yards without contact, but maybe they'd never been smart. Maybe they'd always been a little dumb about what they could have, where they could go. It certainly would explain a lot.

Though Israel was the one to draw them out of the hall, Joe was the one who began tearing at clothing. He needed the sleek feel of Israel's skin merging into his. He wanted the heat, and the smell, and the heady taste when he devoured this intoxicating man. His nerves practically clawed their way to the surface in order to get what they wanted, and still, neither one of them moved fast enough. By the time their clothes rested forgotten on the floor, each bore more scratches. Neither cared.

Israel's hard cock dragged across Joe's stomach, painting his skin in translucent pre-come. Joe fisted its length, but it was the way Israel cupped his face and nibbled at his lips that made him hesitate.

"What do you want?" Joe's ragged question came in fits and spurts, his body protesting the pause in every way it could.

"You to fuck me," Israel answered. He wasn't hesitating at all. He stopped kissing long enough to meet Joe's gaze. It burned, not only where they caught but in its shining depths. "It's been too long."

It felt like it had been an eternity. Joe remembered with perfect clarity the last time he had been buried inside his best friend, three days before he'd left for LA. Israel had asked for it then, too. Iz, who never asked for anything. They'd spent the night together out by the lake, each sneaking home before dawn with grass stains on their asses and grit ground into their knees. It had been the last time for any kind of touching between them. At least until Joe had come back.

He didn't know where the condom and lube came from. Israel might have placed them on the nightstand that morning, after they'd had a night of endless possibilities. Joe knew he hadn't done it, which only made stretching out on top of Israel's dark body even sweeter.

Together, they rocked, cock sliding against cock, mouths disregarding any requests to seek other spots to taste. When Israel spread his legs, Joe knew this would be how they would remain. He reached down and smoothed along the coarse hair on Israel's thigh, climbing higher and higher until his hand dipped behind Israel's balls.

"God, yes..." Israel propped his heels on the bed, lifting his ass to help. The muscles clenched at Joe's touch, inducing matching spasms in Joe's body. "We should've done this last night."

"We're doing it now." He bent and nuzzled into Israel's neck. The musky scent of his skin sharpened his hunger, and his questing fingers sought out Israel's hole. He groaned as he tried to press inside. "You're so tight. You sure you want this?" Silently, fervently, he prayed for a yes.

"Wouldn't have asked if I wasn't sure. Just... been awhile."

A long while, if the clenching around Joe's fingers was any indication. The call of Israel's mouth grew too demanding to ignore, and he returned to the heart-stopping kisses with fresh desire.

Israel pulled at Joe's cock at the same tempo Joe stretched him out. Every stroke was excruciating, seductive in its own right, deadly in conjunction with the rest. When Joe finally felt ready to reach for the lube, his lips were numb, and his heart was ready to shatter his ribcage. Israel watched him with ravenous eyes, grabbing the back of his thighs in silent readiness when Joe angled his covered and slick cock at his opening.

Even stretched and lubed, Israel grunted in obvious discomfort. Joe paused, unwilling to hurt him even for this, but Israel let go of his thighs and cupped Joe's ass, forcing him to continue pushing in, past the outer ring, past the burn, past any last resistance. Joe saw the exact second the pain changed to rapture. Not even the perfect geometry of Israel's features could mask it.

He left no time to savor it. The moment Joe bottomed out, Israel was moving away, establishing a swift rhythm that gave Joe no choice but to drive into his tight passage. After only a few thrusts, he felt like he was going to fly apart, disintegrate into a million pieces with no hopes of ever coming together whole again. He clutched at Israel's shoulders, their chests fused, their kisses desperate. More. That's what he wanted.

Simply...more.

When Israel tightened his hold on Joe and rolled to the side, there was a moment of vertigo, of the world going upside down and every which way before Joe's head hit the pillow and it righted itself again. Israel grinned down at him for the split second before resuming their rhythm, only now the strokes were bruising, deliberate attempts for release. Joe reached between their bodies and found Israel's cock, throbbing and velvety hard against his palm. He pumped in tandem with the slam of their hips, but within a handful of slides, Israel arched his head back and cried out, hot fluid shooting onto Joe's chest.

The smell of it did him in. Joe choked on the endearment that came to his lips, shouting instead, and drove into Israel's body with shuddering thrusts that made his skin combust. Everything went white. Then red. Then a soft muted black as his orgasm finished unfurling through his flesh, leaving him spent and limp atop the mattress.

Israel collapsed on top of him. His harsh breathing rattled against Joe's body, prompting Joe to wrap his arms around him and pull him even closer. Joe's muscles screamed at the effort, but no way in hell was he going to let go. Israel needed this. *They* needed this. He'd hold Israel for an eternity if he thought it would eradicate the last of the pain.

"Don't go," Israel whispered.

Joe didn't know if he wanted an answer. Or expected one. But he gave it anyway.

"Not without you."

CHAPTER 10

[&]quot;Hey, Iz? Your mom's crying in the kitchen."

[&]quot;Yeah. I know."

[&]quot;What's wrong?"

[&]quot;Dunno. Sometimes she does that." Israel pulled the Battleship game out from beneath the bed and stretched out on the floor to get ready to play. "I think she just gets sad."

[&]quot;About what?"

[&]quot;Different stuff. Like my dad. Or something on TV."

[&]quot;My mom doesn't cry."

[&]quot;Your mom's not sad."

[&]quot;No, maybe not." One of the cruiser's pegs was broken. Joe toyed with it as he debated where to slot it into place. "Do

flowers cheer her up?"

"Why?"

"'Cause there's some out by the road already. I saw 'em when I walked over. Maybe we can go pick some and give 'em to her."

"She'd like that."

* * *

Joe rubbed the towel over his wet head as he emerged from the steam-filled bathroom. "It's all yours," he said, walking into the bedroom. Except Israel wasn't stretched out on the bed like he'd left him a half hour earlier. The blankets had been pulled up, the pillows fluffed, and the curtains wide open, letting the Chicago morning sunlight stream inside the room.

He refused to go out to the main room to check to see if his car keys were still on the coffee table. He trusted Israel. After last night, Israel wouldn't leave without letting him know.

Dropping the towel onto the back of a chair, Joe dressed quickly into jeans and a T-shirt. He finger-combed his damp hair as he went out for a cup of coffee, only to stop at the sight in the living room. Israel sat in the corner of the couch, staring at a letter in his hand. Through the paper, Joe recognized the shadow of the Whitlow Academy insignia. Teddy's acceptance letter. The last thing Israel needed to be brooding on.

"I'm all done in the bathroom," he said, hoping to distract Israel.

Israel nodded without looking up. "Thanks."

Joe retreated to the kitchen to make the coffee he now needed more than ever. No sounds came from the living room, and Israel never passed the doorway to head to the bathroom. Every once in a while, Joe strained his ears to try and detect what was going on, but nothing came. Israel wasn't moving. He wasn't even rustling the letter.

Without asking if Israel wanted one, Joe poured out two cups and carried them out to the living room. Some of the shadows were gone from beneath Israel's eyes, and the lines around his mouth weren't quite as deep, but he was a long way off from looking happy.

"Here." Joe traded one of the cups for the letter in Israel's hand. "Though my secretary says my coffee is torture, too."

"I wasn't torturing myself. I just..." Israel stretched an arm over the back of the couch, caressing Joe's nape after he'd sat down. "I woke up thinking about how me and Richelle haven't even talked about what we're going to do with Teddy's stuff yet. We're both living like he's going to come walking through the door any minute. Then we have to deal with people like Una and it hits me all over again that he's not going to do that."

Joe would've said that just walking into his apartment was enough for Israel to get lost in memories, but the look on his face was enough to curb Joe's tongue. "It hasn't been that long. You can't be expected to just get over it overnight." He didn't add any more. They'd both learned that lesson last night.

He straightened to set the letter on the coffee table when a name caught his eye. It wasn't the acceptance letter Israel had been lost in. It had been the announcement that Teddy had been shortlisted. And there, at the top of the alphabetical list, was the first of the seven teenagers who had been on that list with him.

Tucker Asbury.

When he stared at the name for too long, the hand on his neck stilled. "What's wrong?" Israel asked.

"Nothing's...wrong." His thoughts were still whirling when he finally looked up. "Mr. Asbury's son was up for the scholarship at Whitlow, too?"

"Well, yeah. He's the one who told Teddy about the school in the first place."

And Asbury was the one who had pushed to make sure Teddy got the scholarship. Though Joe had promised the man he wouldn't reveal that fact to Israel.

His prolonged silence made Israel sit up. "Why does that bother you, Joe?"

Because Tucker and Teddy hung out together. And not one person who knew both Teddy and Glen believed for a second that Glen had anything to do with Teddy's death.

"What do you know about Tucker?" he asked carefully.

Israel frowned at the question, trying to figure out what Joe was doing with his question. "He likes art. Goes to some private school, I think. Kind of a quiet kid most of the time."

"Most of the time?"

A shrug. "He's just like any other teenaged boy. Things

get him angry sometimes. He's not the nicest kid to be around when that happens."

"Why?"

"Because he gets mean. And condescending. Teddy never called him on it, but once I heard Tucker call him some pretty bad names. Teddy just blew it off."

"Teddy never did anything to provoke him?"

"Like what? Teddy was a good kid. And they only ever saw each other at Avalon. Sarah wouldn't put up with any shit if they gave her any."

"Are you sure they never saw each other anywhere else? Una said last night Teddy brought around some of his new friends. Who else could it have been?"

Frowning, Israel shook his head. "He didn't hang out with anyone else. Richelle might know, but...what's with all the questions about Tucker?"

How much to tell? But the more Joe thought about it, the more he wondered about Tucker's viability as a suspect to throw at Ott. The one problem was the same one that had been plaguing them all along. Evidence.

"I'm curious, that's all." No point in getting Israel's hopes up, especially when he didn't have anything but vague theories in his head. "Do you know who ended up getting the scholarship?"

"No..." Though Joe hadn't elaborated, he saw the wheels turning in Israel's head. Israel reached for his cell phone and started scrolling through his address book. "Hang on."

Joe sipped his coffee while Israel waited for whoever it

was he was calling to pick up. When he heard Iz greet Sarah, he lifted his brows in surprise, but kept quiet as Israel posed the same question to her.

The line between his brows was even deeper when he disconnected.

"How'd you know Tucker got the scholarship?"

The hair stood up on the back of Joe's neck. "I didn't. But now I'm starting to think everybody who said Glen wouldn't have killed Teddy was right."

Israel picked up the letter from the table and scanned it over again, this time with a more detached air than he'd had when he'd been reminiscing earlier. "But they were friends," he argued. "And there's no way Tucker could've even known he'd be the next in line."

"Maybe not," Joe conceded. He didn't want to reveal Asbury's secret yet. It was enough Joe knew that Tucker could've discovered his father's so-called persuasions and taken it from there. "But there might be more to it than we realize. Can you honestly say you know what their friendship was like? Most people didn't know about us, remember."

"Even if that's the case"—and his tone said that he really didn't think it was—"what does that have to do with Glen? Tucker didn't even know Glen. And even if he did, that still doesn't explain how or why he'd kill him."

"I can't say anything about the why. But the how, we do know. Your gun."

Israel gave him a disparaging glance. "You can't be serious. He's a kid. And he's never been to my apartment."

"Glen's a kid. People were quick to believe he killed Teddy. And are you sure about him never being at your place? When Una was telling me about Teddy's new friends last night, she said one of them wouldn't stop talking and asking questions about you. What if that boy was Tucker?"

"He could've found anything he wanted to know by asking me down at Avalon."

"Not if he didn't want you to know what he was doing. What's wrong with showing her a picture of Tucker just to find out?"

"Because it's not him."

But Joe wasn't done. Now that he'd started contemplating this, his brain raced to put all the pieces together. "It's still possible, though. Does it really hurt to see where it goes?"

"Yes. Because Mr. Asbury is a good man. I'm not going to accuse his son of something as ridiculous as murder."

Joe refused to back down. He leveled his most piercing gaze at Israel and said, "Even to get the answers about Teddy, once and for all?"

* * *

Israel only had one sticking point he refused to budge on. "I go alone." His jaw was stone, his body immovable where he blocked the hotel room door. "I know these people, and I know where to ask the questions. They see you, they're going to shut down and not say a word."

Joe agreed if only because he knew Israel was right. He would've liked to be able to tag along and read the responses

at the source, but he had to take what he could. There would be a chance later on to evaluate any witnesses, independent of Israel's biased perspective. He had to trust Israel's desire to get to the truth.

He dropped him off at his apartment, with an agreement that they would meet up for dinner back at the hotel if they didn't hear from each other beforehand. Joe idled at the back of the building long enough for Israel to disappear inside, then lingered for a few minutes longer to make sure nobody followed. His phone rang. When he saw Israel's name on the screen, he smiled.

"I'm going, I'm going," he said before Israel could scold him.

"Do me a favor today, would you?"

"Sure, anything you want."

"Don't bother Richelle. She's...not dealing with you being here all that great."

An understatement, but a request he had no problem granting. They disconnected with a reaffirmation of their evening plans, and Joe pulled back into the street.

Digging out his earpiece, he popped it on and scrolled through his phone book for the first number he wanted to call. It took several minutes to get connected, not that it really surprised him.

"Ott here."

"Detective Ott, this is Joseph Grace, Israel Jones's attorney. We spoke when he was released from questioning."

The pause that followed ended with a grunt. "What can I

do for you?"

"I was wondering if any progress has been made on the case. We'd like to take the fact that we haven't heard from you since Mr. Jones's interrogation as good news, but, well, I know that's not always the case."

"Then you also know I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of an ongoing investigation, Mr. Grace."

"So the case is still open?"

"You seen us make an arrest on the news lately?"

"I'm not so sure this would be considered newsworthy without the human interest angle. If Glen Marsh's killing turns out to be yet another incidence of gang-related violence instead of a grieving father avenging his son's murder, you know and I know it'll end up buried in the middle of the broadcast in a thirty-second sound bite. But considering it's still ongoing, I'll take the answer to my question as a yes."

Ott's heavy sigh came with a squeak of a chair. "Is that all?"

"No, actually." Joe turned onto the highway. He was getting far too comfortable with navigating Chicago. "I actually had a question regarding Teddy Becker's case I was hoping you could clear up for me. Is that one yours, too, or do I need to speak with another detective?"

"Why don't you ask your client if you've got questions about that?"

"Because not only do I not wish to dredge up bad memories for him, I don't think he's privy to the kind of the information I'm curious about. So am I talking to you, or

someone else?"

Another sigh. His call was apparently weighing Ott down. "It's another open investigation, you know that, right?"

Joe didn't care. "The gun that killed Teddy. Do you have it?"

"Of course not. It was a drive-by."

"But you know what kind it was."

"We're not complete idiots here, Mr. Grace."

"Was it the same caliber as what killed Glen Marsh?"

Ott wasn't nearly as quick to answer that query as he was its predecessors. Silence ticked away for several seconds before he cleared his throat. "It's not an uncommon weapon. Half the people in that neighborhood have one. You're not implying that Mr. Jones killed his own son, are you?"

"Please. Don't be ridiculous. But has a ballistics report been done comparing the two? Is it possible they came from the same gun?"

More silence. The fact that he didn't come back and respond right away was all the confirmation Joe needed.

"What brought all this thinking on?" Ott asked. "What do you know that we don't?"

"If you'd been doing your job all along, you shouldn't even have to ask that question. Thank you, Detective. I'm sure we'll talk again soon."

He hung up on Ott's splutters. If nothing else, he'd put a bug in the man's ear. The case would move forward now, one way or another.

His next call was much shorter. The information he'd

requested his secretary dig up for him showed up on his PDA less than five minutes later. Joe smiled as he dialed the next number. Julia deserved a big fat raise for all her extra work.

* * *

When his phone rang at four-thirty, Joe nearly snatched it up from where he'd set it on the desk. It wasn't the private detective he'd been working with all day, however. The number was Israel's cell.

"I thought I was going to see you at dinner."

"We probably have to postpone those plans." He sounded hollow, the absence of any background noise at all honing his words. "Can you meet me right now?"

Joe glanced over the notes he'd spread across the desk like it was his own. "I need a few minutes to get things organized. What's wrong?"

"I've been doing like we agreed. Showing Tucker's picture around."

"And?"

"Most people had never seen him before."

He didn't miss the way Israel had said *most*. "But someone did?"

"A couple of kids. They said they saw a white kid who looked like Tucker joyriding with Royce Moyer a month or so ago."

The name meant nothing to him. "Who's Royce Moyer?"

"One of the local boys. Flunked out of school a few years ago. He tried hooking up with Glen's gang before Glen went

up in the ranks, but they wouldn't have him. They couldn't trust him not to do something dumb to get them all caught."

"Was Teddy friends with him?"

"Hell no. Royce might be an idiot, but he's also crazy. Teddy was smart enough to steer clear of him."

Tucker hadn't, though. "Why would Tucker be hanging out with him then?"

"I've been thinking about that. Tucker's only fifteen. If you're right and he had something to do with Teddy being shot, he couldn't have driven the car. And the kids I talked to definitely said Royce was joyriding. Tucker could've used Royce to get around."

"Royce knew Teddy's schedule?"

"He knew he hung out at the community center. The rest of it's easy enough to figure out."

"So did you find him and ask?"

Israel sighed. "I've been trying to track him down most of the day. I found him twenty minutes ago at the 7-Eleven. He took one look at me and shot out of there like a bat out of hell."

Nothing said guilty conscience quite like running. Rising from his seat, Joe began stuffing his various notes into the folder he'd started, uncaring of ordering them just yet. "With what I've got, and your witnesses, we might have enough to give Detective Ott cause to bring either Royce or Tucker in for questioning. You want to meet me at the police station, or do you want me to go on my own?"

"That's not why I called."

Joe paused. "Why else would we meet up if not to give Tucker to the cops?"

"Well..." Crackling filled the line as Israel shifted the phone in his grip. The dull roar of a car engine came on in the background. "I put the word out I needed to talk to Royce. Made it sound serious. I followed him home and I've been sitting outside here, waiting for him to come out. I was going to have you come over here, but it looks like he's taking off again."

Alarm spread through his body like wildfire. "Don't follow him. Call the cops."

"And tell them what?"

"Anything, just—"

"Shit, he saw me." All he heard was Israel's breathing, long enough for Joe to give up on his notes and bolt for the door. "Look, I'll call you ba—"

The sound of a gunshot blasted through the line.

CHAPTER 11

Israel dropped his head back onto his pillow and smiled.

[&]quot;What're you doing here?"

[&]quot;I got bored."

[&]quot;You're gonna get sick."

[&]quot;So then we're both sick. Wanna play Battleship?"

[&]quot;I can't." Israel held up his mittened hands, tape around his wrists keeping him from pulling them off. When Joe giggled, Israel scowled and stuffed them back beneath the blankets. "Mom says it's to stop me itching."

[&]quot;So what can we do?"

[&]quot;You need to go home before you get caught."

[&]quot;Do you want me to go?"

"Nah."

* * *

Every time one of the doors in the ER waiting room opened, Joe jumped. Nobody would let him go back. "You're not family," everybody kept telling him. They kept telling it to Richelle, too, but she wasn't taking it nearly as quietly as Joe was. When she got another denial, she went storming outside to have a cigarette, bitching the entire way. She had gone through most of a pack when Detective Ott came strolling through.

Ott took one look at him and sighed. "Did you chase his ambulance all the way here?"

Joe leapt forward. "I was on the phone with him when he got shot. What're you doing here?"

"One of the uniforms called me when he saw who the vic was. Considering everything your client has been through this past month? I'm getting the first crack at questioning him." The lock released on the door, and he held it open wide enough for Joe to follow him. "Come on. He's not going to want to say anything to me without his lawyer present anyway."

Joe had to fight not to race past Ott. All he knew was that Israel was conscious, that it wasn't serious enough to require surgery, and that the hospital staff played their cards too close to the chest. Richelle was going to be pissed as anything when she came back in from her smoke break and realized he'd gotten to go back, but Joe didn't care about stepping on her

toes right now. He needed to see with his own eyes that Israel was all right. Until then, nothing else mattered.

Ott stopped and asked for directions to Israel's room, leading the way when the nurse pointed to a nearby open door. The first of the two beds in the room was empty, but behind the curtain on the second was Israel, the machines beeping away beside him. His shirt had been cut away, exposing white bandages across his left shoulder, but the fresh cuts on his face were what scared Joe the most. He'd heard the glass shatter over the line, and the one thing they'd been able to get out of the nurses was that Israel had come in with glass embedded in his cheek. One jagged scratch looked dangerously near his eye, but the hazel iris darted past Ott to see Joe with coherence that couldn't be faked.

Joe nearly sighed in relief when Israel smiled at him.

"You've had a busy day, Mr. Jones." Ott went around to the other side of the bed, giving room for Joe to get closer. He itched to take Israel's hand in his, but he knew the proximity would have to do for now. "How are you feeling?"

"The docs say I'm going to live. You're not here to arrest me for getting shot, are you?"

Ott actually smiled, though Joe knew from Israel's tone that he was only half kidding. "The police on the scene arrested Mr. Moyer. There were enough witnesses to testify he wasn't provoked, but I'd like to hear your version of what happened. That is, if your lawyer doesn't mind."

When Israel glanced at Joe in curiosity, Joe nodded. He wanted to know what had happened, too, and since he was

already sure Israel had done nothing wrong, there was no reason to censor his statement.

"I was in my car when Royce came out of the building. He took one look at me, freaked, and pulled the gun. Next thing I knew, my window was shot out and I had glass in my face."

"Why do you think Mr. Moyer wanted to shoot you?"

"You're the cop. You tell me."

"He seemed to be under the impression you were going to do him harm."

Israel rolled his eyes. "In case nobody noticed, Royce isn't all there."

"So the fact that he confessed to being the driver of the car involved in your son's shooting means nothing to you?"

That made both of them pause. It was the confirmation they'd been hoping for, but given that Ott volunteered the information so freely, perhaps there was more to the story than they thought.

"I had my suspicions," Israel said carefully. "But that's all they were."

"He also gave us the name of the shooter in hopes of making a deal." Ott waited for a reaction, but when none came, he cocked a brow. "Did you have suspicions about that, too?"

"I told you we've been conducting our own investigation," Joe intervened. "All the signs kept pointing to someone else shooting Teddy, not Glen Marsh."

Ott's weary sigh came with a shake of his head. "This would've been a lot cleaner if you'd just brought what you had

to me."

"You would've wanted proof. All we had until this afternoon were theories."

"Yeah, well, now I have a ballistics test that says the same gun fired the bullets that killed Teddy Becker and Glen Marsh, so if this lead pans out, I'll be closing two cases with one shooting. No offense, Mr. Jones."

Ott's change in attitude was a good sign. There was no way anybody would think Israel killed his own son. Even if Gavin Asbury got his son the best lawyer in the world, Israel wasn't going to have to worry about this anymore.

Which meant Joe's services were no longer necessary.

He hung back as Ott asked a few more questions, but nothing more set off alarms or required his involvement. He took Ott's card when he left, but as soon as they were alone, Israel was the one to reach for his hand.

"I've been going stir-crazy back here," he said. "I wasn't sure you were even around yet."

Joe squeezed his fingers, relishing the heat traveling up his arm. "I got here right after Richelle did. She was the one who told me where they'd taken you. And speaking of Richelle, you should really tell the nurse to let her back here. She's just as worried as I was."

Though Israel nodded, he didn't make a move to call any of the hospital staff. His soft gaze drank Joe in, and he tugged gently until Joe sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you about Tucker," he said. "I should've."

"You were too close to it," Joe argued. "And besides, I was telling the truth to Ott. All we had were theories. You're the one who dug Royce up."

"And I got a bullet in the shoulder to show for it."

"But you're alive."

"More than I can say for the boys." His broad thumb absently caressed the side of Joe's hand, his eyes growing distant. "When they let me go, can you drive me home? I'd like to spend the night there tonight."

"Of course." He would take Israel anywhere for the asking, though he would've thought the memories would be even fresher after the day's events. Or maybe that was the point. "Anything else you want me to do?"

Israel smiled. "I'm sure I'll think of something."

* * *

The edges of the curtains glowed from the streetlights outside, casting silvery slices across the ceiling. Every once in a while, one would thin or disappear completely as the world passed by outside the window. Joe found it oddly soothing. As soothing as Israel's deep breathing at his side. Life marched on. Including his.

Israel hadn't asked him to stay. The decision was made amongst the dishes as Joe put them away after dinner, on the couch when they had settled in to watch a cut to hell version of *Die Hard* on TNT, with the touch of a hand when Israel started to nod at his side. Joe had led him into the bedroom without a word and helped him get out of his shirt without

aggravating his bound shoulder. Neither had said anything more than a quiet good night before sharing a soft kiss and crawling into bed.

But Joe couldn't sleep. His thoughts refused to give him the peace necessary to close his eyes. It was more than the constant reminder that this wasn't his bed, this wasn't his apartment. None of that really mattered with Israel asleep next to him. But tomorrow was a different story, because tomorrow brought questions both of them had ignored to this point, or at best, talked platitudes around.

Carefully, he pushed back the blankets and slid out of bed, freezing once when Israel shifted. He waited to ensure Israel wouldn't awaken before slithering out the rest of the way, then padded silently out to the living room, closing the door behind him.

Ott's card was still in his wallet. Joe retreated to the corner farthest from the bedroom, watching furtively to see if Israel stirred. When the detective came on the line, sounding tired and grumpy, Joe kept his voice low.

"I thought I was going to hear from you hours ago," Ott said.

"Mr. Jones and I got tied up in hospital procedures," Joe lied. "Did you bring Tucker Asbury in?"

"Tucker, his dad, and half a dozen lawyers. Not that the lawyers did him any good. His print matched what we got from the gun on the Marsh shooting. Once we told him that, the lawyers couldn't shut him up."

Though he had suspected Tucker was the one, getting the

confirmation lifted the rest of the weight from Joe's shoulders. "Mr. Jones is going to be very glad to hear that he's officially cleared of this. Are you charging Tucker with Teddy's murder, too?"

"Yeah, though I don't know how that's going to go. Money talks too loud in this town, and he's a minor. There's no telling how this is going to plea out."

"How did he ever get Israel's gun?"

"He lifted Mr. Jones's key ring one day at work and got a copy made. Nobody was ever the wiser."

Joe remembered Sarah's comment about stapling Israel's keys to his clothing. Tucker had probably considered him a sucker for being so forgetful.

"Don't be surprised if there's little press about this," Ott was saying. "Asbury's got enough connections to keep this quiet."

Mentally, Joe thanked Asbury for his discretion. If it didn't hit the media, Israel wouldn't find out about Asbury's contributions to Teddy's selection. "Did the material from the private investigator arrive all right then?"

"Yep. Not that we need it now, but it helps me put some of the pieces together."

From the hallway, the sound of the bedroom door opening drifted out to the living room. Joe glanced up in time to see Israel appear as a dark shadow in the entrance.

"You've got my number if you need anything else," Joe said, his gaze unwavering from Israel. "Good night, Detective."

"What was that about?" Israel asked after he'd disconnected.

"Closure." Tossing the phone aside, Joe came around the coffee table to approach. "You're supposed to be asleep. Did your shoulder wake you up?"

"Nah, just realized how empty my bed was." He grabbed Joe's hand and hauled him forward the last few feet. The contact of their bare bodies lodged any protest in Joe's throat. "You couldn't have waited to call him until the morning?"

The temptation to lean forward and bury his face in Israel's neck almost won. Only seeing the bandage gleaming even more whitely in the darkness kept Joe from doing so.

"Better to know and get a decent night's sleep, than not and dream about all the possible ways things could go wrong." Joe settled for resting his hand on Israel's hip, keeping their bodies aligned. "You're in the clear, by the way. In case you were worried."

Israel shook his head. "I stopped worrying the second you walked into that interrogation room."

"For all you knew, I could have been a crappy lawyer."

"Doesn't mean a thing when I also knew you'd fight for me until you couldn't fight any more."

The soft words erased the last of the distance between them. Joe yielded to the pull of Israel's hand at the back of his neck until their mouths grazed across each other, but that wasn't enough, not for Joe, not for either of them. Their lips parted, the tips of their tongues teasing, but that wasn't enough either. Joe moaned when Israel sealed his with a kiss he felt all

the way to his toes. His fingers dug into Israel's waist, his cock jerking as Israel hardened against him.

This probably wasn't the time or the place for such brazen desire. Israel was just home from the hospital. Both of them were exhausted. Everything was still raw. But maybe that was why it was the perfect time. No more walls. No more excuses. No more agendas.

Israel didn't force him to move. He turned Joe against the wall and used it to brace him, locking him in place so Israel could roam at will. Over Joe's chest, tracing the pebbling nipples with his thumbs. Splayed across ribs, learning line by line with his kinesthetic grace. Downward. Down. There, on his belly, tickling but not, muscles Joe forgot about coming to life at the fluttering caresses.

Joe tumbled into the offering and was lost. His hands cupped Israel's face, holding him as steady as Israel did him, and devoured the other man's mouth until his lips were numb. He couldn't breathe but for the scant seconds when they would part, but neither seemed in any hurry to force separation, not even when Israel slipped his fingers beneath the loose elastic of Joe's waistband to find his cock.

Joe grunted and jerked his hips, eliciting a low chuckle from Israel.

"Love the sounds you make." Israel smeared the wetness around his crown, somehow avoiding the slit directly. "I used to dream about us, you know. About Arcola." He was momentarily silenced when Joe kissed him again. "This is better."

Yes, it was, because it was now, and they weren't kids who didn't know what they were doing, and they didn't have to fear retribution if they got found out. They had time on their side, years of experience, and if Joe felt a pang of guilt about those years being apart, he squelched it with the very next kiss.

The hand on his cock never tightened. Israel seemed satisfied with teasing him, exploring the shaft all the way to the base, cupping his balls and rolling them against his fingers. Joe spread his legs wider in order to make it easier, but not even that was enough to spur Israel into anything more than his tender touches.

He whimpered when a single finger slipped between his cheeks. "If you don't stop messing around and fuck me soon, I won't be held accountable for my actions."

The low rumble from Israel's chest echoed into his flesh. The elastic waistband snapped against Joe's stomach when Israel extricated his hand, and while he resented the absence, he was more than eager to follow as Israel led him to the bedroom. His heart thumped wildly with anticipation. It felt like it was going to escape his chest by the time they stretched out on the bed again.

Israel spooned behind him, pushing Joe's sweats out of the way before seeing to his own. Where the tip of his cock slapped against Joe's back, pre-come smeared over his skin. Every inch of contact beguiled him. Or perhaps Israel had beguiled him all along. Joe only knew he needed those familiar hands on him as soon as possible, and as often as he

could get after that.

He let Israel dictate the pace. With one arm coiled beneath Joe and across his chest, Israel kissed and nibbled at his neck until Joe writhed in the close embrace. Twisting like that inspired Israel to start rocking, sliding his thick cock against Joe's scalding skin, but it was a never-ending fiery loop—more contact led to more squirming, which led to even more area enflamed by Israel's erection. Everything escalated until a panting Joe begged for the connection to be completed. He didn't care if it made him sound wanton. He only cared about what it got him.

"Hold onto that thought," Israel whispered.

He gave one last long lick down the side of Joe's neck and then released him, turning over to get to the lube and condoms on the nightstand. Joe looked over his shoulder to watch, but all he got was the vision of Israel's broad back, the white bandages stark against his dark skin. The tattoo would likely be marred now by scar tissue, he realized. Unexpected regret flooded through him at the thought.

Israel's eyes glowed as he returned to Joe's back. His slick fingers eased between Joe's cheeks, prompting Joe to bend his leg to make it easier to reach his opening. He groaned at the first intrusion.

"Promise you'll make those sounds when it's my cock inside you instead," Israel urged, his mouth at Joe's ear.

Joe turned and took Israel's lips in a hungry kiss. "Good luck trying to get me to shut up."

The confession galvanized Israel's probes. He twisted his

finger on every stroke inside, soon adding a second. By the time there were three fingers stretching Joe's ass, Joe had his hand on his own cock, pumping at the same rate as Israel.

Israel laughed softly. "You're going to come before I ever get in you."

He actually didn't have a problem with that, though he suspected Israel might be slightly disappointed. "There's a way to get around that, you know."

"I know."

His fingers disappeared, leaving Joe empty and aching to be filled again. The absence was brief, though he felt each and every second, and as soon as the hard tip nudged at his opening, he eagerly pushed back, ready for it all.

They both sighed when the head slipped past the outer ring of muscle. Israel wrapped his arm around Joe's waist and grasped his cock, squeezing as he pressed inside. Joe gulped for air. Everywhere flamed. His skin, his muscles, his heart. Without Israel's arms to hold him tight, he was pretty sure he'd combust. He wasn't so sure he didn't want that anyway.

Israel didn't move after he was fully seated. The fingers on Joe's shaft trembled, and the breath skating down his neck was rough. Joe didn't need to be told that Israel was as rocked by their joining as he was. He felt it, all the way to his bones.

Warm lips pressed to his jaw. "What would I do without you?" he heard.

Not past tense. Present.

Joe squeezed his eyes shut and leaned his head back. Without speaking, he rolled his hips, forcing Israel to start

stroking out of his clenching channel. The friction made it better, calming his tumultuous feelings by giving him the physical to focus on. He'd think about the other later. This was not the time for it.

Their rhythm was slow and deep. Israel pulled nearly all the way out, only easing back in when the very tip of his cock remained inside. Desire, that living beast which had remained coiled beneath Joe's skin for a decade, two, more, transformed into an urgency he refused to deny any longer. He let it go and rocked into each thrust. Then he rocked again.

Shivers overtook him long before Israel began to quicken. He burrowed closer against his lover's chest, basking in the heat though it did little to lessen the trembling. Words of entreaty spilled from his lips, each one answered by a faster stroke, a harder touch. Israel took them all. Joe had no other option but to cling to the corded arms and ride them out.

His eruption was inevitable. Israel's touch was too talented, Joe's need too great. Their bodies collided in ever increasing strength, and it didn't matter that every once in a while Israel's hand would skitter along his shaft or his teeth scraped over Joe's shoulder. He needed the release like he needed to breathe. Accompanied by a shout torn from his throat, his cock jerked in Israel's hand.

The world blinded him in an explosion of red.

He felt Israel stiffen. The clamp of his mouth at Joe's neck. The pulse of his cock inside his clenching passage. He had been wrong.

Israel was his world.

They lay there spent, as unmoving as they had been when Israel had first penetrated him. Sweat glued them together, chest to back, as did the circle of Israel's arms. Joe knew there was more, though. There had always been more. And he'd been a fool to try and convince himself otherwise.

"You're not going to try and do something like get up to call your secretary, are you?" Israel asked. His embrace tightened. "Because I think I'd have to tie you to this bed if that's the case."

Joe smiled, though it went unseen in the darkness. "No, no more calls." He reached for the Kleenex on the nightstand and began to daub Israel's hands clean. "Though I'll have to call her tomorrow and let her know what's going on."

And there it was. The elephant in the corner. He wasn't the only one who saw it, either. Israel's silence was too deliberate for him not to be aware.

Tossing aside the Kleenex, Joe twisted onto his back to search Israel's eyes. "Come back with me." He swallowed, not because it was hard to ask but due to his fear of what the response might be. "I can stay long enough for you to get everything sorted out. Then we can fly back to LA together."

For what felt like the first time ever, he couldn't read Israel's reaction. "You mean for a vacation? Or...longer?"

Longer. The rest of our lives. "Whatever you want. Whatever you can do."

"What if I can't afford it?"

"Doesn't matter. I wouldn't invite you and make you pay for your plane ticket."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Israel rolled away and sat up, taking care of the used condom as he did so. "I've got a life here, Joe. A job. An apartment. I can't just pick up and go on a whim. Not like you can."

Joe snorted and sat up. "It wasn't exactly easy to make the arrangements to come out here, you know."

"That's not what I meant, but..." His features were decidedly neutral when he bent his knee to shift and face Joe again. The careful distance between them did not go unnoticed. "I don't know what you're asking for. I don't know if you know what you're asking for."

He ached to touch him. He feared how it might break them if he did. "You. However I can get you."

"What if I couldn't go? What if I asked you to stay instead?"

He'd thought about it. A lot. In between fathoming out the truth of Israel's predicament, there had been pockets of fantasies where all he could do was wonder what it would take to keep them together.

"I'd do what I had to. It would take me a few months to make the transition, and I'd have to get licensed to practice here, but if that was the only way for us to be together, then yeah, I'd do it."

"Why?"

Joe could make a speech. He was good at it. His closings were some of the best in the city, because he knew how to make his arguments stick with juries. But he didn't need to be an orator to answer what was essentially a simple question.

"Because I love you. I always have. And I don't want us to be apart anymore."

Slowly, Israel reached forward and cupped the back of Joe's head, pulling him close enough for a kiss as warm and languorous as a nap in the summer sun. "I've never been to California," he said when they parted. "It might be nice to try a vacation there."

Joe smiled. "You might even like it enough to stay."

The light brightening Israel's eyes banished the rest of his fears. "I just might."

* * *

Slowly, their hands twisted together. "Me, too."

[&]quot;I7?"

[&]quot;Yeah?"

[&]quot;I'm glad you didn't beat up Spencer."

[&]quot;I still wish I had."

[&]quot;I know. But it's better this way."

[&]quot;You think?"

[&]quot;No. I know it."

VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

http://www.viviendean.com

Don't miss *Crave*, by Vivien Dean, available at Amber Allure.com!

After a grueling night in the ER, all Dr. Pete Coen wants is to decompress at his local watering hole. He's not interested in casual hook-ups with sexy strangers, though Duncan Burgess is as seductive as they come. But their chance encounter seems not so random when Pete discovers he's not a stranger to Duncan after all.

One explosive night changes his entire future. Pete saves Duncan's life, Duncan saves Pete's, and still, the danger for both of them has only just begun. Pete doesn't want to believe stories about demons who feed on pleasure, and he certainly doesn't want to get thrown into the middle of incubus politics nor become the prey of a succubus. But Duncan has had centuries to perfect his powers of persuasion. They have no choice but to join forces.

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