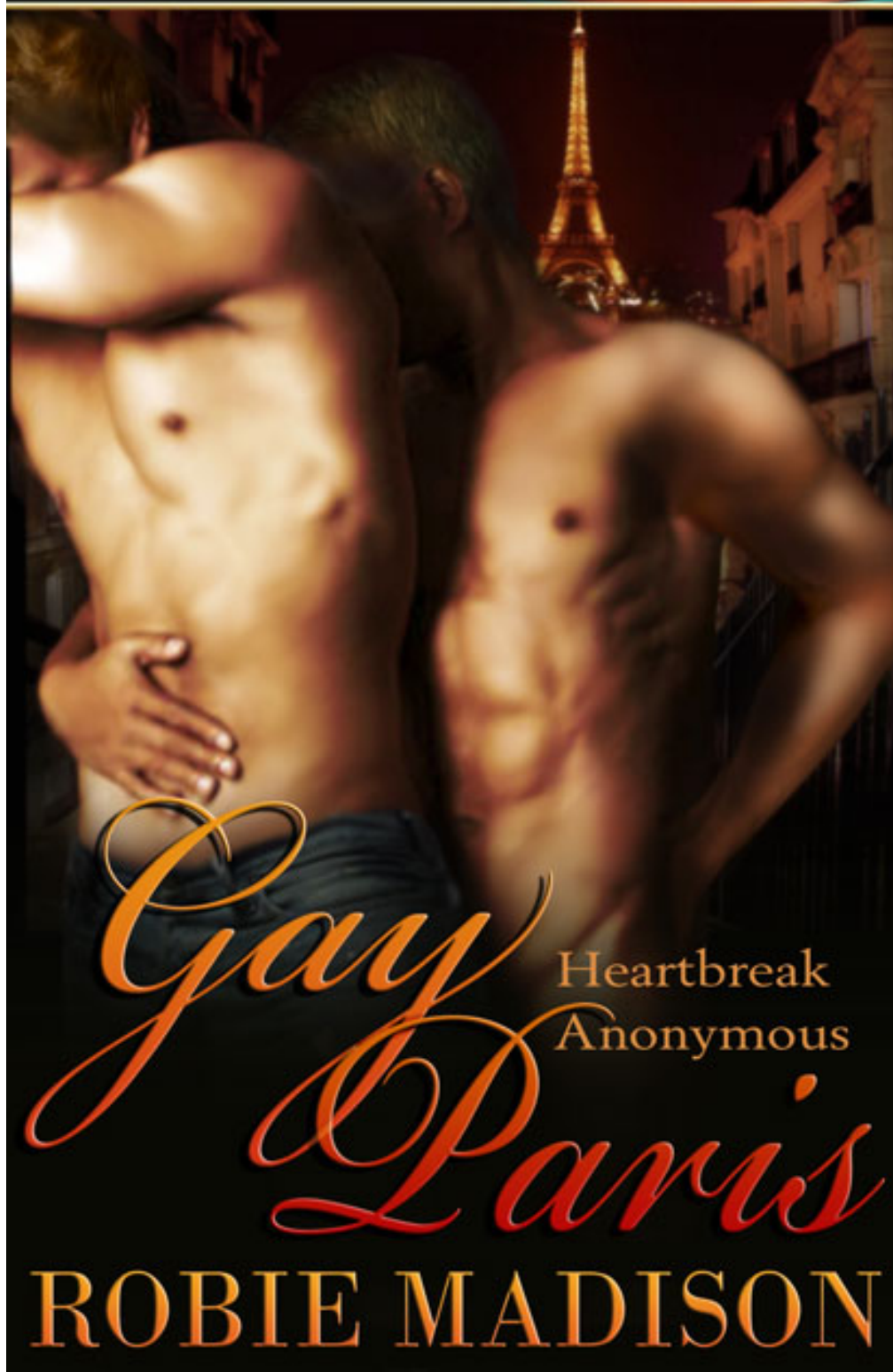


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Heartbreak
Anonymous

Gay Paris

ROBIE MADISON

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Gay Paris

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GAY PARIS

Robie Madison

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Chapter One

The City of Lights.

The city of memories.

Despite the familiar—and famous—sights, Paris had changed in the past six years. Or, more likely, Wyatt James was the one who had changed—older and definitely more cynical than he'd been in his mid-twenties.

He hated the cynicism, which had grown unchecked like an insidious cancer inside of him. Then one day two weeks ago he'd woken up, looked in the mirror and seen a man who viewed the world as a cup half empty. He'd barely recognized himself and in that instant he'd known. If he didn't want to turn into a bitter old man by the time he reached thirty-five—three short years away—he had to excise the tumor that was choking the life out of him. And so he'd returned to Paris.

The city of love.

Evening had descended, casting shadows along the tree-lined Boulevard Raspail where his modest, touristy hotel was located. A far cry from the cozy, furnished apartment he'd once rented in the same district. His body clock hadn't yet adjusted to the shift in time zones or the cultural preference for late dining. Mid-afternoon he'd been forced to search for a *pâtisserie* to appease his sudden appetite. Yet now he wasn't particularly hungry. Nevertheless, a sense of urgency compelled him to venture out. There was a jazz cellar near the Jardin du Luxembourg that he wanted to visit. Provided the *caveau* was still there.

It was, as was Jean-Louis, somewhat stouter than he'd been six years before but with the same, comforting Old World formality and congenial smile that Wyatt remembered from his youth.

"Monsieur James, bienvenue."

Unable to resist, Wyatt was immediately drawn into Jean-Louis' embrace as the Frenchman bestowed air kisses in the vicinity of his cheeks.

"It's good to be back." His switch to French was automatic. The sentiment took a little more effort to dredge up. And yet, now that he was here, the familiar stirrings of exhilaration seized him. Despite everything that had happened at the end, he'd spent a fabulous two years living, working and occasionally studying in Paris.

"Your parents, Monsieur James, they are..."

"Both dead." He'd quit his job in Paris and headed back to California early after learning his father had had his second stroke. But the truth was he'd been looking for an excuse to escape from the sights and sounds and smells that reminded him not of the great European capital, but of a man.

"My condolences, Monsieur James."

"Merci, Jean-Louis."

On the way to a table, he inquired after Jean-Louis' wife, who continued to work in advertising and his two children, who were now both studying at the Sorbonne.

"Now I am the one who does not see them at night," Jean-Louis joked as he pulled out a chair.

It wasn't until Wyatt sat down that he realized that Jean-Louis hadn't seated him at just any table. He'd put Wyatt at *the* table. He glanced at Jean-Louis, as unlikely an instrument of fate now as he'd been six years ago. Resigned – because really, wasn't this why he'd come back? – he settled back in his seat and allowed the Frenchman to recommend a red wine. Pleased with Wyatt's acquiescence, Jean-Louis left to place the order, giving Wyatt a chance to examine his surroundings. The décor had been updated, otherwise the place was much the same as he remembered it – smoky, dimly lit and a fair crowd for a weeknight.

* * * * *

Six Years Earlier

Wyatt spotted Jean-Louis out of the corner of his eye. The maitre d' stood at the edge of the stage, a glass of water on his tray, apparently deferentially waiting for Wyatt to finish a Bill Evans tune. Since it was pretty much a house rule that Wyatt was in charge of his own libations, he wondered what the maitre d' was up to. Seconds after he played the last note, the Frenchman approached the piano and deftly replaced Wyatt's glass with the full one on his tray.

"Monsieur James, the man at the fourth table against the wall wishes to buy you a drink." The maitre d's voice was pitched low and he'd somehow managed to block the microphone so he wouldn't be overheard by the crowd.

Even with the precise directions, it was impossible to ascertain exactly which man since Jean-Louis was blocking Wyatt's view. Regardless, the stage lights would have blinded him. Not that it mattered. Wyatt was here to play the piano. He didn't let strange men buy him drinks—at least not in this club.

"Thanks for the water, Jean-Louis, but you wasted your time. My glass was still half-full."

"He's wearing a business suit, but he is what you Americans call cute."

Having finished his sales pitch, the Frenchman left. A little stunned by the maitre d's forthrightness—especially since he *never* discussed his sexual orientation at work and yet how else was he to interpret Jean-Louis' comment?—Wyatt actually reached for the glass of water and took a gulp.

He set the glass back on the coaster, categorically refused to look out at the audience and rubbed his hands along his black trousers. His palms were damp, his fingers uncharacteristically twitchy. Jean-Louis had a wife and two children in their early teens, which made him anything but an authority on the cuteness factor of men.

Aware that he was, quite literally, in the limelight, he trusted his fingers and the music inside his head to finish the rest of the set. Neither failed him. But as soon as that

last note was played and he took his bow and ambled off the stage, he was overcome by curiosity. Just how cute was this man in a business suit?

Winding his way through the tables, he reached an empty chair, pulled it out and sat down without waiting to be invited or introducing himself. When he finally looked up, an electric shock jolted through his body at the sight of the familiar face. He'd seen the man in the business suit the night before at a restaurant known for its gay clientele near the Rambuteau Métro. Wyatt had been with a few friends, but that hadn't prevented him from checking out the stranger who'd been eating alone.

For one thing, the guy had looked out of place wearing a suit and tie—still did. For another, if Wyatt ignored the conservative haircut and clothes, the guy was definitely hot—black hair with a hint of gray, pale blue eyes, clean shaven with no hint of a five o'clock shadow, and long, blunt fingers. And he'd been watching Wyatt—still was.

"How?" he stammered, realizing from the amused grin on the stranger's face that the shock of recognition must have shown on his face.

"Pure coincidence, I assure you. I had no idea you worked here until I saw you playing the piano. I'm Zach Richards."

Wyatt ignored the extended hand and tried to place the man's North American accent. It had been a while since he'd heard a voice that sounded like home. "Where are you from, Zach Richards?"

Without missing a beat, Zach Richards wrapped his hand around his glass. "Toronto, Canada. I'm here on business and I'm drinking scotch. Can I order you one?"

"I never drink when I'm working." Wyatt had no idea why he was being so brusque.

And since when had he ever lied to himself?

Never. Not even when he'd realized somewhere around grade seven that he liked boys a lot more than girls. Yet here he was telling himself a huge whopper. He knew exactly why he'd been rude. He was disconcerted like hell by the attraction he felt toward this man.

Attraction, right.

Boner was more like it. The second he'd laid eyes on Zach Richards, his dick had shot to attention and his befuddled brain had sizzled with the possibility of what he would find under that straightjacket of a suit. Broad shoulders, flat abs and an arrow of dark hair leading him right to the Promised Land. He didn't doubt for one second that Zach had a really nice package. He was just a little surprised that he cared so much. While he wasn't exactly celibate, neither did he go out cruising every night for a piece of ass. His music consumed him and he had ambitions that didn't include vacuous one-night stands or long-term commitments.

"What about after you finish work?"

"What?" Distracted by his thoughts, Wyatt hadn't heard a word the other man had said.

Zach leaned way across the small table and Wyatt caught the faint odor of citrus and musky male. The scents teased his already overactive imagination, this time with images of tangled sheets and sweaty bodies.

"I said, I want to—"

"Take me back to your hotel room and fuck me."

Despite the dim lighting, Wyatt was pretty sure that Zach turned red. He leaned back in his chair in a not so subtle move to distance himself from Wyatt whose heart pounded like a drumbeat inside his chest.

Had he pushed too far, too fast?

And, more to the point, why had he voiced his secret thoughts? Made himself vulnerable to this man who was here on business, while Wyatt lived here. Worked here. Had goals that didn't include a quick one nighter with an insanely hot guy.

He sat. Not daring to move. Barely daring to breathe while Zach drank his scotch. The man's hand shook slightly, betraying his own uncertainties about this encounter. It

struck Wyatt that Zach truly had come into the club to listen to a little music and have a drink. That his invitation had been an act of impulse.

The man set his drink down and, with a flick of the wrist, sent the glass skidding across the tabletop. Wyatt caught it seconds before it tipped over the edge of the table and onto his lap.

"Thought you might need a drink," Zach said.

Wyatt's hand tightened reflexively around the glass, but he didn't pick it up.

Across from him, Zach shrugged. "Suit yourself." Then he leaned forward again. "There's just one problem I have with your proposition. What if I want you to fuck me?"

Neither of them spoke much on the way to the hotel. Didn't so much as touch each other. And yet there was no mistaking the sexual tension that snapped between them like a live wire, at least not in Wyatt's mind. So it surprised him that no one on the street, in the hotel lobby or in the confines of the elevator took any notice of them. That didn't stop a flush of self-consciousness from assailing him as he stood in the thankfully deserted hallway while the other man opened the door to his room.

He followed Zach into the dark room, giving the door a decisive shove as it swung closed. Zach flipped a switch and a desk lamp came on, but before Wyatt could make some asinine comment about how nice the room looked, the other man pivoted on his heels, trapping Wyatt against the door. This up close and personal, Wyatt, who stood a good two inches taller than Zach's six feet, had an excellent view of the "salt" that liberally peppered Zach's hair, which contrasted sharply with his unlined, rather youthful face. Obviously aware of the direction of his gaze, the other man raked his hand through his short locks.

"Family trait. I'm thirty-two and I've wanted to do this since last night."

This was a kiss.

Incredibly soft, full lips pressed urgently against Wyatt's mouth, claiming him. The scent of citrus filled his lungs and heat slid through his veins. His eyes fluttered closed

and he actually moaned when Zach's tongue traced the sharp edge of his teeth and then pushed inside. Their tongues tangled, the potent taste of Zach's scotch zinging across his taste buds.

My God, the man knew how to kiss. And he smelled so damn good.

The clean male scent pulled Wyatt out of his downward spiral into pure lust. With an effort and nowhere else to go, he twisted his head to the left, breaking the contact. Seconds later, Zach's large hands slammed against either side of the door, framing Wyatt's face.

"You want out, Wyatt James," the man growled, "say so now or so help me—"

"No!" He practically shouted the word, his mind reeling because he'd never actually introduced himself and yet Zach had just called him by name. Then he remembered the notice with his name and picture at the club. Had the advertisement prompted Zach to come in and investigate?

His gaze locked with Zach's. The man's eyes might be a pale blue, but there was nothing weak about them. With only inches separating them, it was impossible to miss the flare of desire mixed with heated anger.

"No, it's just..." His voice trailed off when he realized he was about make a complete idiot of himself.

"Just what?"

Wyatt swallowed his misgivings. "You smell good."

Zach barked with laughter. He adjusted his stance, crowding his body even closer to Wyatt's and one of his hands slid along the door panel until he could caress Wyatt's cheek with his thumb.

"You stopped the kiss because I smell good?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean—I mean, I don't. I usually have a shower after work."

For a fraction of a second, Zach hesitated and then he stepped back and gestured toward a door.

“Help yourself.”

“Thanks.” Still feeling awkward as hell, Wyatt slipped past the other man and into the surprisingly large bathroom. Flipping the switch, he turned to close the door only to come face-to-face with Zach.

“Here, thought you might need this.”

This was a hanger from the closet so he had somewhere to put his pants and dress shirt. The gesture so perfectly fitted his host, given Zach Richards’ impeccable attire, Wyatt grinned and accepted the item. Once alone, he didn’t waste time. Dumping his satchel in a corner, he stripped off his clothes, taking the extra time to hang them properly, and then stepped into the tub without waiting for the spray to warm up. The blast of cold water had almost no effect on his raging hard-on.

Although he was quick, efficient and thorough, he kept glancing toward the door wondering if Zach would join him. The exhilaration of the moment mixed with a little heady danger made him wish his host would come in. The thrill of anticipation that swirled low in his belly wanted Zach to remain on the other side of the door.

He couldn’t quite believe he’d flouted common sense and gone off with a stranger. To a hotel room, for God’s sake. How cliché was that?

He certainly wasn’t rash by nature, but the moment Zach had leaned across the table and told Wyatt he wanted to be fucked, Wyatt would have happily stripped them both right there in the jazz club. Setting his hand on the tiled wall for support, he closed his eyes and fought to slow his hammering heart rate. Instead of calming him down, thoughts of reckless danger and excitement had only made him more, well, excited.

Sliding a soapy hand down his stomach, he wrapped it around the base of his cock. He didn’t really need the extra lubricant. Pre-cum dribbled out of the slit like a leaky faucet. With swift, sure strokes, he fisted his shaft. An incredibly idiotic thing to do given what, or rather who, was waiting for him in the other room. And yet incredibly necessary if he was going to walk out that bathroom door with any semblance of

control, rather than where he was right at this moment, which was past the point of no return.

His entire body shuddered, consumed by the madness that had seemingly overtaken him the instant he'd recognized the man in the suit. Turning his face into the cascade of water to muffle his cry, he shot his load. Seconds later he sagged against the wall of the tub, the edge on his lust momentarily abated but by no means satisfied.

Less than five minutes later he was dry, but the mirror was still fogged, providing the perfect excuse to not obsess about his appearance. He'd shaved before work and finger-combed his towel-dried hair. His cock had calmed down, but to prevent any further embarrassment he snagged an extra towel off the rack and wrapped it around his middle.

The cooler air in the hotel room hit his skin the second he stepped through the doorway, causing his nipples to pucker. Or maybe it was the sight of Zach standing near the window, a loosely tied bathrobe covering his body. Either way, the almost complete absence of body hair on his torso guaranteed Wyatt couldn't hide his reaction from the other man.

For what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few seconds, the two men stared at each other. Forget bedtime fantasies or jacking off in the shower. Zach might be six years older and, from the look of the room, he had a damn generous expense account and he was in Paris on business, but for tonight, he was Wyatt's.

Zach broke eye contact with the obvious intention, if the heated determination in his hard stare was any clue, of taking his fill of Wyatt's body. The younger man nearly laughed when tiny frown lines appeared on the other man's forehead when he reached the vicinity of the towel. *Too bad, baby.* At least most of his skin was exposed, unlike Zach who'd covered his in a loose if silky garment that revealed only nominal clues to the body beneath.

"Would you like that drink now?" Zach asked, gesturing toward a minibar.

In three strides, Wyatt closed the space between them. While he'd been in the shower, Zach had been busy. A bucket of ice sat on the table next to the small fridge along with a couple of glasses and a selection of tiny liquor bottles. He wasn't much of a drinker, but the sight of a smattering of dark hair framed by the "v" of the robe's lapels gave him an idea. After putting two ice cubes in one of the glasses, he chose the bottle of scotch.

"Make me one too, will you?"

"No." He twisted the cap and poured the amber liquid over the ice. "We'll share."

Zach's mouth twitched at Wyatt's audacity. "You like scotch, then."

Wyatt picked up the glass. "Never tried it. Thought it might be fun."

"Fun?" The look on Zach's face suggested he didn't quite understand the concept.

Instead of explaining, Wyatt strolled around the room.

Despite what he'd said, from the looks of things, Zach Richards wasn't the kind of man who handed over control too easily. Aside from the drinks and the man himself, the only evidence that anyone occupied the room was a computer case discreetly tucked alongside the desk. Wyatt had no doubt that Zach's black suit and white shirt were neatly hung in the closet along with the striped tie he'd been wearing. His leather shoes were probably placed in orderly fashion just below.

To satisfy his curiosity, Wyatt opened the top drawer of the bureau. Sure enough, the man's briefs were stacked in a pile, his socks paired in a tidy row. Closing the drawer, he turned back toward his host. The idea that Zach might want to give up control excited Wyatt almost as much as losing it himself.

"Nice place you have here."

"I like it." Frustration laced each word, forcing Wyatt to turn and stare out the window at the street below so Zach wouldn't see his grin. What had Zach expected? That Wyatt would jump his bones the minute they got to the room? Half the fun was the slow build of arousal.

"Have you been here long?" he asked, resuming his tour of the room.

The question was a mistake, reminding him that this night was a one-shot deal. That thought took him out of the moment, so he wasn't paying attention to Zach, who intercepted him at the foot of the bed.

"A week. Are you going to drink that or —"

"Or," Wyatt said. Determined to forget about the future and live in the moment, he dipped two fingers into the scotch and gave it a quick stir.

From Zach's expression, the action was tantamount to sacrilege. A second later, he gasped when Wyatt traced a wet path through the smattering of dark hair on his chest all the way down to the silk tie, which he tugged open. The folds of the robe parted, revealing a dense bush of black hair that framed a thick, seven-inch uncut cock. Wyatt's mouth watered in anticipation. He dipped his fingers back in the scotch and set to work marking a trail along the other man's collarbone.

"What are you —" Zach bit back a curse, his breath rasping harshly in his throat.

Wyatt dipped his head until he almost touched Zach's ear. "I told you. We're sharing the drink."

A tremor racked the man's body, sending an answering shiver through Wyatt's frame. The scent of the scotch on Zach's skin tantalized him with the promise of its potency. Dipping his head further, he licked the edge of Zach's collarbone near his left shoulder. Before he could move, Zach tunneled the fingers of his left hand through Wyatt's hair, holding him firmly in place.

Wyatt chuckled. "Don't worry, baby. I wasn't planning on going anywhere." Except down the solid, muscled frame quivering beneath his lips.

Chapter Two

Zach's obvious sense of urgency only galvanized Wyatt to take things nice and slow.

Whenever he performed on an unfamiliar piano, he took his time to touch the keys, sense the vibrations and hear its unique tone in order to coax the most out of the instrument when he finally played it. If he was going to learn the nuances of Zach's body, the theory was no different.

Dipping his head, he kissed the hollow of skin between the other man's collarbone and neck. Zach's pulse beat sharp and fast against his lips, but his hand jerked before it tightened its grip on Wyatt's hair. Aroused, then, but strung so tightly he wasn't likely to enjoy much of what Wyatt intended to do.

Not wanting to alarm the man, yet needing to assert some control of his own, Wyatt nudged the edge of the bathrobe with his nose. The silky, smooth texture was a heady contrast to the rough, wiry feel of Zach's chest hair against his cheek and he continued to nuzzle and kiss the area as increasingly more skin was revealed. The move had the desired effect. Zach visibly relaxed his hold, eventually releasing Wyatt's head, which allowed the robe to slip off his shoulder.

"That's better, baby." Wyatt murmured the encouragement when Zach shuddered yet again. "I need to finish what I started."

To his credit the man stood his ground, though his breath was harsh and hot against Wyatt's skin, heating his nerve endings and straining his resolve. Pulling back, Wyatt quickly dipped two fingers into the now cool scotch and swore he heard a sizzle.

Taking his time, he painted the contours of Zach's flesh, tracing the contrast between hair and skin. The man's pecs were heavy with muscles that twitched and settled under his passing caress. He searched and found one dusky nipple—flat and

hard and incredibly sensitive to the briefest swipe of his fingertip. Intrigued, he coated the nub with liquor, eliciting a low growl from the man in front of him. In spite of the awkward angle, he bent his head for a taste.

The sharp tang of scotch and man exploded on his tongue, driving him completely crazy. Unable to remain gentle, he sank his teeth around the morsel and tugged. The answering cry of pleasure-pain from Zach reverberated like a shock wave through Wyatt and he stumbled. Forced to release his hold on the man's flesh, he swore softly and, heedless of the amber liquid sloshing madly over the sides of the glass, he sank to his knees. Seconds later the bathrobe fell to the floor, leaving Zach standing in front of him—a perfectly sculpted erotic vision.

So much for slow and steady.

He buried his face against the other man's flat, furry stomach and fought for each breath. A difficult task when Zach's masculine scent filled his lungs and his erection nudged his chin. Nor did it help matters when Zach's hand settled lightly on top of his head. Blindly he set the glass of scotch on the floor. Shoving it under the bed to make sure it was safely out of the way, he then wrapped his arms around Zach's waist. He didn't give a damn what kind of idiot that made him.

His hands settled on the small of Zach's back—an intimate depression of incredible softness that led his questing fingers straight to the crease of the man's buttocks. The already taut, round globes tightened imperceptibly. Above him he heard a low, guttural string of swear words and his head was yanked back, forcing his gaze upward. Zach's pale blue eyes blazed with longing. But before Wyatt could react, Zach shifted and sat down on the bed. His legs were spread wide, his large, square hand insistently pushing Wyatt's face into his groin.

"Suck me off," Zach demanded.

Begged.

It was hard to tell. Either way, Wyatt didn't much care because he definitely had plans for Zach's body. Crawling a little closer, he shoved Zach onto his back before manacled the older man's hands and pinning them beside him.

"Grab hold of the bedspread," he hissed, "because if you try to force me again, so help me I'll stop."

He watched closely, keenly aware of the war going on inside the other man's body as muscles tensed and visibly relaxed in succession. Clearly Zach Richards wasn't used to being ordered about.

Too bad, baby.

Eventually Zach's eyes fluttered closed, he flexed his fingers and then gripped the bedspread. It was the signal of surrender Wyatt was waiting for and he immediately wrapped his hand around the base of Zach's cock. Reflexively, Zach thrust his hips upward, bit back a moan and sank back onto the bed. Wyatt settled his hand on Zach's stomach, which immediately tensed.

"Easy, baby," he crooned, caressing the man's belly. "I promise I'll make it good for you."

But first he looked him over, unencumbered by Zach's self-conscious gaze. He'd been right. The cut of the suit and its somber color hid the body of a honed street-fighter, though he seriously doubted Zach Richards had ever had to survive on the street. Naked, however, there was no way to disguise the bulky frame of pure, sleek muscle. Zach obviously cared for his body with the same precision he gave to the rest of his life.

Wyatt ran his hand across Zach's flat abs and down his side, coming to rest at the concave where hip met thigh. His fingers, sensitized from long experience to the subtleties of a finely tuned instrument, easily read the signs of an approaching crescendo.

He fisted Zach's cock, his hand gliding across the velvety skin that encased the steel-hard shaft. Pre-cum squirted from the slit in the mushroom-shaped head, lubricating his sure, steady strokes. Zach's already ragged breath became rougher as he

sought to ride the plateau and prolong his pleasure. Wyatt merely grinned and slid his free hand beneath the man's heavy testicles. Sweat glistened across Zach's pecs. His grip on the bedspread tightened and then he lifted one leg, propping his foot on the edge of the bed. A clear invitation Wyatt wasn't about to turn down.

Probing gently, Wyatt inserted the tip of one finger inside the other man's anus. The hole was incredibly tight, Zach's response incredibly beautiful. His eyes opened, the pale blue hazy with lust, yet he still managed to pin Wyatt with a heated look.

"Please," he whispered.

Wyatt obliged, easing his cum-soaked finger further into the snug passageway. Zach arched his neck, stifling a groan that could have signaled either pain or pleasure. Unsure, Wyatt stopped.

"No—I've—never. More." The whispered words were barely coherent. The instruction was not.

Carefully, Wyatt withdrew, added a second finger and plunged deep inside in tandem with the next long pull on Zach's cock. Zach's entire lower body heaved upward, his sphincter muscles clamping tightly around Wyatt's fingers. The rhythm was broken, but only for a couple of seconds until Zach's body involuntarily relaxed. Shoving his questions aside, Wyatt increased the pace, forcing the sensations to come faster than he knew the other man could cope with. Zach had surrendered. To him, and Wyatt intended to make sure it was unconditional.

Three double strokes later, he felt a familiar contraction of the muscles at the base of Zach's cock that signaled his imminent release. Sure enough, within seconds cum erupted from his slit, liberally coating his chest and stomach.

Easing his hands away from Zach's body, Wyatt pushed himself to his feet. In front of him Zach lay still, his eyes closed, his hands still clutching the bedspread. Even with the sweat, scotch and semen coating his body, he was a gorgeous specimen.

Spying the ice bucket sitting where they'd left it beside the minibar, Wyatt had an idea. He brushed his hand across Zach's thigh.

"I'll be back in a minute, baby."

In the bathroom he dumped the ice in the sink and filled the bucket half way with warm water. Grabbing a face cloth from the pile on the counter, he hurried back into the bedroom. Zach hadn't moved. Putting the bucket on the floor at the foot of the bed, Wyatt rinsed out the face cloth in the sudsy water and set to work washing Zach's body. Since he himself had very little chest hair, he was intrigued by the way the water droplets clung to Zach's fur. He resisted the urge to bend his head and taste the combination of H₂O and clean man. Dropping the cloth in the water, he retrieved his towel from the floor and dried Zach off. By now, the other man's breathing had evened out and his hands lay lax beside him. Wyatt tossed the towel over his shoulder and leaned forward. "Hey, baby —"

Without warning, one of Zach's arms shot off the bed, his large hand captured the back of Wyatt's head and forcefully pulled him down into a blatant, open-mouthed kiss. Caught off balance, Wyatt's body crashed against Zach's and his mouth was savagely tongue-fucked. The second he instinctively struggled, Zach's other arm clamped around his waist, his hand settling possessively on his ass cheek. Recognizing that resistance was not only futile but not even desirable, Wyatt sank into the other man's embrace, keenly aware of the semi-hard shaft pressing firmly against his thigh.

Far from taking the edge off, it appeared Wyatt's hand job had unleashed Zach's wild side and his libido. But, while he was more than happy to continue, there was one important piece of information he needed to clarify. So he responded to Zach's kiss and caressed the man's face with his fingertips and waited patiently for the flare of passion to pass. At last it did and Zach, his chest heaving, buried his face against Wyatt's neck.

"Zach, baby, I have to ask you —"

"No."

Chuckling softly, Wyatt caressed the older man's temple. "No I don't have to ask you or —"

Zach turned his head away and stared up at the ceiling. "No I've never fucked or been fucked up the ass. That's what you want to know, isn't it?"

Taken aback by the cold, defensive tone in his voice, Wyatt didn't immediately respond. Then he decided he didn't need to take any crap, either.

"Quite frankly, yes. What's more, it's a fair question under the circumstances."

Zach snorted. "You mean considering you just jerked me off."

Despite the condescending tone, Zach's body trembled beneath his, making Wyatt wonder what the hell was going on. The man's attitude made no sense, especially given the fact that he hadn't loosened his grip on Wyatt. A second and third tremor wracked Zach's frame, yet the man still refused to look at him.

Was his attitude born out of fear? Or because he thought the admission made him look less macho? Whatever the cause, the reason was stupid and misguided.

"How about considering we're both lying naked in a bed sporting massive hard-ons?"

That captured Zach's attention and he finally looked at Wyatt.

"Now," Wyatt continued, ignoring the confusion in the other man's eyes. "Are you going to tell me where you've stashed the condoms and lube or do I have to search for them myself?"

Bracing his feet on the edge of the bed, Zach shoved them both further up the mattress. He licked his lips, studied Wyatt's face for a minute and then gave a jerky nod in the direction of the night table.

"In there," he said.

Since he was already lying across Zach's body, Wyatt simply shifted his weight until he was straddling Zach's hips and sat up. Not giving the other man time to think or question his move, he leaned over and pulled open the drawer of the night table. Given the circumstances, he wasn't particularly surprised to discover a brand new package of condoms and an unused tube of lube in the drawer. Pulling out the two

items, he dropped the lube onto the bed, opened the box of condoms and took one out. He ripped the square package open and proceeded to roll it down Zach's cock.

Zach gripped the bedspread again, his eyes wide with confusion and interest. "I thought—"

"What?" Wyatt leaned over, getting right in Zach's face. "That you'd get fucked. Don't worry, you will."

Zach swallowed, hard then he lifted his head, the cords of his neck straining with the effort and brushed his lips against Wyatt's mouth.

"Thank you."

Unsure what to make of the unexpected sentiment, Wyatt pulled away. "Shut the fuck up. Right now I'm the one on top."

When Zach actually smiled at the aggressive words, Wyatt fought down an unexpected swell of panic that churned inside his stomach. Zach's smile lit his face, banishing the hard edges and mature, serious tone that probably made him a success in his chosen field. That, in spite of whatever demons he'd been wrestling with only moments ago, he trusted Wyatt not only with his body but also enough to reveal this hidden, carefree side of himself, was breathtaking. And damn scary, because Wyatt was falling for this man—hard, complexities and all.

He didn't understand it. Didn't understand what was happening to him. He kept his relationships simple. He didn't do complex. But neither could he deny the forces of attraction that had gripped him in some spellbinding power since he'd sat down at the table at the club.

Shaking off the psychobabble, he grabbed the tube of lube and one of Zach's hands and squirted a generous amount on the man's fingers.

"Grease my hole," he ordered.

After a moment's hesitation, Zach reached between Wyatt's splayed legs, the edge of his thumb brushing against Wyatt's sac. The accidental touch sent a jolt of heat

through his groin and he clutched Zach's shoulder to steady himself. He was so hard, he ached. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to let Zach touch him, but he'd wanted those blunt fingers exploring him. Giving him a taste of what it would be like to take Zach's length up his ass. Wyatt closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing.

For a man who'd never been fucked—at least this way—before, Zach seemed to have no difficulty delving up Wyatt's crack to his anus. Maybe Zach guessed what Wyatt wanted. Maybe he knew neither of them would last long once they started again. Either way, he ran his fingers around Wyatt's hole only once and then plunged two of them in. Hard. Deep. Right up to his knuckles from the feel of it. Mutely, Wyatt bucked, his back arching, his ass instinctively pushing back to maximize the pressure. The strokes continued—slow, steady and yet with an unmistakable urgency. And then—

“Do it.” Zach's whispered words were harsh. Needy.

Wyatt opened his eyes seconds before Zach withdrew his fingers from his body. He was staring directly down into the other man's face. Usually Wyatt was pretty good at reading people, but he was so damn muddled by his own thoughts, the only thing he trusted at the moment was the words. Keeping his eyes firmly on the man beneath him, he adjusted his position. Immediately, one of Zach's hands settled on Wyatt's waist, neither urging nor stopping him, simply holding on. The straightforward gesture reassured him and, with one plunge of his hips, he seated himself on Zach's cock.

The initial burst of pain at being filled so completely after such a long abstinence stung Wyatt's eyes. But he knew from past experience that if he simply allowed himself to relax, he'd quickly adjust to the invasion. As if he understood, Zach reached up with his free hand and drew Wyatt down for a kiss. Sweet, tender, exploratory—a fuse waiting for the spark to set it off. Like the friction of two hard, male bodies rubbing against his erection. Like the slight but insistent buck of Zach's hips that nudged his shaft against Wyatt's prostate.

With a growl, he pulled away from Zach's mouth, unable to bear the slow tease one moment longer. One look must have told Zach that he was in for a wild ride, because he

immediately clamped his hands on Wyatt's thighs. His blunt fingertips dug into Wyatt's flesh with each piston stroke, his own hips catching Wyatt's rhythm and thrusting upward.

"That's it, baby. You feel so good."

Maybe too good. His balls tightened and he clenched his jaw, determined to ride Zach just a little longer. On his next down stroke, he clenched his sphincter muscles and was rewarded when he heard Zach's shout of pleasure. An instant later, he was gasping for equilibrium when Zach wrapped his fist around Wyatt's dick. The snug embrace pushed him over the edge. The rhythmic contractions started low in his belly. His head bowed and he grunted as the first pulse shot up his shaft, shooting his load all over Zach's chest. Two strokes later, Zach's entire body tensed, his fingers digging deep into Wyatt's thigh as he came.

It was difficult to say whether Wyatt collapsed in exhaustion on top of Zach or whether Zach pulled him into another embrace.

"This time," he joked softly, "we definitely need to hit the shower."

Zach grunted. "Stay," he said a moment later.

Wyatt closed his eyes, savoring the idea of being held in a man's arms. Of holding someone close.

"Yeah," he said. "For a little while."

Used to sleeping late, Wyatt ignored the dip of the mattress as the body next to his left the bed. Rolling onto his side, he dozed, only vaguely aware of the shower running and the sound of voices in the hall.

Voices in the hall?

He opened his eyes, squinting to read the numbers illuminated on the digital clock sitting on the bedside table. Sure enough, it was some ungodly hour of the morning. Prepared to bury his head under a pillow and doze off again, he squinted at the pillow

before realizing it wasn't his. Nor were the sheets. In fact, he wasn't in his apartment at all.

Memories of the previous evening tumbled through his mind and he swore softly. He had absolutely not intended to stay the entire night. Staying implied...a lot more than a one-night stand. Forcing himself awake, he sat up in bed and cursed a second time—a whole string of words in both French and English. His clothes and his satchel were right where he'd left them, in the bathroom—the currently occupied bathroom.

Scrambling out of bed, he strode to the minibar, extracted a bottle of water and twisted the cap off. As he drank, he mentally calculated the Euro he'd need to leave to cover the cost and wondered if he should pay for the tiny bottle of scotch, too. Once he'd drained half the bottle, he searched the floor for the towel he'd discarded the evening before. He couldn't find it. Since he'd used it on Zach, it would probably have looked idiotic wrapped around his waist anyway and he wished he at least had a pair of briefs to put on. He spied Zach's bathrobe neatly folded over the back of the desk chair a second before the bathroom door opened and Zach stepped into the room.

Fully clothed. All right, technically he didn't have socks or shoes on his feet and his shirt was unbuttoned, but at that moment, in Wyatt's state of absolute nakedness, technicalities didn't seem relevant. What was relevant was the inscrutable expression on Zach's face. To Wyatt's way of thinking, it could only mean one thing. Gone was the man who'd said, "fuck me", last night, replaced by the fastidious Canadian businessman. Heat suffused Wyatt's body, embarrassing him further when Zach didn't say so much as a good morning. Walking toward him was the hardest thing Wyatt had ever done, but he forced himself to do it because he had to get his clothes.

"I'll freshen up and be out of here in five minutes." Despite the water he'd drunk, his voice sounded raw.

Without a word, Zach stepped aside, but when Wyatt started to slide past, the other man grabbed his arm. His grip was hard, almost urgent, before it gentled sending a shiver akin to anticipation zinging through Wyatt's veins. For what seemed like forever,

Wyatt stared at the hand enclosed around his wrist then he looked up. Zach's pale blue eyes were shuttered, giving nothing of his emotions away. Wyatt blushed an even brighter shade of red when he realized Zach was giving him the once-over. Unfortunately, his dick showed none of his awkwardness and stiffened under Zach's steady perusal.

"You look...I really wish I didn't have a meeting this morning, but I do," Zach said.

"I understand," Wyatt said, all the while wondering what Zach had been going to say about his looks.

"Do you? Because I damn sure don't."

More awkward silence followed, underscoring yet one more reason Wyatt should have left before now. A sense of self-preservation took over and he attempted to pull out of the other man's grasp. He didn't succeed.

"Tonight..." Zach's voice trailed off and he abruptly let go.

Instead of retreating, the way he'd so desperately wanted to do only seconds early, Wyatt stood his ground. Was it possible that Zach wanted to see him again? The idea was insane and insanely tempting.

"What about tonight?"

"Would it be all right if I visited you at work?"

Wyatt's heart slammed against his chest, just begging to break free. In spite of putting a clamp on his emotions, of going into this with his eyes wide open, there was no use denying he wanted more. Or that he was thrilled that Zach seemed to want more too.

"I'm not working tonight."

"You're not?" Zach's eyes clouded in confusion.

Wyatt suppressed a grin. Zach really was a neophyte. He'd obviously prepared for one scenario without contemplating any alternatives, such as the fact that a saxophonist had the weekend gig at the club where they'd met last night. Normally, Wyatt lined up

work at another club, usually playing backup for a singer, but every so often he took time off to renew his creative spirit.

No question but that his creativity had been in overdrive last night.

He reached out and traced the curve of Zach's collarbone with his forefinger. The man's pulse raced like a souped-up engine in the Grand Prix. Steadying his own nerves, he went for broke.

"In fact, I'm free all weekend."

They met at a sidewalk café for lunch very late in the afternoon, collected a few necessary supplies—food, wine and more condoms—on the way back to the hotel and remained in bed for the next two days. That is, except for several highly erotic showers and a couple of quickies against the wall. By the time Wyatt took a look at himself in the bathroom mirror early Monday morning, he recognized all the danger signs—that certain sparkle in his eyes, warm glow on his skin and a cheesy smile on his face.

He was hooked. A fact that surprised the hell out of him because he'd always been so focused, so sure of where he was going. So certain he would get there alone. Yet the weekend with Zach Richards had taught him there was room for more than just music in his life.

Unfortunately, there was also a very good chance that he was dangling on the end of a line with no hope of being reeled in. Despite the growing intimacy between them, neither man had pushed for more—mentioned the future. Determined to keep cool and be mature, he opened the bathroom door.

"Right. I'll see you back at the office then."

Zach's words hit Wyatt like a sucker punch. Unable to move, he forced air into his lungs and watched as Zach calmly placed the phone back in the cradle.

This was it, then. It was over. He stepped into the room and leaned against the wall for support.

"Everything all right?" he asked, striving for a casual tone.

Zach sat in the desk chair wearing his silk bathrobe, his forearms resting on his thighs and his gaze on the nondescript gray carpet. "Fine. I have to send a couple of reports to the client and the office. That's all."

Work, something Wyatt himself should be thinking about. He needed to catch up on his sleep if he was going to be in any shape to play tomorrow night.

"When do you fly out?"

Maybe they still had a couple of hours they could spend together. Maybe they could grab a bite to eat before he had to say good-bye.

With apparent effort, Zach straightened but, though he looked in Wyatt's direction, he wouldn't meet his eyes. "In a couple of weeks. I'm taking some vacation time. There's just one problem."

Disbelief warred with desire, disturbing Wyatt's fragile hold on his emotions. His limbs destabilized and he slid down the wall, landing with an audible thump on the floor. He'd talked himself into a one-night stand with this man. Then he'd convinced himself that turning one night into three wouldn't shake up his world too much. He'd been wrong.

"What's the problem?"

"This room is part of the expense account. Now that I'm on vacation, I have to check out." This time Zach looked right at him. "Please tell me I'm not making a fool of myself."

If he was, then Wyatt was equally foolish.

"Why don't you move in with me?"

* * * * *

A glass filled with amber liquid appeared in the middle of the small table with a clink. Wyatt's focus shifted from the stage to the tumbler and he frowned, certain he'd ordered a glass of wine from Jean-Louis.

"As I recall, you like your scotch on the rocks."

A hand rested heavily on the tabletop as its owner pulled out the opposite chair and sat down. The man's hair was almost white, though there was still a smattering of black throughout and laugh lines bracketed his pale blue eyes. The first three buttons of his tailored blue shirt were open.

In all the reruns of the *Wyatt and Zach* show Wyatt played in his head, Zach never aged.

Wyatt scrubbed a hand across his face. An older Zach Richards still sat across the table from him.

"How?"

Chapter Three

From the moment he sat down, Zach Richards questioned the wisdom of his actions. He'd been five minutes away, having left the club in the back of a taxi, when he'd received Jean-Louis' call.

"Come quick, monsieur. He is here."

No need to say who he was. That knowledge hadn't made it any easier to believe the Frenchman's words. He still didn't quite believe it and yet Wyatt James was sitting right across the table from him. A pissed-off Wyatt James, if the other man's expression was anything to go by, which is why Zach was sitting there like some dumbass mute.

He'd fantasized about this meeting for so long. Imagined walking in and seeing Wyatt sitting right where he was. Imagined Wyatt walking in and finding Zach waiting for him.

Utter crap.

The trouble with fantasies was they never took into consideration the unpredictability of human behavior. In his fantasies, Wyatt James didn't look grim. He might be a few years older, but he still had that brash self-confident grin that had so defined him six years ago.

"Jean-Louis called my cell. I'd just left," he finally said.

The sparse truth, as far as it went. In reality he'd visited Paris and this club each spring for the past couple of years. A way of getting back in touch with the person he'd been six years before when he'd lived with Wyatt for two weeks. This year, as part of his therapy, he'd spent two months traveling throughout Europe, which is how he'd come to be here this late in June, but he didn't want to get into that right now.

He doubted Wyatt would understand. Wondered if he had any chance at all of making this Wyatt—the one with the California tan, sun-kissed hair the color of sand

and disturbingly sharp hazel eyes—ever understand. But, now that his fantasy had taken an abrupt departure into the realm of the real world, he had to at least try.

Across from him, Wyatt picked up the glass, swirled the amber liquid rather violently, making the ice cubes clink and then slugged back half the contents. He slammed the glass onto the tabletop. For about half a minute the two men simply stared at each other and then Wyatt flicked his wrist, sending the glass sliding across the tabletop. Without breaking eye contact, Zach easily caught the tumbler and, though he preferred his scotch neat, downed the rest of the drink.

Stupid macho crap move. He'd already had one drink this evening. His limit since he planned to take a Tylenol chaser before bed.

"Satisfied?" he asked, setting the glass back on the table.

A pair of hazel eyes blazed hot. Regrettably not with the kind of passion Zach had hoped to see in them.

"What? You just expect me to —"

Knowing he wasn't likely to get another chance. That he might be blowing the one he had, Zach leaned forward. "Take me back to your hotel room and fuck me."

Wyatt shot out of his chair so fast, he nearly toppled it. Zach didn't so much as move a muscle, afraid he'd beg if he did. He was not going to beg. Except Wyatt just stood there, he didn't walk away. Agonizing second after agonizing second ticked by.

"Are you coming, or not?" he asked at last before turning and striding toward the door.

For some stupid reason, Zach was eternally grateful that Wyatt wasn't there to see him stand up and follow. By the time he reached the entranceway, Jean-Louis and Wyatt were chatting amiably. He suspected the Frenchman had anticipated their—or at least Wyatt's—hasty departure and had been waiting for a chance to intercept.

"Ah, Monsieur Richards, here is your bag."

Well, that was one way of putting it. His “bag”, tucked into a discreet corner under the maitre d’s watchful eye, was a steel-framed backpack filled with his worldly possessions—or at least the ones he needed for this trip. He walked over to the corner and hefted the twenty-kilo pack onto his back, very conscious of Wyatt’s interest.

“Merci, Jean-Louis,” he said and extended his hand. From past experience, he knew better than to offer the Frenchman a tip.

Jean-Louis was having none of it and embraced him, despite the awkwardness of the pack, and kissed him on each cheek.

“Take care of yourself, Zachary Richards,” he said softly.

It was clear that while he intended Wyatt to see the display of affection, he did not want the other man to hear what he said. During Zach’s visits he and Jean-Louis had shared a few candid discussions, something else Zach wasn’t certain Wyatt would understand. He squeezed Jean-Louis’ arm in understanding and then turned to face Wyatt. If the other man was surprised by his apparent friendship with the Frenchman, he didn’t comment. Merely said his good-byes and led the way out onto the street. Where he proceeded to hail a taxi, open the back door for Zach and order him inside.

Although Zach would have walked without complaint, he was relieved he didn’t have to. They rode in silence after Wyatt told the taxi driver the name of his hotel. Zach didn’t even make a move for his wallet when the driver pulled up in front of the wide boulevard, knowing instinctively that Wyatt was just looking for an excuse to pick a fight. Several tourists were at the front desk, in spite of the late hour, so no one paid any attention to their arrival in the lobby or their departure up the elevator.

Tension swirled between the two men like a palpable entity within the confined space. Unanswerable questions—questions better left unanswered, at least for a time—bittersweet memories and, above all, curiosity over each other’s activities during the intervening six years.

Apprehension coursed through every fiber of Zach’s being as he followed Wyatt down a short hallway and waited for him to unlock the door to his room. He’d played

the scene at the club with the deliberate intention of reminding Wyatt of their first meeting. That didn't mean he expected them to fall into bed the moment they were in the room—far from it. He was going into this blind with no plan and no solid clues to Wyatt's thoughts.

Wyatt waved him in and Zach found himself in the long arm of an L-shaped hallway that led to the bathroom. He caught a glimpse of the main room around the corner when he slipped off the straps of his backpack. Anticipating that he might not be staying for long, he dumped the pack on the floor. Before he had a chance to straighten, he was shoved, none too gently, against the wall. Reflexively, his hands shot out to break the impact. A body pressed close behind him, crowding his space and his air. Making it difficult to breathe.

"So you came here to get fucked." The voice was rough-edged, with no teasing tone and the total absence of an endearment to soften it.

Zach closed his eyes, rested his forehead against the cool wall and fought to remember that this was Wyatt. That there was no need to fight back. That didn't stop the panic from welling up inside him when Wyatt's hands manacled his wrists, forcing his arms higher up the wall. Then Wyatt's hips canted forward and there was no mistaking the heavy ridge insistently pressing against the crack of Zach's ass.

"Yes," he whispered, hoarsely.

If it was Wyatt's intention to make him back off, he wasn't going to succeed. Zach was willing to play this out, to go as far as he had to for another chance. One of his hands was released and his shirt was viciously tugged free of the waistband of his jeans.

"Take it off, otherwise don't move."

Then the harsh voice and hard body were gone, leaving Zach's heart hammering against his ribcage and his fingers fumbling to undo the rest of the buttons on his shirt. Frustrated, he gave up and expedited the job by simply pulling the shirt over his head. Throwing it onto the top of his pack, he caught a burst of light in his peripheral vision

and realized that Wyatt was in the bathroom. Before he could take a closer look, he was slammed against the wall again.

He braced himself and sucked in his breath when Wyatt's hands set to work on his belt buckle. Each brush of the other man's hands against his body was like a flame licking his skin. Scorching his flesh, but it was so damn good to feel alive. By the time his jeans were unbuttoned, his dick was hard. His pants and briefs were unceremoniously shoved past his hips to his thighs, leaving him exposed. Vulnerable. Needy. He hung his head and swore when the heel of Wyatt's hand rubbed along the length of his erection.

"Yeah, you definitely want to get fucked." This time there was no mistaking the lust lacing the raw tone.

So Zach wasn't all that surprised when Wyatt nudged, instead of kicked, his legs as wide as the barrier of the denim allowed. Or that Wyatt caressed his ass before applying the lube and delving into the crease. When questing fingers found Zach's hole he almost wished for the roughness of the other man's hands. This tenderness was too much like his fantasies.

Unable to suppress a shudder from running through his body at the intimate touch, he regretted the display of vulnerability. Now was not the time to show any weakness. He was under no illusion that Wyatt intended to be gentle.

Two fingers pushed past his sphincter, insistently demanding entrance. He gulped in a load of air and consciously forced his body to relax. The fingers probed his anus, slicking it in preparation. Sweat broke out across his brow as he remembered. Wyatt's cock was about the same length as his, but considerably thicker. The first time he'd taken it Wyatt had gone slow, easing himself inside with erotic kisses that had teased and distracted Zach into accepting the invasion.

Zach swore softly when Wyatt withdrew his fingers, pulled Zach's ass cheeks apart and nudged his hole with the bulbous tip of his cock. Zach figured that was about the only warning he was going to get and he tensed. Another sign of weakness, but he

suddenly didn't give a damn. He wanted this, but not like this. He wanted to hear Wyatt call him *baby*, a ridiculous term of endearment considering he was six feet and nearly two hundred pounds of solid muscle. Hell, at this point he'd take Wyatt calling him Zach.

Perhaps Wyatt sensed his reluctance, because his hand loosened its hold on Zach's waist and slid around and up through the hairs on his torso. Zach recognized the move as a deliberate one of reassurance.

"I can't be gentle."

The words were practically a growl as well as a declaration and Zach realized Wyatt was fighting his own battle. He concentrated on that. On how his sudden reappearance must have shocked the other man.

"I don't expect you to be."

That seemed to be the signal Wyatt was waiting for. He eased his head inside. Zach bit back a moan and shoved back, asking for more. Wyatt gave it to him, pushing himself steadily deeper until his testicles slapped against Zach's butt. Now the fire burned inside him, edged with pain, but also incredible pleasure. Zach closed his eyes, savoring the feel of being filled. Possessed. Taken.

And he was. Wyatt's hands tightened on either side of his waist. Like a madman, he pounded into Zach's ass. Flesh slapping rhythmically against flesh, forging a raw, primitive bond between the two men. Zach cried out, daring Wyatt to deny the fact that a bond still existed between them.

In defiance, Wyatt grabbed his neck. "Come," he hissed.

At the command, Zach lost all control. Not that he'd had much to begin with. Wyatt wanted his complete submission. Fine, he'd get it. Still bracing one arm against the wall for support, he reached out blindly, grabbed his shirt and wrapped it around his cock. One brush of the soft material against his oversensitive glans was enough to set him off. He gave a guttural shout as semen erupted from his slit.

But his submission came with a price. Wyatt bowed his body, his sweat-soaked skin brushing against Zach's back. The man's hands tightened their hold on Zach's body. With a hoarse grunt and one final thrust, he came. Zach closed his eyes, absorbing the sensation of the pulsating spurts inside him and the press of naked flesh around him. It had been so damn long. And then Wyatt kissed his spine.

"Wyatt." He whispered the name like some stupid fool who thinks one kiss will make everything better.

Abruptly, Wyatt pulled out, his hand sliding down between them to hold the condom in place. Before Zach had a chance to straighten, Wyatt turned away. He was naked, a fact Zach had failed to notice because he'd been so caught up in what was happening between them. But he looked now at the long, lean frame and the tight ass. Even six years down the road, Wyatt James still had a beautiful body.

"Wyatt—"

"Give me a minute and then you can clean up."

"Sure," Zach said to a closed bathroom door.

Now that he was alone, he slumped against the wall, shifting his weight to take the strain off his bad leg. He'd wanted to be fucked, not screwed around—a crude but important difference. Realizing he was still staring at the bathroom door like some lovesick puppy, he glanced down and grimaced. His perfectly good shirt was a mess, just like his life. He tossed the useless garment back on top of his pack and pulled up his pants. He could at least retain a modicum of dignity when Wyatt threw him out.

Or not, because he practically fell asleep standing against the wall in the few minutes it took for Wyatt to reappear—this time with his pants on. Zach's eyes snapped open and he grabbed his shirt and pack to cover his embarrassment.

"I won't be long," he said and forced himself to walk the few feet without a noticeable limp.

The effort cost him. Sweat beaded his brow and the damaged muscles in his right thigh quivered like the proverbial bowl of jelly. Crap. He was not going to fall flat on

his ass until the bathroom door was closed. Letting the pack drop to the floor, he turned, intending to shut the door.

“Here. I thought you could use this. For your shirt.”

This was a hanger. Instead of taking it, Zach faced Wyatt and wondered what the hell he was supposed to read into the not-so-simple gesture.

“You’ll need to hang up your shirt after you wash it out.”

A roundabout invitation to stay, then. With no guarantees.

“Thanks,” he said, took the hanger and closed the door.

And nearly fell on his ass when his leg buckled. Cursing, he managed to grab the edge of the counter with his free hand and steady himself. At this rate, he was going to need those Tylenol sooner rather than later. Biting back the sense of frustration that always dogged him when his leg finally gave out, he leaned against the counter, filled the sink with soapy water and put his shirt in to soak.

In the same position, he managed to toe off his shoes and shuck his jeans, underwear and socks. He added his briefs to the soapy water. Mission accomplished, he hobbled two feet to the tub, cautiously lowered himself onto the edge, pulled his pack over and opened it. In went the jeans and socks and out came a pair of soft track pants. He cleaned himself up in the tub, pulled the track pants on and then forced himself to head back to the sink. A few minutes later, the shirt and his briefs were hanging in the tub to drip dry and he was back to staring at his pack. No way did he have the energy to lift it again. He also resisted the urge to open the pouch where he kept the painkillers. His senses were already dull and he still had to face Wyatt.

He managed to make it out the door and the two paces along the short hallway into the main room when he was forced to reach for the wall. Only one lamp was on near an armchair in the corner, casting a single pool of light amidst the shadows in the room. Wyatt was staring out the window, but he turned when Zach entered the room.

"Mind if I...sit on the bed?" What he wanted was to lie down. What he wanted was to find a way to make Wyatt talk. What he wanted were the words to explain what needed explaining. In the meantime, he'd take what he could get.

Across from him, Wyatt frowned. Not the response Zach had hoped for.

"What the hell's wrong?" Wyatt said, striding forward.

"Nothing." Zach waved him off. "I just want to sit down."

"You are such a damn liar, Zach Richards. You're pale and you look like you'd fall over if the wall wasn't holding you up."

While he spoke, Wyatt walked around the side of the bed and then pulled back the bedspread and sheet.

"At least I finally got you to say my name."

Seconds later, Wyatt was by his side, swearing softly. "Let me help you. You need to lie down."

A mixture of pride and stubbornness made Zach want to refuse. He didn't because Wyatt only spoke the truth. He did need to lie down and he probably did need the help to do that. Leaning heavily on the lean frame, he wrapped his arm around Wyatt's waist. The lingering scent of man and sex swirled around him, teasing him with "what ifs", and he bit back a curse. One which Wyatt fortunately associated with the pain Zach was in. He limped to the bed and sat down, wincing when his weight shifted as he swung his legs up onto the mattress. But, once he sank back against the pillows, he felt a damn sight better.

"Thanks," he said, determined to ignore how good it had felt to be in Wyatt's arms again, even for a moment.

Wyatt's frown deepened.

"I'll be all right in a few minutes."

"You bastard, you mean. As in 'I'll be all right in a few minutes, you bastard.'" Wyatt knelt beside the bed. "Zach, I swear to God I didn't mean to hurt you."

Zach stared at the ceiling. He wanted to ask if Wyatt meant he hadn't intended to hurt Zach physically or emotionally. He didn't, mostly because he figured he already knew the answer. Instead he waved his hand again in a dismissive gesture.

"You're absolved. My bum leg isn't your fault."

"I didn't help," Wyatt muttered. He reached out and settled his hand on Zach's thigh. "What happened?"

The million-dollar question.

I discovered you were right. That I could leave, but I couldn't escape who I am.

"My thigh was broken three years ago."

"That's why you have a cane."

It was strapped along one side of his backpack and Zach had thought, obviously erroneously, that Wyatt hadn't noticed.

"Yeah. That feels good."

That was Wyatt's hand stroking up and down Zach's thigh, creating a soothing heat through the soft cotton track pants.

"Haven't you taken anything?"

Zach shook his head. "I try not to unless I have to." It had been a bitch weaning himself off the powerful painkillers the doctor had prescribed during his recovery. And, while he wasn't a masochist, he could stand a little pain if it meant reclaiming his life on his own terms.

"Besides," he continued a moment later, "I've had too much scotch."

"Half a watered-down ounce?"

"I had a scotch during my first visit. Neat."

"Right. The visit where you got to know Jean-Louis really well." Sarcasm vied with curiosity and confusion in Wyatt's voice. Clearly the man was still trying to make sense of the exchange he'd seen between Zach and the maitre d' at the jazz club.

Zach turned his head so he faced Wyatt. “Jean-Louis and I got to know each other, as you put it, a couple of years ago. Do you really want to get into this now?”

Wyatt took a couple of minutes to digest this latest information. At least he seemed willing to talk, and listen. And he kept rubbing Zach’s thigh. But if this was new to Wyatt, it was just as new to Zach. Fantasies aside, he hadn’t really expected he would meet Wyatt tonight. And, while he’d imagined all the things he’d say – all the things he wanted to say – thinking and actually speaking his thoughts were two very separate actions. After years of suppressing both, it would take more than a night to be comfortable opening up, even if the person he was talking to was Wyatt James.

“No. We can talk in the morning,” Wyatt said, adjusting his position so that he now crouched beside the bed. “Can you move over into the middle of the bed without jarring your leg?”

Guessing what Wyatt had in mind, Zach propped himself up on his elbows and shifted his body, taking care to keep any weight off his bum leg. No sooner had he settled back down against the pillows than Wyatt crawled onto the bed.

“Tell me if I’m too intense and it hurts,” Wyatt said before he placed his hands on Zach’s thigh and set to work massaging the muscles.

Eventually, Zach relaxed into the moment. Tomorrow would come soon enough, but right now –

He lifted his hand and settled it on Wyatt’s knee. After the briefest of pauses, Wyatt continued the massage and Zach gave himself up to at least part of the fantasy. He was lying in bed with Wyatt. Okay, so Wyatt was kneeling beside him on the bed and his magical fingers, which were very strong from playing the piano, were busy kneading the soreness out of Zach’s thigh, but it was a damn good start.

Chapter Four

Six Years Earlier

Her upper body was nude, revealing pert breasts and a flat stomach. Perhaps that explained why her face, devoid of expression, was turned slightly to the left. She wished to avoid the direct stares of her many admirers.

Zach stood on the landing transfixed. The lack of arms did not detract from the beauty that was Venus de Milo. The concept that the sculptor had envisioned the woman's figure inside a hunk of stone captivated him.

"For once in your life, Zach Richards, just follow the damn crowd."

Zach turned, a grin on his face. But all the while he wondered if there was a double meaning behind Wyatt's words. He'd done his best to live in the moment. To play out these two weeks and not think about what came next.

"Do I detect a note of jealousy?"

Wyatt snorted. "You get turned on by six feet seven inches of marble woman, just let me know. I'll gladly stand aside."

Zach managed a laugh. "Sounds like a B movie from the fifties."

"1958 and the woman in question was fifty feet tall and on a mad rampage against her cheating husband."

"Definitely not my type," Zach admitted.

He wasn't all that surprised that Wyatt deftly spouted facts about marble statues and movies in the same conversation. Over the past two weeks he'd discovered that his lover was a font of trivia. And a damn good tour guide. He could definitely say he'd *done* Paris. Today they were *doing* the Louvre.

With one last look at the graceful lines of the statue, he jogged up the wide staircase, easily passing Wyatt.

"Hey."

For once in your life –

He didn't look back. "I'm following the crowd."

Approximately three flights up, as if drawn by a magnet, he and at least a hundred other people surged through two galleries of pictures and then turned right again into yet another gallery. He slowed, as fascinated by the crowd congregating at one end of the room as he was by the portrait they were staring at. He moved forward until he stood at the edge of the throng.

A body, slightly taller than his own, pressed close behind him and an arm slid around his waist. He jerked at the unexpected intimacy, but the arm held him fast. Not that anyone around him noticed. A hand flattened against his belly and he sucked in his breath.

"Satisfied?" There was a clear hint of amusement in Wyatt's tone.

For once in your life –

Zach ignored the hand and the voice echoing inside his head. Refocusing, he gazed over the tops of several heads and past the cordoned-off barrier. And there she was – another woman, this one wearing an enigmatic expression that had fascinated millions.

His requisite fifteen seconds of intense study later, he turned away. To his relief, Wyatt released his hold. It was difficult to think clearly when Wyatt crowded his personal space in so public a place. And impossible for Zach not to feel self-conscious even though no one ever seemed to pay them any attention.

"I could hardly come to the Louvre and not see the Mona Lisa," he said. Even to his ears, his voice sounded curt, a reaction to the embarrassment he felt.

If Wyatt noticed, he didn't comment. He simply began to talk about the pictures hanging on the gallery walls and the artists who'd painted them. Holding a close second to music, Wyatt was passionate about art and architecture. But while Zach respected Wyatt's enthusiasm, he was dead certain he saw something very different

than Wyatt did each time he looked at a picture or studied a statue or admired a building.

Happy to let the awkward moment pass, Zach fell into step beside Wyatt and did his best to appreciate the vibrant colors and the depictions of times long past. He should have known that Wyatt wasn't about to let the matter drop. They had no sooner entered the Galerie d'Apollon when Wyatt grabbed Zach's arm and pulled him into the center of the room.

"Close your eyes," he commanded.

Very aware of their exposed position and that Wyatt hadn't let go of him—had, in fact, shifted his position so he stood beside Zach's right shoulder, practically embracing him—Zach hesitated. This time it was impossible to ignore the heat that skimmed through his veins or the way his stomach clenched. The same way it had late yesterday afternoon when Wyatt had kissed him and said "love you" before heading off to work.

For once in your life—

As he had every other time Wyatt had touched him, however casually, in public over the past two weeks, Zach fought the twin urges to at once shove the man away and relax into his lean frame.

He didn't relax, but he did close his eyes and wondered if he'd hear Wyatt whisper those two words again. Wyatt had said them so easily, so quickly. Maybe he hadn't meant them. Maybe Zach had imagined them altogether.

"Now lift your head and look up at the ceiling."

The ceiling featured a series of paintings, but Zach ignored them all except the huge oval one in the center. He recognized the scene immediately, even though he hadn't studied Greek mythology since grade school. Amidst blue sky and billowing white clouds, Helios, the god of the sun raced his chariot across the heavens. Just below the chariot wheels, against a backdrop of dark clouds, Icarus fell headfirst toward the earth, the wax on his wings having melted because he'd dared to fly too close to the sun.

Nearby, his father Daedalus glanced back, an expression of disapproval on his stern face.

The knot in Zach's stomach tightened and, though he wanted to, he couldn't look away. Unable to disappoint his father, he'd never stepped out of line. Barely admitted what he was. Focused on his studies and then his job, he'd only ever explored that dark side of himself when he was away from home. Even then, the risks were usually too great to do more than visit places, sit in a corner, watch and listen. Only very rarely had he ever acted on his cravings for more.

Then he'd seen Wyatt James. Heard the man play the piano. And for once in his life he'd taken something just for himself.

"Is that how it is for you?"

At Wyatt's quiet question, warning sirens blared to life inside Zach's head. Other than to exchange some basic information about their past sexual experience—which hadn't amounted to much for Zach—they hadn't shared anything about their lives beyond their interests. Zach had sure as hell never mentioned his father or even spoken of his family, though he'd seen pictures of Wyatt's parents in the apartment and overheard a couple of phone calls.

"Zach."

The air around him thickened, making it difficult to breathe. How had Icarus felt at that moment, when he'd realized that his bid for heaven had landed him straight in hell?

"I'm out of here."

Needing air, distance, to be in another goddamn space than this one, Zach shoved out of Wyatt's embrace and headed at a run for the stairs. Unfortunately, a steady stream of people moving in the opposite direction slowed him down—enough to give Wyatt a chance to catch up with him on one of the landings.

"Zach, hold up." Wyatt caught the sleeve of Zach's jacket.

Zach pulled free. "No."

"Zach, I didn't mean —"

"Didn't you?" Zach accused, rounding on the other man.

To his credit, Wyatt didn't mumble some crap excuse. He shrugged, no doubt trying to make light of the situation.

"I was curious. Concerned. Thought it might be a way to get you to talk."

The panic rose up inside him again. "No. I'm out of here."

He turned to leave, but Wyatt made another grab for him.

"Okay, I'll —"

Zach jerked his arm away. This time he only turned his head. "No. I'm getting out of here. You can do whatever the hell you like."

This time he forgot about niceties and plowed his way through the crowd surging up the stairs. He didn't slow down until he reached the escalator that would take him up inside the glass pyramid to the entrance to the museum. Halfway up, he looked back, but didn't spot Wyatt.

Not sure what to make of the disappointment that enveloped him, he ignored it. Wyatt was a stupid ass if he thought Zach would talk. There was no point in talking and nothing to talk about.

Turning away from the Jardin des Tuileries and the Place de la Concorde, he headed along the river, only to realize he was nearing yet another famous Parisian landmark—Notre Dame. He crossed the Pont Neuf to the Left Bank and kept walking.

He didn't return to Wyatt's apartment until late in the afternoon. For a few hours at least, he'd played a familiar game—pretended he wasn't Zach Richards but a man called Smeets or Schmidt or just plain Smith. Walking aimlessly, he'd managed to lose himself in a city of millions where no one cared who he was. And no one had any expectations of him. A subject he hadn't really allowed himself to think about when

he'd moved in with Wyatt, but, after the incident in the Louvre that morning, he was damn sure Wyatt had at least a few expectations about their relationship.

He did too.

At the end of two weeks—tomorrow—it would end. There was no alternative and no point in contemplating one.

Since he wasn't sure whether Wyatt would be home or not, he stopped off at a little market down the street to buy a few supplies for dinner. Usually he and Wyatt shopped together and he paid—his contribution in lieu of paying for accommodation. Ruthlessly he shoved aside the regret that this last time he was shopping alone. What was was.

He let himself into the apartment with the key Wyatt had handed him the first day he'd moved in. After closing the door carefully behind him, he put the key in a little dish that sat on a table near the door. He wouldn't need it again.

The apartment was quiet. The living room empty, though it looked as though Wyatt had been playing his keyboard recently because the music sheets had been rearranged. Wyatt lived in organized chaos. No doubt the basket of clean clothes was still sitting at the foot of the bed waiting to be folded and put away. If Zach hadn't cleaned up the kitchen this morning, dishes would have been washed but still sitting on the rack by the sink.

Carrying his grocery bags, he headed down the hall and into the kitchen, only to stop in his tracks at the sight of a naked Wyatt standing in front of the fridge. He'd obviously just taken a shower. A damp towel hung over the back of a chair and beads of moisture still glistened in his wavy hair. A bottle of wine sat open on the counter, a half-filled glass beside it.

"Didn't know when you'd be back," Wyatt said.

Totally unconcerned with his nudity or the fact that his cock was semi-erect Wyatt lifted the glass of wine in mock salute and took a swig. But Zach was the one who drank in the sight of Wyatt who looked like a Bacchanalian reveler in search of an orgy.

Zach set the groceries on the table. "So you decided to get drunk?"

Wyatt slugged back the rest of the contents of the glass before setting it back on the counter. "On half a bottle of wine? Not even close, baby."

Not too surprisingly, given how Zach had dumped him earlier, Wyatt sounded belligerent. Wyatt wasn't exactly a fighter, but Zach wouldn't put it past him to give it a try, so he moved first. All it took was three steps forward to back Wyatt against the fridge.

Wyatt gave him an irreverent grin. "You think you can just walk in here and —"

Zach took fierce possession of Wyatt's mouth, thrusting his tongue inside, desperate for a taste of this man. If anything, he was the one exhibiting violent tendencies. He threaded his fingers in Wyatt's damp hair, holding him fast though the other man hadn't resisted the swift invasion. Their tongues dueled and Zach's senses sank deeper into the euphoria of the moment. The clean, fresh scent of male, the soft skin over hard muscle, the fingers of Wyatt's hand digging into his side—Zach was aware of every nuance and reveled in the reactions he drew from his lover.

He broke the kiss. "Yes, damn you, I can and I'm going to prove it."

Without another word—or protest—from Wyatt, Zach knelt on the floor. In the intervening minutes during their wild kiss, Wyatt's dick had hardened and now jutted straight at Zach's mouth. Reverently, he reached out and ran his thumb along the underside of the silky skin. Above him, Wyatt moaned. His head clunked against the fridge and his hips jerked forward. Zach obliged and cupped Wyatt's sac in his other hand, gently rolling the balls in his palm. Then he bent forward and nuzzled his lips against the head of Wyatt's erection. Almost immediately, Wyatt grabbed Zach's hair and pulled him back.

"Wait, we need a —"

"No, we don't," Zach said, his eyes on Wyatt. "You know I'm clean."

He left it at that. He wasn't being stupid. They'd used condoms each and every time—a sign of mutual respect and caring. But the fact was he was clean and so was Wyatt, who had the report to prove it.

Wyatt rested his head against the fridge again and closed his eyes. In the silence of the room, Zach could hear every harsh breath Wyatt took as he struggled for control.

“I don’t think —”

“Please. I want to taste *you*.”

Wyatt’s entire body shuddered and then he nodded, loosening but not releasing his hold on Zach.

Permission granted, Zach fisted Wyatt’s shaft. He didn’t want Wyatt relaxed. Didn’t want a coherent thought to enter the man’s head. Sure enough, after only a few strokes, Wyatt’s grip on him tightened and he muttered something in French. Zach slowed his pace but tightened his grip slightly, increasing the pleasurable friction. The back of his hand brushed against the wiry curls that framed Wyatt’s groin and a bead of pre-cum appeared in Wyatt’s slit.

Tempted, Zach leaned forward and licked, savoring the slightly salty taste. Releasing his hold, he set his hands on Wyatt’s thighs, caressing the length of muscled flesh. He closed his eyes, memorizing the texture of Wyatt’s skin. Above him he heard a sharp intake of breath and then Wyatt shifted beneath him, widening his stance and jerking his hips again in silent demand. Needing more himself, Zach opened his eyes, bent lower and nuzzled Wyatt’s sac, breathing in the unique musky odor of this man. The move earned another unintelligible word from Wyatt.

Unable to resist, he lowered his mouth over Wyatt’s cock—thick and hard as steel and so hot Zach was sure he’d burn his tongue. He didn’t care. Slicking Wyatt’s pole with his saliva to make it easier for his mouth to accommodate, Zach bobbed his head up and down, allowing the crown to bump against the roof of his mouth. With each slide, Wyatt’s hand reflexively tightened and loosened its grip on his hair, a clear sign of encouragement. Or maybe intent.

Zach cupped Wyatt’s testicles again and then ran his middle finger along the sensitive ridge of flesh between Wyatt’s balls and ass, slowly working his way to the base of his hole. Pulling his head back, Zach swirled his tongue around the thick edge

of the glans, earning him another spurt of pre-cum. Then, because he could, he ever so gently scraped his teeth along the shaft while at the same time easing the tip of his finger inside Wyatt's anus.

Without warning, Wyatt cried out, his grip on Zach tightening to the point of pain. And then he started fucking Zach's mouth. Jerky, desperate strokes that demanded all of Zach's concentration because it was sure as hell clear Wyatt didn't have any. Zach would have grinned if he hadn't been so preoccupied. As it was, he could only take the wild abandon so long before he was forced to assert control. If he was going to finish this, he needed to breathe after all.

Exerting his weight, he anchored Wyatt's pelvis against the fridge with his forearm and drew back a little. He used his tongue to soothe the retreat, but from the sobs that filled the air around him, he knew Wyatt was straining to hit that next plateau.

Zach's finger pressed deeper into Wyatt's ass, seeking and then finding his prostate. Certain he now had Wyatt hanging by a thread, he sucked in a load of air and plunged, burying Wyatt's cock down his throat. Wyatt screamed Zach's name. His entire body tensed and then Zach felt it—a hot pulse that started at the base before shooting its way up the shaft. Within seconds the first load of semen filled his mouth. He drank greedily, aware that this was probably the only time in his life he'd ever get to give and take from someone without any barriers between them.

When it was over, he released Wyatt's semi-erect dick from his mouth. He knew he should stand up, move away, but he didn't have the energy. The stupid truth was, he didn't want to let go. So he rested his head against Wyatt's thigh and hung on for a few moments. Wyatt's hand stroked Zach's head, lulling him into a false sense of security he couldn't afford to have, but was so damn nice.

"You're leaving in the morning, aren't you?"

The question, spoken clearly and distinctly, snapped Zach out of the state of lethargy he'd nearly succumbed to. Wrenching his head away from Wyatt's touch, Zach scrambled to his feet. Wyatt held his gaze, waiting.

"Yes," Zach finally said.

"Then you better strip, baby, because we aren't nearly finished."

The next morning, Zach woke to the sounds of Wyatt working on a new piece at the keyboard. He headed to the washroom, paused at the edge of the living room and then thought better of saying hello when Wyatt kept his back turned. He showered and packed all the while wondering how he was going to say good-bye. He couldn't just walk out without saying something. He wheeled his case to the door and then walked back into the living room.

Before he could speak, Wyatt stopped playing and shifted his position on the bench so he faced Zach.

"Despite what I see every time I sit down to play, the world isn't black and white."

A white-hot rage speared Zach in the gut. He didn't need this psychological mumbo-jumbo or the invisible strings that came with it.

"You going to spout some crap about how I'll never forget you?"

Wyatt's facial features tightened. "No."

He actually sounded sincere.

"Well, fine." Zach paused, because he'd honestly expected some kind of battle. "Thanks. For everything." The words were totally inadequate, but they were the best he could do.

Wyatt didn't acknowledge them, just sat there. With a nod, Zach turned and headed back to the door. He had his hand on the doorknob when he heard footsteps behind him.

"You can leave me, Zach Richards, but you can't run away from who you are."

Somehow Zach made it out onto the street where the taxi he'd ordered was waiting for him. He endured the long drive to the airport in stoic silence. Shoving a large tip

into the driver's hand, he entered the terminal, dragging his suitcase behind him. Instead of heading for the check-in, however, he found the nearest washroom.

This morning he'd put on the one suit he'd left hanging in Wyatt's closet. He hadn't bothered to unpack the rest, buying a few casual clothes for his two-week vacation. Unzipping his case, he stuffed his two pairs of jeans, four T-shirts and the jacket he'd bought into a plastic bag. He closed his suitcase and, dumping the clothes near the garbage can, he walked away.

Chapter Five

Zach woke to the awareness that he was lying in an otherwise empty bed. From the intensity of light streaming in through the narrow gap in the drapes, it seemed clear the day had started without him.

Crap.

Heart pounding, he sat up, ignoring the sheet, which fell to his waist leaving his chest bare. Wyatt, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, looked up from the magazine he was reading. He was sitting in the single armchair, the lamp on behind him so he could see without opening the drapes.

“How’s your leg?” Wyatt looked well-rested and concerned, if the lines marring his forehead were any indication.

Zach clenched the sheets in his hand and tried to get his brain up to speed. He didn’t remember falling asleep the night before. Didn’t remember waking up during the night, so he had no idea where Wyatt had slept. And he sure as hell didn’t want to be too obvious by glancing over at the pillow next to him to see if it had a dent in it.

Crap.

“Fine. Thanks.” God, he felt awkward and perversely happy because he was with Wyatt. He needed his head examined. “I’ll freshen up and get changed.”

“Good, I’m getting hungry. I didn’t really eat dinner last night.”

Zach paused, his legs hanging over the side of the bed. “Sounds good,” he said, striving for a casual tone.

“We need to talk.”

Him and Wyatt talking—the very thing Zach had hoped for last night when he’d taken a gamble and returned to the club. In many ways it would have been easier to say

what needed to be said in that dim room with a table and a glass of scotch between them and a crowd of people around them. Which just went to show that he hadn't learned a damn thing if he was still trying to hide out.

Well, he was done running – from the truth, from life, from his feelings.

If he blew it, fine. He blew it. But at least he would walk away knowing he'd given it his best shot – however lousy that was. That he'd fought to reclaim a relationship that meant everything to him.

"Yeah," he said, shoving himself off the bed. "We have to talk."

He limped toward the bathroom. Even though it was not his intention to provoke sympathy, hope stirred inside him when he noticed Wyatt put his magazine on the desk and shift forward in his seat, as though wondering if he should offer to help. Before he could act, however, a phone rang. Not the one belonging to the hotel and, from the ring tone, not Zach's cell, either. Wyatt jumped up, pulled a carry on that was sitting on the desk over and pulled out his cell. With a quick nod at Zach, who'd reached the bathroom door, he simultaneously flipped the lid and turned aside.

"Hello, sweetheart."

Zach closed the bathroom door and leaned against it. Absently, he looked down at his hand. It was shaking.

Crap.

Logically, he knew "sweetheart" could be anybody. It was Wyatt's nature to be affectionate. To assign nicknames to his friends both male and female. At least that had been the case among the few of Wyatt's friends Zach had met six years ago and he presumed that habit hadn't changed. But factor in the way Wyatt's voice had turned husky on a dime, the way he'd lengthened the first syllable of the word and the fact that "sweetheart" was an endearment, and logic meant squat.

* * * * *

"Thanks."

The sound of Zach's voice provided Wyatt with yet another excuse to glance at the man walking beside him. The initial impression he'd had last night of an older version of the Zach Richards he'd known six years ago had been accurate. But he'd also missed some significant changes. Ones that had become all too noticeable during their early afternoon stroll through the Jardin des Tuileries.

This Zach was leaner and the lines bracketing his eyes weren't from laughter but endurance in the face of pain and suffering. Then there was the cane.

It elicited all sorts of protective feelings inside Wyatt that he didn't want to confront. Fortunately, Zach was as tough and stubborn as Wyatt remembered, which helped suppress Wyatt's idiotic tendencies. Zach would probably knock Wyatt on his ass for suggesting he take it easy. Three times already, Wyatt had consciously adjusted his pace, well aware that Zach wasn't about to ask.

"You're welcome."

Wyatt started, suddenly aware he'd stopped walking and listening. "What?"

Zach gestured towards himself. "I say 'thanks' and you say," here he pointed at Wyatt, "'you're welcome'. It's called a conversation."

Something they'd both avoided for the rest of the morning after agreeing they needed to talk.

"Not sure what I'd be saying 'you're welcome' for," Wyatt admitted, wondering if he'd missed more of the conversation than he'd previously thought.

Zach quirked his lips. The expression couldn't quite be called a smile. "For agreeing to visit the Louvre. It can't have been easy."

True, Zach's request, over breakfast, had come as a surprise. But not as unpleasant a one as Zach seemed to think. In fact, Wyatt had gone to the museum a couple of times after their disastrous visit and before he'd left Paris for good. Of course it was also true that he'd avoided the Galerie d'Apollon each time, today's visit being the exception.

Instead of evoking painful memories, the sight of the familiar paintings had only served to remind him of the reason he'd returned to Paris. He'd come back to say good-bye. To pack up the memories of his time with Zach and store them away precisely so he could move on with his life.

It seemed the ultimate irony that Zach should unexpectedly appear in his life now. That the rough sex they'd shared last night had been better and far more meaningful than any of the shallow encounters Wyatt had had in the intervening years. That the sight of Zach sleeping in his bed could stir up his possessive instincts. That, six years later, he, Wyatt James, would be forced to admit that he still loved this man.

The admission knocked the wind out of him faster than a ball zooming into home plate. He loved Zach Richards.

That did not mean that he was idiotic enough to dismiss the fact that Zach had walked into his life six years ago and promptly walked out of it two weeks later. Or that history had a nasty habit of repeating itself.

No matter how he felt, he was not going to repeat the mistakes of his past. Except that he already had, which is how he'd gotten himself into this mess. Just like he had six years ago, last night he'd invited Zach Richards back to his place.

Shit.

He started walking again. But with each step he took he was keenly aware of Zach's pale blue eyes assessing him. A moment later, he heard the rhythmic thump thump of Zach's cane hitting the pathway as the other man followed. Automatically, he slowed his pace.

"Wyatt, I think it's time we —"

"You like Ferris wheels?" Despite what he'd said this morning, no way was he ready to talk right now.

"What?"

"Ferris wheels," he repeated pointing to the edge of the park where an enormous, white wheel several hundred feet high rose above the rooftops of Paris.

"Never been on one."

Wyatt couldn't contain his incredulity, particularly since he'd considered his question rhetorical. "Never? Not even as a kid?"

Zach's knuckles were white where he gripped the handle of his cane, his eyes fixed on the giant wheel. "Went to Canada's Wonderland once. Rode a few roller coasters."

His voice was flat and didn't invite inquiry, reminding Wyatt of the way Zach used to shut down whenever they'd gotten remotely close to talking about their families and lives back home. The notion just pissed Wyatt off more. He hadn't liked being shut out six years ago. Liked it even less now.

"You afraid of heights or do you want to take a ride?"

No doubt about it. He was being a belligerent bastard. Goaded Zach into a reaction. Any reaction.

What he got was silence. Zach didn't so much as move a muscle. Just stared at the Ferris wheel, making Wyatt wonder if he'd actually managed to hit a sore spot. Maybe Zach was afraid of heights.

"No. Yes."

Wyatt quickly computed the terse answers and together they set off toward the small fairground. The silence between them was far less companionable than it had been ten minutes ago.

Ten minutes later, the car they were sitting in swung slightly as it jerked to a halt about eye level with the rooftops of the houses across the street. He and Zach sat opposite each other. Zach's right leg was stretched out, his foot propped on the edge of the cane, his calf touching Wyatt's in the confined space. A tenuous connection between them at best, particularly as Zach was staring at the Paris skyline.

As if he'd heard the direction of Wyatt's thoughts, his gaze shifted. "You still pissed?"

Unable to stop himself, Wyatt snorted in surprise. Okay, so he hadn't exactly hidden his mood. He hadn't expected Zach to call him on it, though. The old Zach of six years ago wouldn't have said anything. Because he had, Wyatt decided to be equally blunt.

"Hell, yes. I don't like hitting brick walls."

The other man held his gaze. For a second, Wyatt figured Zach was going to tell him to fuck off.

"My father doesn't believe in—" Zach's voice broke, but like a stubborn son of a gun he didn't break eye contact.

"Frivolous activities?" Wyatt suggested. He still sounded confrontational even though what he really wanted was to keep Zach talking.

Zach swallowed, licked his lower lip and nodded. "A couple of my friends from university took me to Canada's Wonderland for my twenty-first birthday. We had a good time."

And probably got hell for it afterward from his father. Wyatt wasn't going to ask. Didn't really want to go there. Zach had told him enough. He had a few friends whose parents were never going to win a parenting award, which gave him a few unpleasant ideas.

Seconds later, the car they were in swung crazily for a minute as the wheel started up again. Across from him, Zach gripped the edge of the seat, his gaze once again focused on the sights of Paris.

Shit. Just as we were making progress.

So maybe he did want that talk after all.

Maybe he was a love-struck idiot, because for the last twenty minutes just about the only thing he'd thought about was the fact that, while there were definite similarities to

the Zach of six years ago, this Zach was different. The brief conversation they'd just had proved it.

The ride was short. In a matter of minutes they hung, suspended at the top of the wheel and, Wyatt had to admit, the view was spectacular. Not enough to distract him, though.

"What about you?" Wyatt asked.

Zach faced him, but didn't say a word.

"You've been in a piss-poor mood since breakfast."

Across from him, Zach shrugged. A little too casually. "The phone call this morning. You seemed happy. Good news?"

Automatically, Wyatt grinned good-naturedly. All the while his brain computed what it had just heard. Zach Richards, the man who'd claimed him for two weeks and then walked away without a backward glance or phone call, sounding jealous. What's more, he'd asked a personal question. The Zach of six years ago wouldn't have dared for fear Wyatt would have asked one right back, which is exactly what had just happened.

What the hell was going on? He'd come to Paris to say good-bye to the past, but it seemed as though Zach was in Paris to—

He dug out his phone and flipped it open, rather than take his thoughts to their logical conclusion. Zach wanted answers, by God he'd get them. Punching a few buttons, Wyatt turned the small screen so that it faced Zach and handed him the phone.

"Yeah," he said, settling back in his seat once Zach was looking at the picture. "Very good news. Jamie managed to build a house or a castle, Daisy's not too sure which, without knocking the bricks over before he'd finished."

"Daisy?" Zach asked without looking up.

"Jamie's mother."

"The boy in the picture."

"Yes. Personally, I think it's a castle. Jamie likes castles. Has a picture book about them. What do you think?"

Zach finally looked at him. "Who is he? He can't be your —"

"My what? My son?" He leaned forward. "Why not? You walked out six years ago without finding out what I wanted. Without having a damn clue about what makes me tick. And now you want answers. Fine, I'll give you some."

"No, Jamie isn't my son, but that doesn't stop me from wishing every single day that he was. Daisy is my ex-landlady and a good friend. I happened to be the only one around when she needed a labor coach so I stepped in. She named the kid after me and asked me to be his godfather."

He took the phone, hit another button and handed it back. "The happy family. Daisy and Brent were married two weeks ago."

Zach studied the second picture. "The man in the wheelchair, Brent, is Jamie's —"

"Biological father. Yes." Which was why Wyatt had prudently left Santa Rosa before the happy couple returned from their honeymoon.

Zach handed the phone back. "Do you resent him?"

"Hell no." Wyatt snapped the lid closed and put the phone away. "Brent's a decent man. He worked hard to do right by Daisy and Jamie this past year and I support that."

He stopped talking before the lump in his throat choked him and turned his gaze out across the skyline. Sometime in the last few moments, while he hadn't been paying attention, the wheel had started its descent.

Shit.

He'd nearly spilled his guts. Been on the verge of telling Zach his deepest dream. Had probably said too much already. The absurd thing about it was, he'd never thought about being a father until Jamie's arrival in his life.

Once upon a time, he'd envisioned eventually meeting someone and settling down, but he'd never considered creating a family of his own. Never even thought much about what it meant to be part of a family, until he wasn't.

Now he often wondered what it had cost his parents to watch him go out into the world and claim his independence, knowing he wouldn't be coming back except to visit. He decided it was at once the most sorrowful and yet the most rewarding experience a person could have. And he wanted it, even though he didn't have a clue how he was going to accomplish it.

He looked Zach in the eye. "I didn't come back to Paris to start something with you."

* * * * *

Two seconds after Zach walked into Wyatt's room, he dropped his cane on the floor. The carpet muffled the dramatic impact, but he didn't much give a crap. He pulled his T-shirt over his head and threw it onto a nearby chair. He was undoing his belt buckle when Wyatt finally noticed the action.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Wyatt's confused gaze wandered between Zach's chest and the rumpled tee, like he'd never seen either before.

"Undressing, what does it look like?" He finished unbuckling his belt and unsnapped his jeans.

"What the hell for?"

Zach stopped mid-zip and arched one eyebrow. "The cripple needs a nap before he's thrown out onto the street."

"For God's sake, I did not call you a cripple. I merely asked if you wanted to rest your leg. You did a lot of walking today."

Actually, his leg was doing okay after the massage and the decent night's sleep he'd had, along with the fact that he'd been sensible and used his cane today. The dull ache

was an old friend, nothing to take too seriously, merely a caution sign. Regardless, he did not need a nursemaid.

“Fine, I want to rest my leg.”

“And I’m not throwing you out. I just thought—” Wyatt waved his hand in the air as if that would explain everything.

It didn’t explain a damn thing. Not by a long shot.

Emotions he had no name for welled up inside him thick and fast. Stepping forward, he lashed out, shoving Wyatt’s chest with the palm of his hand. The unfamiliar aggression felt good.

“What?”

Caught off-balance and off-guard, Wyatt took a step back. “Zach.”

He shoved Wyatt again. “What did you think?”

The man took another step back. The back of his legs bumped against the foot of the bed and he raised his hands, signaling he wasn’t going to fight back. Probably too chicken-shit scared to hit a cripple.

“That you weren’t ‘starting something’ when you brought me back here last night and fucked me against the wall?”

“Okay, I get it.” Instead of conciliatory, Wyatt’s voice now sounded cold. “You’re angry.”

“That another one of your brilliant thoughts, James? ‘Cause I have to tell you—”

A phone rang, effectively interrupting anything else Zach had to say. Not the one belonging to the hotel and not Wyatt’s cell phone either. Turning his back on Wyatt, Zach stalked over to the desk—ignoring the protest from his leg for moving so fast. He’d set his cell down on it before undoing his pants. Picking the phone up, he glanced at the caller display. With a frown, he simultaneously flipped open the phone and twisted around to face Wyatt.

“Bonjour.”

Across from him, Wyatt's gaze focused on Zach's face and he frowned.

"Oui. Oui." Since it didn't seem he was going to get another word in edgewise, he simply held out the phone.

"Jean-Louis. He's in a panic and speaking too quickly, but I think there's a problem with a piano player."

Wyatt accepted the phone without a word, but he kept his eyes on Zach while he listened to Jean-Louis.

Disgusted with himself for losing control, Zach turned away and headed around the side of the bed nearest the wall. The last thing he wanted was to pick a fight with Wyatt. He turned down the covers of the bed and glanced over at Wyatt, who was now facing away from him. The other man was still engrossed in the phone call, which would probably result in Wyatt heading out to the club for a gig tonight, if Jean-Louis' persuasive manner was anything to go by.

Fighting a rising panic that Wyatt's words on the Ferris wheel meant he'd never stood a chance, Zach shucked his jeans. Too tired to search his backpack for his track pants, after a moment's hesitation, he took off his briefs and left them on the floor next to his pants. Whether they were phantom or real sensations, his right leg retained a peculiar sensitivity to restrictive clothing.

Climbing onto the bed, he lay back against the cool sheet and soft pillow. Before he could plan his next move, or pull a sheet over him, Wyatt snapped the phone closed and tossed it onto the bed. In one fluid motion, he shoved his jeans to the floor and then pulled his T-shirt over his head. The tee hit the floor about the same time Wyatt caught sight of him on the bed.

Not surprisingly, Zach's cock stirred at the sight of Wyatt nearly naked. Smooth chest, hard lines, small, dark nipples, flat stomach, long legs and the sizable bulge between them – the man definitely looked sexy as hell. Always had.

Zach levered himself into a semi-sitting position and reached for the sheet. He might have screwed up this chance with Wyatt, but he did at least know fucking him wasn't the answer.

"I take it you're playing piano at the club tonight."

Instead of answering him, Wyatt grabbed the sheet and tugged it out of Zach's hands.

"What the hell did you do to yourself?"

Apparently, the question was rhetorical because Wyatt didn't wait for Zach to answer. He crawled onto the bed beside him. Resigned, Zach let his head fall back on the pillow.

Chapter Six

"I got a tattoo," Zach said, stating the obvious.

Wyatt's response was less than complimentary. Zach closed his eyes and willed his dick to subside. Fucking Wyatt might not be the answer, but that didn't stop Zach from craving the physical connection it would bring. Providing him with a place to start when words failed him, as they had on that Ferris wheel.

The truth was he hadn't known how to react—to the picture of the little boy, the vehemence of Wyatt's words, or the sense of longing behind them. The Wyatt of six years ago had been intense and passionate about his music. About him, too, but Zach had never considered—

Hell, until very recently, he'd never ever considered sharing his life with someone, let alone building a family with them. If it wasn't for Celeste, his sister, and her two boys, he wouldn't even know what a "normal" family looked like.

His eyes snapped open and his entire body jerked from the unexpectedly light touch when Wyatt grazed Zach's thigh with the tips of his fingers.

"Did it hurt?" Wyatt asked.

It was a musical staff. A treble clef was nestled into the indentation between the hip and thigh bones of his bum leg. The exact spot where, each night for two weeks, six years ago, Wyatt had placed a possessive hand after spooning close against Zach's back. The five parallel lines of the staff angled downward across Zach's inner thigh and continued in a spiral around the back of his leg to the front again, where it ended approximately seven inches above his knee.

As for the process hurting, Zach supposed there had been pain involved, but not nearly as much as when his thigh had been broken. He didn't say that though. Merely shrugged and waited for the other shoe to drop.

“Holy —”

Quite deliberately, Wyatt traced the notes adorning the lines and spaces with his fingers. Zach could almost hear him humming the melody in his head. The distraction didn’t work for Zach. He already knew the tune by heart. Knew this man by heart.

The slightly musky odor of Wyatt’s skin, the salty taste of his sleek flesh and the feel of hard muscles—those were the elemental links that Zach understood. That he could touch and linger over so that Wyatt wouldn’t have any doubts about how much Zach wanted this chance. Any chance.

Frustrated and out of patience, he grabbed the back of Wyatt’s head and pulled it down until their faces were mere centimeters apart. His heart thumped hard against his chest at the golden flare of desire that sparked in Wyatt’s eyes.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s the song you were writing six years ago.”

Wyatt licked his lower lip. “I never finished it.”

“Too bad. It was good.”

Crap. And how stupid was this conversation, particularly when all he wanted was to kiss Wyatt? What’s more, Wyatt didn’t look as if he’d object.

Gripping the back of Wyatt’s head, Zach closed the gap, brushing the seam of Wyatt’s lips with his tongue. He was rewarded when a low groan rumbled up from Wyatt’s chest.

Good idea.

The kiss deepened. Their tongues dueled, hungry for the taste of each other. Learning. Exploring. Remembering, until they were forced to seek air. Ducking his head lower, Zach nuzzled one of Wyatt’s nipples—already taut and the color of a copper penny. He sucked the nub into his mouth, rolling it around with his tongue and tugging it a little until Wyatt squirmed.

Definitely a good idea.

The palm of his free hand glided across Wyatt's flat stomach, seeking and then finding the waistband of the man's briefs. He tugged them down—a none-too-gentle demand. Wyatt caught Zach's wrist in his hand.

"Wait—"

No, that was exactly what he'd been doing. What he did not want to do now that he had Wyatt beside him on the bed. He rolled toward Wyatt, forcing the other man back against the mattress.

"Shut up." He whispered the words against Wyatt's mouth. "Right now I'm the one on top."

Wyatt's sharp laugh was followed by a brief but intense scuffle as both men fought to shove the cotton barrier away. The second it was gone, Wyatt clamped his hands around Zach's back, one hand sliding down his spine to the curve of his ass. Zach moaned at the sweet familiarity of the move. Wyatt's cock was harder than a steel nail and already slick with pre-cum. Zach's own erection was pressing insistently against the other man's stomach. He gently rocked his hips, increasing the delicious friction between the two hard bodies. One of them moaned. Maybe it was him. Before he completely lost himself in sensation, he grasped both sides of Wyatt's head in his hands and stared down at him.

"Do it," Wyatt said before Zach could ask.

The intensity of Wyatt's gaze—his eyes had turned a dark, rich brown—trapped Zach in that space between the present reality and past memories. Of the late nights and early mornings they'd spent in bed exploring each other's bodies. Lazy investigations that usually ended with sweat-slicked skin and a whisker burn or two.

Hyper aware of Wyatt's hands on his body, Zach moved. Found and caught a slow, steady rhythm that stirred the embers flaring to life in Wyatt's eyes. He thrusts became more forceful, edging toward the roughness Wyatt liked. He liked. The bedsprings squeaked in protest and he grinned.

"Ass," Wyatt said.

"You want a piece?" He bent his head and whispered a graphic suggestion against Wyatt's lips before invading his mouth.

Wyatt's hand clamped down on Zach's ass cheek, the tips of his fingers delving into the crease, and then he pushed back. The spike of pleasure caught Zach right in the balls, pulling them tighter against his body. The resulting resolution was inevitable after that. It was only a matter of which one of them would blow first. Zach clenched his jaw, his eyes half closed in a concerted effort to hold out just a little longer.

He and Wyatt were so tightly locked in each other's embrace he actually felt the pulse of Wyatt's dick as it erupted hot, sweet liquid across their bellies. He bowed his head, the muscles of his neck cording with tension as he lost the will to fight and cum shot up through his slit.

Sweaty, breathless, he lay on top of Wyatt already regretting the imminent separation. He held out a little longer, even though he had to be crushing Wyatt against the mattress. His mind reeled, connecting and disconnecting images from the past and this morning. His thoughts returning time and again to the Ferris wheel ride.

"Wyatt." He whispered the word. Prayed for strength. "I know I hurt you when I walked out six years ago. I'm sorry." He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "But don't you think I hurt myself, too?"

Wyatt jackknifed into a sitting position. "Damn you, Zach Richards. What do you want me to say?"

He scrambled off the mattress, stalking the few feet to the window before pivoting to face the bed.

"That I love you? That for six years I've loved you, a man who walked out because he didn't have the guts to face the truth about himself? About us?"

Zach pushed himself into a sitting position. "I'm here now."

The words were terribly inadequate, even if the sentiment was sincere, but he simply didn't know what else to say. He'd apologized, but from the looks of it, that wasn't going to be enough either.

Wyatt threaded the fingers of one hand through his already mussed hair. His gaze darted around the room before landing on Zach. The lines of his mouth set into a characteristic firmness. He'd resolved on a course of action and he wasn't about to be swayed.

Crap.

Wyatt's hand dropped to his side. "I love you, Zach," he said, his voice quiet, steady. "But I know from experience that isn't enough."

* * * * *

The singer bowed and then threw her arms open, welcoming the audience's applause. She stepped back two paces and turned, blowing an air kiss in Wyatt's direction. He stood and bowed toward her and then the audience, acknowledging her thanks.

All in all the gig had been a success, once he'd calmed the singer's fears by proving he already knew most of the pieces in her repertoire. And he'd enjoyed listening to her sultry voice switching from English to French as she flirted with the audience and him.

He waited a few moments and, as expected, the audience encouraged her to sing an encore. Dutifully he took his seat at the piano. She turned toward him again and mouthed the title of one of the two songs they'd arranged for just such an eventuality. He nodded and played the opening notes.

As it had been all evening, his playing was professional, clean and merely competent. Not that anyone else but Jean-Louis would notice. They'd come to hear the singer, not him. With one exception—the man sitting at the fourth table against the wall. Wyatt hadn't seen him and Jean-Louis hadn't said anything, but he knew Zach was sitting at that table. Had been aware of him from the moment he'd entered the club about halfway through the evening. He was impossible to ignore.

Damn the man.

The song ended and the singer took another bow. She gestured toward him and he stood, smiled and nodded his head. And then it was all over. The lights on the stage dimmed and he quickly walked away toward the back of the club. Jean-Louis stood waiting for him in the hallway of the modest backstage.

Wyatt waved his hand dismissively before Jean-Louis could open his mouth. He'd hoped for a couple of minutes alone to come off the performance high to consider his next move.

"You're welcome. Glad I could help out."

"Why was Zach Richards here with his bag? I thought you two—" Jean-Louis' descriptive wave of his hand encompassed all sorts of possibilities.

The first thing Wyatt computed was the word "bag", which obviously meant Zach's backpack.

Damn the man. He'd up and left. Again.

And then Wyatt realized what else Jean-Louis had said.

"What do you mean was? He's gone?"

The Frenchman nodded.

Wyatt's fingers flexed and then curled into fists. He desperately wanted to hit something—the wall next to him for starters, but he doubted Jean-Louis would be pleased with the hole it would leave.

Where the hell did Zach hope to find somewhere to stay this late at night? He needed a bed. He needed to properly rest his leg.

He obviously did not need Wyatt.

"It's been a long night. I'm going back to my hotel room."

Several hours later that night, or very early the next morning depending on one's point of view, Wyatt sat in the armchair, in the dark, gazing at the empty bed. His thoughts were on the phone call he'd received this morning from Daisy Chadwick. Sort of.

* * * * *

Two Weeks Earlier, Santa Rosa, California

"May I have this dance?"

If anyone other than the bride had asked him, Wyatt would have refused. But he couldn't say no to Daisy McDermott, now Chadwick. He'd been her best man, after all. Taking hold of her slim hand, he led her out onto the dance floor. Even though the band was playing a slow number, he held her at arms' length for a moment.

"You look..." he paused as it dawned on him exactly how she did look. "Radiant."

"Thank you, kind sir," she said as he drew her into his arms.

He pulled her a little closer and she settled her head on his chest. The other best man, the groom's brother, was dancing with his wife. Despite the growing lateness of the hour, both sets of parents were also gliding smoothly around the dance floor, attesting to their decades-long partnerships.

He twirled Daisy around the small space, relieved that he wasn't overwhelmed by a floor-length extravaganza of lace and satin. The bride was wearing white—a dress that swayed in elegant folds around her slim calves. While the choice certainly fit with Daisy's role as the mother of a very active three-and-a-half year old, it served another practical purpose. The hem hung well clear of the wheels of her new husband's sporty-style wheelchair.

"Having fun yet?"

He glanced down at the mischievous smile that lit Daisy's face. "Yes, of course."

"Liar." A note of concern was clear behind the teasing tone.

"My parents danced like that," he said, nodding toward hers.

Daisy's slim hand tightened on his arm. "Oh, Wyatt."

He shook his head. "Brief bout of nostalgia, that's all."

He had no intention of ruining Daisy's day with his melancholy thoughts. Though he'd just indicated otherwise, his morose musings had little to do with the loss of his father and mother, who'd died five and four and a half years ago, respectively. It was his own future he was worried about.

"So are you going to tell me, or do I have to beat it out of you?"

"And ruin your dress?"

His attempt at lighthearted banter was greeted by Daisy's no-nonsense stare. The same one she used on her son whenever he attempted to deny his latest foolhardy escapade. Obviously, she hadn't bought his slide into sentimentality.

"It's time for me to move on," he said, surprised at how easy it was to voice the decision he'd reached this morning while staring at himself in the bathroom mirror.

"I already told you, I have no intention of kicking you out of the apartment. Brent agrees."

"I doubt that," he said, matter-of-factly. Now that he had one, the groom deserved to have his family to himself without a tenant hovering in the wings.

Wyatt gazed over the top of her head, searching the edge of the crowd. Sure enough, Brent was watching his wife. Whenever they were together, Brent rarely let Daisy out of his sight. Wyatt envied the look of hunger mixed with raw joy that lit Brent's eyes whenever Daisy was in the same room with him.

"He won't forget you, Wyatt," Daisy said, softly, misinterpreting the focus of his stare.

He was James—Wyatt's godson and namesake, who was currently curled up contentedly on his father's lap. Circumstance and fate—otherwise known as the unpredictability of birth—had resulted in Wyatt's hasty substitution as Daisy's labor coach. It had been one of the most awesome experiences of his life. And, while Daisy had assumed the mantle of single-parenthood with a vengeance and the support of family members, he'd been as protective as any father during the first two-and-a-half years of the boy's life. He'd stepped aside without a qualm once it was clear that Brent

was back in Daisy's life for good and eager to make up for lost time by being a father to the son he hadn't known he had.

That didn't mean Wyatt was some kind of heroic saint. It had hurt like hell to see the little boy run to Brent and hear the word "Daddy" on his lips. A word Wyatt was unlikely ever to hear.

"I know," he said, and hoped to God it was the truth. "But I still need to move out. Our arrangement was supposed to be temporary, remember?"

She grimaced. "I needed the money and you were the only one of my friends who—"

"Was downsizing," he said with a smile.

Six months after his mother's death, he'd finally sold the monstrosity known as the family home. But, given the number of gigs he played out of town, he hadn't been willing to commit to buying a new place for himself just yet. Daisy's offer had provided the perfect short-term solution. One that had stretched to four years—past time for Wyatt to make some tough decisions about where he was going with his life.

"Have you been looking for a place?"

He shook his head. "I plan to do a little traveling first. I'll be gone by the time you and Brent get back from your honeymoon."

Daisy's eyes flared with cautious curiosity, as if she didn't quite trust his motives. Smart woman. Fortunately the song came to an end before she could ask any more questions. That didn't stop her from voicing a familiar edict as he escorted her back to her husband.

"Wyatt. Don't go too far. Jamie and I *are* your family." Daisy's hand tightened imperceptibly on his arm. "Brent knows that too."

He nodded. Given Brent's recent struggles to put his life back together after an accident had left him paralyzed, the man probably did know all too well how much he

owed Wyatt and the rest of his family for looking after Daisy and Jamie. Not that Wyatt ever planned to take advantage of the situation. That wasn't his style.

Just before they reached the tables, Daisy turned to him.

"I suppose this means I should tender my resignation."

"Resignation?"

"Well," she said with a wink. "I'm hardly a member in good standing of Heartbreak Anonymous after what happened this afternoon."

He saw through her attempt at a jest. In typical Daisy fashion she was agonizing over how he'd react now that she'd deserted the support group he'd started six years ago. Words from the ceremony flashed through his mind. He tucked them aside and, with another glance at Brent, smiled down at Daisy.

"Consider yourself resigned." He counted three beats of music. "To the matrimonial estate."

Instead of laughing, she clutched his arm a little tighter.

"Tell me," she commanded in that serious tone he knew so well.

He shook his head. "Inappropriate stuff."

She didn't say a word, simply stood there waiting.

"Just remembering all the talks we had. You had, I listened to."

"They got me through a tough time – what about them?"

He quirked his lips in a poor attempt at a smile. "You don't give up, do you?"

She looked over at Brent. "I'm glad I didn't," she murmured before turning back to him. "Is that what has you worried?"

"He cut you off. Wasn't around when you needed him."

"Brent's here now, Wyatt."

"And that's good enough?"

"Yes. He could have died, Wyatt. Instead he fought his demons and came back asking for a second chance. That's not a gift I take lightly. And I also know we're not just talking about Brent. There were plenty of nights you talked and I listened, remember."

He did, all too clearly.

"Don't go there, Daisy," he warned.

"All right," she said, softly. "Thanks for the dance."

"My pleasure."

His smile was genuine as he watched Daisy walk over to her new husband. He spun away the moment she leaned down to brush Brent's mouth with her own, before the green-eyed monster completed its chokehold around Wyatt's heart. That didn't prevent him from seeing Brent's hand slide possessively across her hip.

What would it be like to have someone who loved you that much? Who couldn't stop touching you?

Wyatt stalked off in the direction of the cash bar.

It was definitely time to exorcise the ghost from his past and move on. To face up to the fact that he'd long ago found – and lost – Mr. Right.

* * * * *

Wyatt woke to the startled realization he'd been dozing. He rolled his head from side to side and stretched his arms to work out the kinks. Now fully awake, he shoved his lean frame out of the cramped armchair and paced the width of the room.

Brent's here now. I'm here now.

Brent's here now. I'm here now.

Stupid, fucking ass.

That's what he was, a stupid, fucking ass.

By the end of the two weeks they'd spent together six years ago, he'd known that Zach was trapped in his life. Known Zach couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag let alone recognize he had options—Zach's story yesterday afternoon about his father proved that. As a result, six years ago he'd let Zach walk out.

He'd been a stupid, fucking ass back then too.

He'd expected two weeks of marathon sex and a casual declaration of love to counteract a lifetime of conditioning. And had promptly been devastated when Zach hadn't bothered to once look back.

So what had he done?

He'd sat on some Ferris wheel and told Zach he hadn't come back to Paris to start something with him. Then he'd stood in this room and told Zach he loved him but that being here wasn't enough.

Zach who, after receiving a phone call from Jean-Louis, had come racing back to the club because Wyatt was there. Zach who'd had an entire four bars of a song Wyatt had been writing six years ago tattooed on his leg. Zach who'd calmly said, "I'm here now."

Given a second chance, Wyatt had been so busy protecting his damn fragile ego he'd lost Mr. Right all over again. And this time he had no one to blame but himself.

Brent's here now. I'm here now.

He hadn't really listened to Daisy Chadwick two weeks ago and he hadn't paid attention when Zach had said practically the same words right here in this room yesterday afternoon. Worse, he suspected Daisy knew he hadn't heard what she'd said. Nor, despite seeing the signs, had he bothered to investigate the reasons for the changes he'd seen in Zach.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, absently rubbing his hands up and down his arms. It wasn't cold in the room, but his arms were covered in goose bumps and he felt slightly nauseous. True, he hadn't really eaten a proper dinner, but he didn't think the lack of food was what caused the symptoms.

Given a second chance, Zach Richards had grabbed it.

Given a second chance, Wyatt James had run scared. Had proven he knew shit-all about love in spite of all his declarations.

How was he any better than Zach's father who, from the little Wyatt knew, placed all kinds of conditions on the love he doled out to his son? No wonder Zach had left again.

He really did have a cancer-like disease growing inside him because he'd dumped six years worth of pent-up, twenty-something angst he'd labeled a broken heart on Zach and expected the man to take it. And stick around just to prove he was worthy.

Shoving himself off the bed, Wyatt walked over to the window and pulled back the drapes. The sun was up and people were already hurrying along the boulevard heading to work. Wyatt placed the palm of his hand against the glass.

Zach was out there somewhere, which meant it wasn't too late. If he was damn lucky, he could have another shot at that second chance and make Zach his.

All Wyatt had to do was call Jean-Louis and get Zach's cell number. Track him down—or go sightseeing.

Absurd as it sounded, the wild idea made sense. During their brief conversation yesterday over breakfast, Zach had admitted he'd been traveling around Europe but hadn't yet revisited the sights of Paris.

All Wyatt had to do was pick the correct location. An easy choice considering he'd orchestrated the tour six years ago.

Chapter Seven

Zach Richards stared at himself long and hard in the bathroom mirror. He looked rumpled and bleary-eyed. A night spent on Jean-Louis' couch had left his bum leg feeling a little stiff. Not that that was anything new. Most mornings it needed a cup of coffee and a couple of laps around his modest apartment before declaring itself in working order. A fact of life he hadn't quite learned to live with but was getting used to because his leg wasn't going to get any better than it was.

No, the issue wasn't with Jean-Louis' couch or the Frenchman's hospitality, which he'd extended the moment he'd discovered Zach in his tiny office at the club. An offer Zach had all too readily accepted, since his round of phone calls hadn't turned up a hotel vacancy. The issue was with Zach himself and the realization that his bum leg might not be the only defective part of his body.

For the second time in six years Wyatt James had told Zach he loved him. Sure this time he'd sounded almost angry about it, resentful even, but with good cause. He was right. His love hadn't been enough six years ago to keep Zach from leaving. And, as of yesterday afternoon a declaration of love still hadn't been enough to make Zach really believe in it.

Leaning over the sink, he splashed water on his face, grabbed a towel and dried off. When he next looked in the mirror, an image of his two nephews appeared beside his. They were a couple of sponges, latching on to words and phrases they repeated endlessly. Several years ago they'd learned the word 'ditto'. For months afterward, whenever Celeste had tucked them into bed with a whispered, "I love you," they'd giggled and said, "Ditto". Then his sister, pretending to look very solemn, would say, "Oh, so you love yourselves, too," causing the twins to laugh hysterically at Mommy's joke.

Her words were no joke. Somehow his baby sister had learned what he never had and was teaching her boys a vastly different message from the one she and Zach had grown up with.

To this day, he'd never told his sister he loved her, for offering him a place to live after he'd left the hospital, for looking after him, for simply being Celeste. In fact, he'd never told anyone he loved them, including the person staring back at him in the mirror. So it had kind of shocked him numb to hear Wyatt utter those three words so passionately.

It had taken the rest of the night for the words to sink in. To not get lost in the swirling black hole that constituted his father's screwed-up definition. For him to realize that he understood the concept better than he'd thought.

Now, facing himself in the mirror, Zach knew that the only way the last three years made any sense was if he called Wyatt at his hotel and told him ditto.

* * * * *

Sightseeing.

Zach surveyed the long line of tourists that snaked under the huge superstructure. Not surprisingly, he didn't spot a six-foot-two man with tousled, sun-kissed hair. That didn't mean that Wyatt James wasn't here, just that Zach hadn't found him yet.

Of course he could have it all wrong, but he didn't think so. The second he'd learned from the hotel reception that Wyatt was out sightseeing, he'd envisioned the Eiffel Tower. It had been one of the first places Wyatt had taken him six years ago. Back then they'd climbed the stairs to the first level. Today, he hoped like hell Wyatt had opted for the elevator.

A while later he purchased his ticket, which entitled him to stand in another line. Soon after, he was zooming upward to the second level of the tower. The observation deck was crowded. He was determined. Halfway around, he spotted a familiar tall, lean form standing next to the railing, apparently admiring the view of the Seine.

He stopped – walking, breathing, thinking coherent thoughts. Just stood there and soaked in the most beautiful sight in all of Paris.

And then his heart thumped against his chest like a kick in the pants.

His cane tapping softly on the floor, he walked over, grasped Wyatt's arm and tugged him around. Wyatt's soft grunt of surprise was all the invitation Zach needed. He leaned forward and kissed him – mouth to mouth, the tip of his tongue teasing the sharp edge of Wyatt's teeth. He smelled man, tasted toothpaste laced with the last vestiges of morning coffee. And then he pulled away.

"Just so you know. I love you too."

"Easy, baby," Wyatt said. His eyes, which were framed by laugh lines, shifted from brown to brilliant green. "People are looking."

"Doubt it," Zach said, not sure what to make of Wyatt's easy good humor or his sudden use of the old endearment, neither of which he'd expected. To cover his confusion, he turned toward the view. "And so what if they are?"

Wyatt resumed his former position, his forearms resting on the railing. "What are a couple of faggots kissing, when you can look at all this, huh?"

He spoke lightly, obviously intending to be funny, but the "f" word made Zach wince. Of course Wyatt noticed.

"Problem, baby?" he asked, deliberately shifting his position until their shoulders touched. His tone was a little less playful.

Zach didn't move away, didn't want to, but he kept his eye firmly fixed on the boats moving up and down the river. This time there were no excuses. It was time to talk.

"You never asked me about my leg."

He felt Wyatt's whole body draw in on itself, puzzled. Then the back of his hand brushed Zach's. "You said you broke it."

That wasn't what he'd said.

“Actually, a guy swinging a steel pipe – at least I’m pretty sure it was a steel pipe – broke it.”

Wyatt reared back and slammed his fists hard against the rail. His roar of rage was partially carried away by the wind, but still, Zach was fairly certain people were now definitely looking at them. He reached out, thought better of it and dropped his hand.

“Calm down,” he said, even though he doubted Wyatt would take him up on the suggestion.

“Calm down,” Wyatt hissed, though he did turn back to the railing. “You expect me to be calm after telling me that some asshole came after you with a steel pipe?”

“Actually it was three assholes. Only one of them had a steel pipe.”

It was easier to be glib than serious. Easier to throw out comments guaranteed to rile Wyatt. To deflect his difficulty with reliving what had happened and the resulting feelings of guilt that by speaking out he had failed his father. Other than to the police and then his therapist, he’d never revealed all the details of the attack – at least the parts he remembered.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” With obvious effort, Wyatt muttered the words under his breath. “We should not be having this conversation here.”

Actually, Zach welcomed the crowds. They provided yet another barrier between him and the vivid memories that still occasionally plagued his dreams.

“You picked the location. I called your hotel this morning only to be told you’d gone out sightseeing.”

“Don’t gloat,” Wyatt said after sucking in a couple of gallons of air. “I came looking for you.”

Zach grabbed hold of that knowledge like a lifeline, just as he’d tried to take their surprisingly easy camaraderie this morning in stride. He’d learned to accept a lot of crap in his life without complaining. So he wasn’t about to question the reason for his sudden good fortune.

Beside him, Wyatt once again settled against the railing, his gaze on Paris. "What happened?" he asked, quietly.

I discovered you were right. That I could leave, but I couldn't escape who I am.

"I came out of the closet."

"Damn it, Zach, don't jerk me around."

"I'm not. I'm trying to explain my decision to leave Paris six years ago."

* * * * *

Wyatt shot Zach a hard look then pushed himself away from the railing.

"Let's go. We're getting out of here."

Zach's pale blue eyes turned flinty with determination and Wyatt knew he was in for an argument if he didn't make his case first.

"I don't know about you, but I could use a drink. And the rest of the story."

To his relief, Zach nodded sharply, picked up his cane, which he'd leaned against the rail, and followed him to the elevators. Despite the crowds of people around them and the group sharing the enclosed ride, the only person Wyatt was aware of was Zach. He desperately wanted to put his arm around the man but resisted the urge.

Instead he savored the public kiss and the quiet but adamant declaration of love. While both these actions had merely reinforced his earlier conclusions that Zach was, indeed, here now, he doubted the other man would be entirely comfortable with extended public displays of affection. Though it was hardly simple affection that drove Wyatt's need.

"You up for a walk?" he asked once they'd exited the elevator. He wanted that drink, but his need to burn off some of the restless tension that zinged through his body was greater.

He bit back a grin at Zach's terse "yes". He didn't give a damn how independent and strong Zach Richards was. From now on Wyatt was going to watch his ass and every other body part.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to add asshole with steel pipe plus *I came out of the closet* and come up with gay bashing. The surprise was that, given his reticence about declaring himself, Zach had been targeted at all. The only conclusion Wyatt could reach was that Zach had somehow been careless and been caught leaving a bar.

Some time later, they stopped at one of the numerous restaurants that lined the street. Zach slid into the banquet seat that ran around the outside wall of the café, shifting slightly when Wyatt slipped in beside him. The seats offered a wide angle view of the booksellers and artists lining the low river wall of the famed Left Bank. An awning shielded them from the glare of the late afternoon sun and Wyatt shoved his sunglasses onto his head before ordering a bottle of wine from a waiter.

After eyeing the sidewalk, he slumped back in his seat and stretched his arm along the back of the banquet around Zach's shoulders. The man stiffened for a microsecond and then relaxed. Encouraged, Wyatt rhythmically rubbed his thumb along one of Zach's shoulder blades. Satisfaction surged through him when Zach didn't pull away as soon as the waiter appeared. Ignoring the interplay between the two men, the waiter uncorked the bottle and, after Wyatt declared it palatable, poured them each a glass.

"To second chances," Wyatt said, lifting his glass for a toast.

After a moment's hesitation, Zach clinked his glass against Wyatt's. "To second chances."

"So tell me," he asked, fairly certain of the answer though it sickened him. "How did three assholes, one of whom had a steel pipe, out you?"

"Because one of the men they beat up and raped died. The police didn't initially link the cases, probably because I was discreet and parked several blocks away from the club."

Wyatt's wineglass hit the table at an angle. He barely managed to right it, but not before the ruby liquid sloshed over the side, staining the wooden tabletop.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Bile churned in his stomach as he realized he had not, in fact, considered all the implications of the scenario. His grip on Zach's shoulder tightened. "Were you..."

Zach slid his hand under the table and rested it on Wyatt's thigh. He shook his head. "They weren't expecting me to fight back. I got a few good punches in and broke someone's nose before I blacked out from the pain. Figure they thought I was already dead and got the hell away."

His gaze shifted to the river. "Before I lost consciousness, I saw the faces of the men who'd attacked me. Us. When I learned about the death of the other victim shortly after I woke up in the hospital, I came forward as a witness. I couldn't, in good conscience, remain silent when this other man had been silenced."

His movements jerky, Wyatt picked up his glass and slugged back half the contents. His initial assessment of Zach had been terrifyingly accurate—a street fighter with a personal code of honor.

He could have died, Wyatt.

Daisy's words, spoken about Brent, came back to haunt him. Three years ago, Zach could have died and Wyatt would likely never have known anything about it. With that thought, any last vestiges of the self-absorbed heartache that had driven him to return to Paris in the first place completely dissolved.

His arm still firmly around Zach's shoulders, he leaned back against the padded seat, closed his eyes and stretched out his legs. The pose was a ruse. His heart rate remained accelerated and his overactive imagination kept conjuring violent images he'd rather not visualize. He caught Zach's scent, laced with a hint of citrus, and breathed deeply.

"Wyatt, are you okay?"

"What the hell do you think?" he asked, opening his eyes. Before Zach could pull away, he caught the man's chin with his free hand. "Jesus, Zach, I could have lost you."

Zach brushed Wyatt's hand away with a nod, only to cradle it in his palm. "You haven't."

This time Wyatt didn't miss the quiet assurance in the other man's words.

"Tell me they got the assholes."

Zach caressed his palm. "You aren't a fighter, Wyatt."

Reaching out, Wyatt grabbed the wine bottle and refilled the two glasses.

"You're right," he said after taking a sip. "I'm not a fighter. If I was, I'd have fought harder to make you stay."

The revelation served to remind him how young he'd been at twenty-six. At the time, he'd considered himself experienced, worldly, all because he lived in a European capital and ate croissants with the natives. In reality, he'd had a lot to learn about life. Probably still did, but over the past six years he'd experienced enough loss to know when to grab hold and hang on to what he did have.

Zach shifted away, his attention on the street. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. It wouldn't have made any difference."

"Why?" Wyatt asked, drawing lazy designs across the top of Zach's back. The man shivered. "Because you owed your bigoted father some kind of misplaced allegiance?"

Zach's eyes flared with surprise, which only served to annoy Wyatt. That day six years ago in the Louvre, he'd made it clear he knew exactly what Zach would be going home to.

"Something like that."

Wyatt didn't press the point. He had the distinct impression that Zach was still wrestling with a few demons where his father was concerned.

"What happened after the attack? All hell broke loose at home?"

"Yes. My brother came to visit me in the hospital exactly once to inform me that it was a good thing that our mother was dead so she didn't have to learn that she had a

faggot for a son. Then he accused me of trying to kill our father with my revelation. Oh yes, and that I was fired."

Unable to contain his outrage, Wyatt straightened, drawing Zach closer to his side. He was way beyond his "fuck, fuck, fuck", mantra. When Zach had introduced his broken leg into the equation this morning, Wyatt had had no idea he'd end up opening a Pandora's Box of ills.

"Your brother fired you?"

"Father. My brother and I worked for him. He still does."

"Isn't that illegal?"

Zach's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Yeah, well, I was hardly going to sue him over it, now was I? When Celeste, my sister, called from B.C. she said it was about time I found a new job."

The picture of Jamie and the one of Daisy and Brent with their son along with the box of condolence cards he still had stashed at his old apartment, flashed through Wyatt's mind. His parents might have died, but he'd always known he was loved, accepted, valued for being who he was. Once they were gone, he'd had a whole damn slew of friends and a few relatives who'd become his support network. His family.

He knew they'd accept Zach without a moment's hesitation. It wouldn't change the past or what had happened to either of them. Wouldn't replace Zach's fucked-up family—at least his sister sounded halfway decent. But it was a base from which they could start—a stepping stone toward building a life together. And that sounded pretty damn good.

"So I moved in with my sister."

"What?" Distracted by his thoughts, Wyatt hadn't heard a word the other man had said.

Zach shook his head. "I said I moved to B.C. after... Started a consulting business, which is growing."

Wyatt perked up at the news Zach had moved to the west coast. "British Columbia, isn't that where you said your sister lives?"

Zach grinned. A genuine one this time that lit up his eyes. "The man *was* listening. Yes, I rent a basement apartment in Celeste's house."

"I just gave up my apartment," Wyatt said, quirking a smile. "I'm temporarily homeless." He shrugged. "Well, except for the hotel room."

"We've already been there. Done that."

Yeah, they had. And, although Zach's tone held a hint of teasing, he watched Wyatt intently. He'd been, Wyatt realized, filling Wyatt in on his life. Opening up and sharing as if—it was time to put the past in its place.

"I don't have a gig until the middle of the summer," he said. Then he took a deep breath and a leap of faith. "Please tell me I'm not making a fool of myself."

Zach's bark of laughter filled him with pure joy.

Zach was here. He was here.

Then Zach leaned forward and kissed him. Short, sweet, and filled with a promise for the future.

"Why don't you come back to Canada with me?"

About the Author

Award winning author Robie Madison loves visiting mystical places and learning about other cultures and peoples. She's spent several years living abroad, allowing her to study human nature in a variety of settings and circumstances. These years also included a few wild exploits of her own. Multi-published, Robie uses her knowledge to enhance her stories. When not traveling or planning her next trip, Robie creates characters that can do the adventuring for her. She can also be found teaching writing courses online.

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