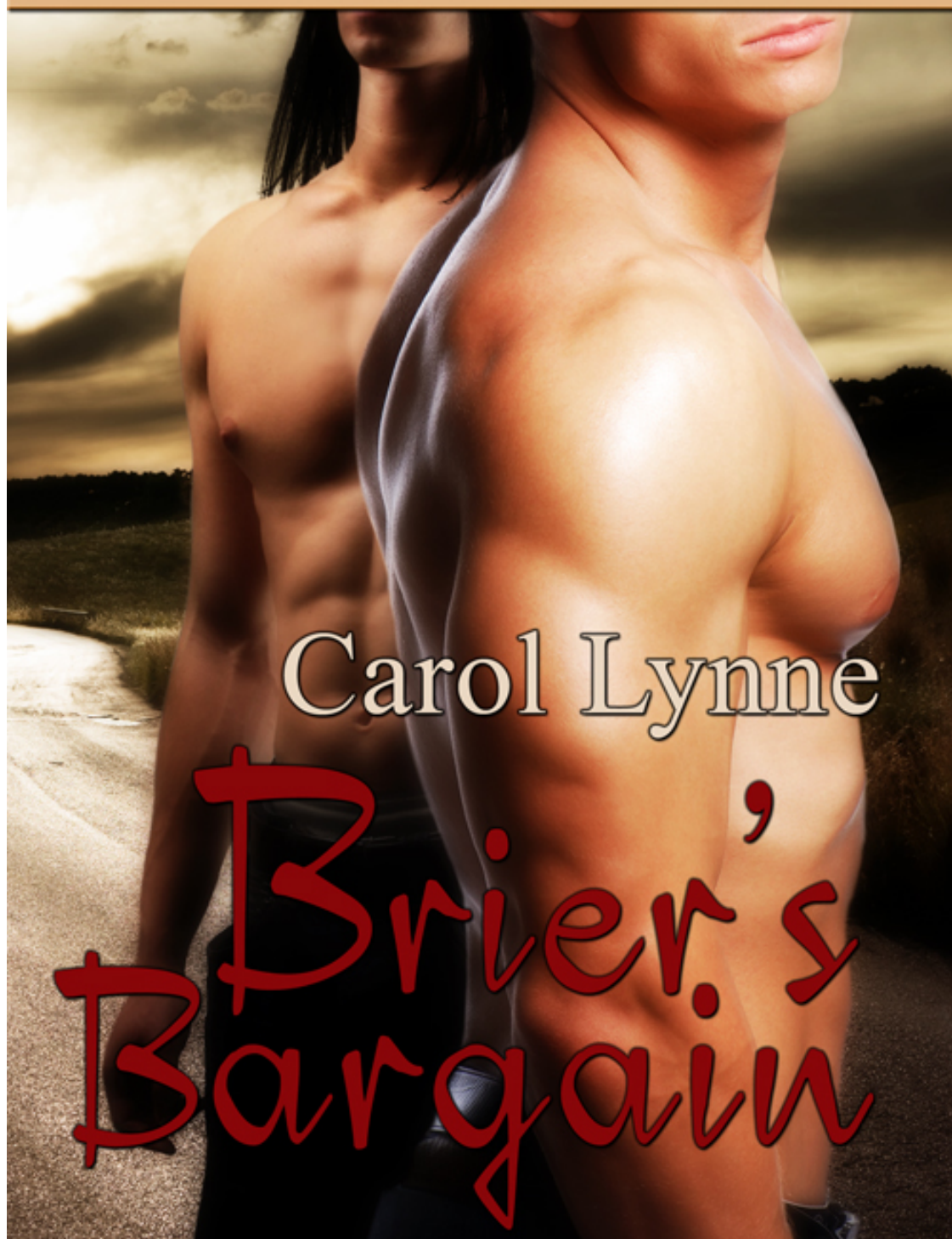




Bodyguards in Love



Carol Lynne

Brier's  
Bargain

A Total-E-Bound Publication



[www.total-e-bound.com](http://www.total-e-bound.com)

Brier's Bargain

ISBN # 978-1-907280-28-3

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Edited by Claire Siemaszkiewicz

Total-E-Bound Publishing

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Published in 2009 by Total-E-Bound Publishing 1 The Corner, Faldingworth Road, Spredlington, Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, LN8 2DE, UK.

**Warning:** This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

**Bodyguards in Love**

**BRIER'S BARGAIN**

**Carol Lynne**

## *Dedication*

Thanks to all the Men in Love readers for their continued support.  
Hopefully, this new series will live up to that one.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Kool-Aid: Kraft Foods Company

Jeep: Chrysler Group LLC

Tilt-A-Whirl : Selner Manufacturing Company

## Chapter One

"...DEFG..." Brier placed the last file in the appropriate spot and closed the drawer. "Do you have anything else for me to do, Sheila?"

"No, sweetie, you're all done. Why don't you see if Bram is ready to call it a day?" the accounting office secretary said with a smile.

"Okay. See you Monday." Brier picked up his coat and started to leave, but Sheila called him back.

"Brier? You forgot your paycheque."

Smiling, Brier turned and picked his cheque up from the table where he'd laid it earlier. "I'm gonna need this, too."

"Yeah? Special plans this weekend?"

"The carnival's in town. Bram and Declan promised to take me."

"Oh, isn't that nice. You have fun."

"I will." With one last grin, Brier went to find his twin brother. Since being released from the psychiatric hospital nearly three years ago, Brier had worked and lived with Bram and his partner Declan.

He knew Bram was taking him to the carnival to help get his mind off of Jackie. Brier stopped walking and rubbed his eyes. Thinking about the only man he'd ever truly been in love with still made his chest hurt. Jackie had said he loved Brier too, but then Jackie had gone away to some foreign country and left him all alone.

Brier knew it was Jackie's job to go train bodyguards for Three Partner's Protection Agency, the company they all worked for, but it didn't make it any easier to be alone. He waved hi to Mac as he passed his office on the way to Bram's.

He poked his head in and smiled. "You almost finished?"

Bram looked up from his computer, those little tiny reading glasses perched on the end of his nose that Brier thought made his brother look so smart. "Yep. Just give me another ten minutes or so."

"Okay. I'm gonna see if Mac's going to the carnival."

Bram nodded and went back to his computer. Brier travelled back down the hall to Mac's office. He leaned against the doorjamb and waited for Mac to notice him.

"Hey," Mac greeted. "How was your day?"

"Good. I got everything filed that Sheila asked me to, and I finished painting the break-room."

"I know. The break-room looks terrific. I'm glad you suggested we go with the yellow. It really livens it up."

Brier felt a blush creep up his cheeks. Mac always said nice things to him, but it was still hard for Brier to take a compliment without getting embarrassed. "Are you going to the carnival?"

Mac smiled and leaned back in his chair. "No, I think we'll skip it this year. You?"

"Yeah. Bram and Declan are taking me." Brier held up his paycheck. "Except I'm paying for myself."

"That's good."

Brier tapped his foot on the leg of the desk. He wanted to ask a question, but didn't want Mac to get mad at him.

"Something wrong, Brier?"

Brier shook his head. "I was just wondering if you'd talked to Jackie? He hasn't called me for a while."

Mac looked uneasy for a moment before his attention shifted to the door. Brier looked over his shoulder at Bram. "You ready?" Bram asked.

"Yeah. I was just asking Mac if he'd talked to Jackie."

Bram took a deep breath. "I imagine Jackie's too busy to call anyone these days. Don't take it personally, brother."

Brier stood and stuffed his cheque back into his coat pocket. He had a feeling something was going on. For several days he'd caught Bram whispering to Declan. A couple of times Brier thought he heard Jackie's name, but when he questioned Bram, his brother always denied it. Maybe Jackie wasn't coming home. What if he fell in love with someone else and didn't want Brier anymore?

He felt that throbbing thing start in his head again. Brier lifted his hand to the thick scar on the side of his skull to rub away the pain, but it didn't help. The scar his father had given to him as a baby was a constant reminder that he'd never be as smart as his twin brother.

How a father could abuse an infant and then just sign over custody to the state when that abuse had permanent repercussions, Brier still didn't understand. At least he was happy his father had been convicted after abuse led to the paralysis of his younger brother Thor. Brier didn't feel a bit sorry that his father had been murdered in prison. He began to rub harder at the raised scar that ran in a large arc above his right ear.

"You okay?" Bram asked, stepping into the office.

"Head hurts."

"Did you take your medicine?"

Brier hated it when Bram tried to baby him. He wasn't a baby. "Yes. It just hurts sometimes when I get upset." He pushed past Bram to the hall. "See you Monday, Mac. If you talk to Jackie, tell him I said hi."

Bram stayed in Mac's office for a few more minutes. Brier decided not to wait on him and went out to stand by Bram's car. It was hot outside, so Brier took off his jacket. He thought it was weird how the mornings could be cold, but then the afternoons would get so hot.

Bram finally came out of the building and unlocked the doors. "I guess I should've given you the keys. You could've started the air conditioning."

Brier didn't say much. He got in and fastened his seat belt before leaning his head against the window. The hot glass felt good as it rubbed on the scar. "Are we going to eat at the carnival?"

"Whatever you want. This is your night." Bram pulled out of the parking lot and headed for home.

Brier turned to his brother. Bram had been very patient with him since Jackie left. He hated that he'd had the meltdown while staying at the Triple Spur. Ever since that night, Bram had treated him differently. The way he'd been treated when he'd first been released from the psychiatric hospital in Oklahoma.

The hospital reminded him of Carl, Jimmy and Rick, the men who'd sexually abused him in the hospital. Bram had told him that Carl and Jimmy were in a little trouble, but they wouldn't be going to jail, and the police hadn't found Rick yet. He'd moved away. "Have you heard anything about Rick?"

Bram got a surprised look on his face. "What brought that up?"

Brier shrugged. "I don't know, just thinking about stuff."

"Sounds like some pretty heavy thinking."

"Maybe," Brier mumbled.

"The police haven't located Rick yet, but when they do, they want to put him in jail."

"Because of me?"

"Because of what he's done to several men in the hospitals he's worked in." Bram shifted in his seat, and didn't look at Brier anymore. "They want you to testify, but I told them no."

"Why?" Brier asked.

"I don't think you're up to sitting in a courtroom with Rick, telling everyone in the room about the things he did to you."

Brier pressed his scar harder against the glass. "I don't wanna see him. He's scary."

Bram nodded and reached over to squeeze Brier's hand. "I know, buddy. That's why I told the police they'd have to find another way to convict him."

Brier felt better. At least Rick couldn't get to him if he didn't see him. Rick used to tell him he'd kill him if he ever told. Brier knew he'd do it to. Rick was a bad, bad man.

"I have money to buy us all corndogs for supper," he said, trying to change the subject.

"Are you sure that's what you want to do with your paycheque? I can buy my own dinner."

"You buy me dinner all the time."

"Okay. Corndogs it is."

\* \* \* \*

Brier felt a lot better by the time they arrived at the carnival. He got out of the car and looked around. There was so much going on. He didn't know what to look at first. "I want to ride that," he announced, pointing towards the Ferris wheel.

Bram chuckled. "I think we should save that one for after we eat. Let's try one of the more adventurous rides first."

Brier took off towards the rides. He remembered from the previous year that he had to buy tickets in order to ride. He dug his wallet out of his back pocket and counted out some money. "Do you want me to buy your tickets, too?" he asked Declan and Bram.

"We'll get our own," Declan said, pulling out some money.



Reading the note on the front of the ticket window, Brier tried to figure out how many he needed. He glanced over his shoulder at Declan. "How many are you getting?"

Declan reached past him and pointed towards the third option down on the list. "I think this one will do just fine for me and Bram, but maybe you should get this one."

Brier nodded and counted out enough money before stepping into line. He wanted to go in the Fun House for sure. Those goofy mirrors always made him laugh. Once it was his turn, he handed his money over to the guy behind the glass. "Tickets, please."

The guy gave him a bracelet instead of tickets. Confused, Brier held his money back out of the man's reach. "Don't I get tickets?"

"You had a twenty in your hand, I thought you wanted the bracelet," the guy droned.

Declan cut in front of Brier and spoke to the ticket guy. "He does. I'll explain it to him." Declan took the money out of Brier's hand and gave it to the guy behind the glass.

Brier watched Declan give the guy money for actual tickets. Now he was really confused. When Declan led him away from the booth, Brier questioned him. "Why do you get tickets, and I only get this silly paper bracelet for my money?"

Declan smiled and took the bracelet from Brier. "Because with this, you can ride as many rides as you want. It's a better deal for you." Declan fastened the bracelet around Brier's wrist.

"So why didn't you and Bram get one?"

"Because we don't like to ride as much as you do, so it wouldn't have been worth the money for us."

Brier nodded like he understood, but he really didn't. Money still tended to confuse him. He knew he was getting better. Bram had already started a savings account with the money he earned at his job. He was saving up to buy a car. Bram had promised to take him to get his driver's licence as soon as the doctor cleared it. Sometimes he worried that he should spend his money and get an apartment to live in like most men his age, but Bram and Declan kept telling him they enjoyed having him around.

"What's first?" Bram asked when they rejoined him.

Brier looked around. He knew he wanted to ride all of them, so he decided to let Bram pick first. "Whatever you want."

Bram headed towards the Tilt-A-Whirl. Brier grinned. He loved that one. Everyone always got all smushed together. As they waited in line, Brier turned to Declan. "So what do I give the guy when I get up there?"

Declan gave him a friendly pat on the back. "Nothing, just show him your bracelet."

"Wow. Cool." He liked the bracelet thing already. Usually he ended up dropping half his tickets on the ground when he dug them out of his pocket.

Brier flashed his bracelet with a smile when it was their turn. He chose one of the little sea-shell-shaped cars that was already a little tilty. "This one looks good."

"Hmmm, the big question is who sits where," Bram said.

"Declan in the middle since he's the smallest," Brier replied, getting in.

After the guy came around to make sure everything was locked down tight, the ride began. Brier leaned to the side, hoping to make the car spin. He noticed a little resistance from Declan, but Bram helped him out by leaning into Declan. Their little sea shell started spinning really fast, and Declan began to groan.

Brier couldn't keep from laughing. He loved the way the spins made his tummy feel. By the time the ride slowed to a stop, Brier was ready to go again, but Bram had to help Declan off the ride and down the steps. "Are you okay?"

Declan took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead. "Just a little dizzy."

Brier felt bad that he'd made Declan go on the ride. "Should we go sit down?"

Declan shook his head. "Why don't you go on one, and Bram and I'll watch."

"Okay." Brier bounced a little as he tried to decide on which ride to choose. He saw one that went upside down. "Ooh, that one." He pointed.

Bram laughed and rolled his eyes. "Better you than me."

There were a couple of chairs close to the ride, so Bram made Declan sit down. "You go ahead. We'll watch from here."

Brier nodded and got in line, happy to have his bracelet. The line was really long which told him it must be a really good ride. He was looking up at the small cages as they spun around and upside down when someone slapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Brier."

Brier glanced over and saw Charlie and another guy from Three Partners that he'd seen in the halls. "Hi, Charlie. You gonna ride this?"

"Yeah." Charlie removed his hand and scratched the back of his neck. "Listen. I just wanted to say how sorry I am about what happened to Jackie."

"Huh?"

"Don't worry though. I'm sure he'll pull through. Jackie's one of the toughest sonofabitches I know. No way a little bomb could keep him down."

Brier's mouth filled with saliva. *Uhh oh.* He covered his mouth and ran to the nearest trash can before he threw up. He heard Charlie and Bram arguing behind him as he continued to spew what little was left in his stomach.

All he could think about was Jackie and the word bomb. He'd seen bombs on TV and knew it was bad, really bad. Brier wiped his mouth and turned around to face his brother. He could tell by Bram's expression that he already knew about Jackie and the bomb. How could his brother have kept something like this from him? The days of not getting a phone call from Jackie suddenly made sense. Bram kept telling him Jackie must be busy when all the time he knew the truth.

Brier went from sick, to heartbroken, to pissed in about sixty seconds. Without saying a word, he reared back and punched his brother in the face, feeling the satisfying crunch as his fist connected with Bram's nose.

Without looking back, Brier turned and started running. He needed to talk to Mac. His boss would be able to tell him where Jackie was. All Brier wanted was to find Jackie and make him better.

He pushed his way through the crowd to the main street of town. After running several blocks, he stopped and tried to figure out where he was. Since the office for Three Partners was also Mac's home, he knew the address. He saw a cab and waved down the driver.

Getting into the backseat, Brier gave the older man the address before digging out his wallet. He'd never taken a taxi by himself, but he'd been with Bram and Declan several times when they'd taken a cab. The car pulled up outside Three Partners and he gave the driver some money, making sure he gave him a few extra dollars for a tip.

He ran up the front steps and rang the doorbell. After a few seconds, he looked through the stained glass panel beside the door and pounded on the heavy wood. He saw Nicco running towards him.

The door opened and Nicco pulled him inside and hugged him. "I'm so glad you're here. Bram called. He's worried sick about you."

"I don't want to talk about him. I want to know about Jackie. I need to find him. Will you help me?"

"Come on," Nicco said, leading Brier to the living quarters.

Mac and Amir were both on the phone when Nicco sat with him on the couch. "Amir is talking to Bram, and Mac is finding out the latest on Jackie. He knew you'd want to know."

Brier's heart plummeted. So, everyone knew about Jackie but him. He felt his eyes sting as the tears he'd tried so hard to hold back, dripped down his face. He didn't bother wiping them away, the way he felt, there wouldn't be any stopping them anyway. He felt completely betrayed by the people who said they loved him.

Picking up a pillow from the couch, Brier buried his face in it, shrugging loose of Nicco's hand on his shoulder.

"Declan's taking Bram by the ER to get his nose set before they come over," Amir's accented voice said.

Maybe eventually Brier would feel guilty about punching Bram, but not right now. He wished he could just go to the emergency room and have his pain taken away. Pulling the pillow away from his face he looked at Nicco. "Is Jackie gonna die?"

Nicco glanced at the other men in the room before turning to Brier. "They don't think so, but he was hurt really bad."

"Can you take me to him?" Brier asked, the tears still sliding down his face.

"No. He's in a hospital in Jurru. Do you know where that is?"

Brier nodded. "Bram showed me on a map, but why can't you take me there?"

Nicco ran his fingers through his hair. "Because you probably wouldn't be able to see him anyway and you don't have a passport."

"Well get me one," Brier demanded.

"I can't."

Mac hung up the phone and sat on the coffee table in front of Brier. "I just talked to the hospital in Jurru. Jackie's still in a drug induced coma, but they say his vital signs appear to be improving."

"Why? What happened to him? How come no one told me?" Brier had so many questions that he didn't know where to start.

Mac reached for Brier's hand. "There was an attempt on Prince Zahar's life. One of his servants was killed and Jackie was injured when a car bomb exploded in front of the palace as the Prince was coming out to get into his car."

Brier knew Jackie must be hurt really bad by the way Mac was talking to him. "Is he gonna die?"

Mac shook his head. "I don't think so, but it's still a little early to tell." Mac rubbed the back of his neck, obviously struggling with what he was about to say. "Jackie lost his left leg from the knee down. He also suffered some internal injuries, but the doctors think they either fixed or removed everything that was damaged. They're worried about infection. That's what's happening inside Jackie's body right now."

"What can I do?" Brier asked.

"The only thing any of us can do is pray," Nicco said, hugging Brier from the side.

"Okay." Brier stood and turned towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Mac asked.

"To the church down the street," Brier informed them. He was thankful he'd been given something to do that would help the man he loved.

When Brier arrived at the church, he was sad to find the doors locked. He stood on the steps for a few moments before sitting down. *I guess this is as close as I can get, God. I hope you can still hear me.*

Brier talked to God until a car pulled up to the curb in front of him. Bram and Declan got out and walked towards him. "You okay?" Brier asked, taking in the bandage across the bridge of his brother's nose.

"I'm fine," Bram said, and sat down next to Brier.

"Sorry," Brier apologised, unable to meet Bram's eyes.

"I deserved it. I should've told you about Jackie."

"He'll be okay now. I had a long talk with God, and he's going to make Jackie all better," Brier informed Bram and Declan.

"Good. Then all of this was worth it."

Brier nodded. "Please don't keep things from me. I think sometimes you forget that I'm a couple of minutes older than you are."

Bram chuckled and gave Brier a hug. "You know, I think you're right. I'll do better, I promise."

## Chapter Two

Over the next several days Brier prayed every chance he was given. He spent every lunch hour as well as before and after work at the church he'd visited that first night. Finishing up his daily filing, he was interrupted by a big hug from Bram.

"Good news. Jackie's awake and doing well."

Brier turned and wrapped his arms around his brother. "It worked. When can he come home?"

Bram shook his head. "Not for a little while yet. The doctors need to make sure he's strong enough to make the long flight. Don't worry though. Prince Zahara offered his private plane and while in Jurru, the Prince is seeing to it that Jackie has everything he needs."

"Except for me," Brier mumbled. "So how long do you think?"

"A week. Maybe ten days. Of course when he gets back to the States he'll need around the clock supervision. The Prince asked me to arrange a nurse to care for his wounds so he could recuperate at home."

"He doesn't need a nurse. I can do it."

Bram smiled and hugged Brier tighter. "You can visit all you want, but Jackie's going to need special care. His leg will need constant attention to make sure infection doesn't set in again."

"I can learn how to do that."

"I'm sorry, but he really does need a nurse."

God, he hated being stupid. Brier didn't want to do anything to hurt Jackie, so he eventually nodded. "Can I at least stay at his house with him? That way the nurse doesn't have to sleep there."

Bram patted him on the back. "That sounds like a damn good idea, brother. We'll see how Jackie feels about it. The main reason I came in here was because Jackie asked to speak with you. What do you say we go into my office and give him a call?"

"Really?" Without waiting for Bram, Brier broke away and ran to his brother's office. He had the phone in his hand when Bram finally walked into the room. Laughing, Bram took

the phone from Brier and dialled. He had to go through several people before he was connected to Jackie.

"Hey, buddy, how're you feeling?"

Brier paced back and forth, biting on his thumbnail while Bram talked to Jackie for a few minutes. He knew he had to rush over to the church as soon as he finished talking to Jackie. He had someone to thank and didn't think it should wait.

Bram grinned at Brier. "Listen, I've got someone here who's fixing to bite off his thumb if I don't let him talk to you. You up for it?" Bram chuckled and held the phone out to Brier.

Grabbing the cordless phone, Brier walked towards the corner of the room. "Jackie?"

"Hey, sweetheart." Jackie's voice sounded really different to Brier.

"Are you okay?" Brier asked.

"No, but I'm getting there. They tell me I'll be home in another week or so. I can't wait to see you."

"I've been praying," Brier admitted. "I knew you'd be okay."

There was silence for several moments before Jackie spoke. "Listen, sweetheart. I'm not the same man that you're used to."

"Because of what happened to your leg?"

"Yeah. That and I've got a few new scars. I hope I don't scare you when you finally see me."

Brier shook his head. "You won't. I love you. I just want you to come home so I can take care of you."

Jackie sighed. "Are you sure you want to do that? Depending on my recovery, it could be a long time before I'm able to make love to you."

"That's okay. Will I still get those kisses I like so much?"

Jackie laughed and then started coughing. "Don't make me laugh, it hurts," Jackie continued to chuckle.

"I'm sorry." He hadn't meant to make Jackie hurt. Brier hoped his boyfriend would forgive him.

"No, don't be sorry. Talking to you is the only thing that could possibly make me smile these days. And to answer your question, yes. You'll get more than enough kisses from me."

Jackie started to sound tired. Brier knew it was time to hang up, but it seemed he'd waited so long to hear his Jackie's voice he hated to. "I miss you. I miss your kisses."

"Me too, sweetheart. I'll see you soon though. I love you," Jackie said with a yawn.

"Get some rest and get better. Do what the doctors tell you to do so you can come back home."

"I promise. Will you call me every day?"

"I'd like that very much. It's lonely not talking to you at night."

"Just hang on and before you know it, you'll have me every night."

"I'm counting on it." Brier hung up the phone and turned back to Bram. "Do we have time for me to go to church before we go home?"

"Sure," Bram said with a nod.

\* \* \* \*

It ended up being almost two full weeks before Jackie was flown home. Bram took Brier to the executive airport to meet the Prince's plane. "I can't believe how jumpy my stomach feels," Brier said.

"Just nerves. It'll settle down once you see Jackie again," Bram soothed, petting Brier's hair.

With his forehead pressed to the wall of glass, Brier watched as a big man carried Jackie down the aeroplane's steps to a waiting wheelchair. It was the first look he'd had of the man he loved in a long time. Brier pounded on the window, trying to get Jackie's attention.

"He can't hear you," Bram told him. "It's noisy out on the runway."

Brier watched as Jackie disappeared somewhere underneath the window. "Where'd he go?"

"They'll bring him up the elevator." Bram pointed towards the big stainless steel doors. Brier rushed over and stood, waiting.

When he heard the subtle ding of the elevator arriving on the floor, his forehead broke out into a cold sweat. When the doors whooshed open, Brier held his breath, waiting for a sign from Jackie. Not wanting Jackie to feel bad, Brier didn't look down at his leg.

Brier was met by his lover's big smile as the man with muscles pushed Jackie's wheelchair out of the elevator. Jackie opened his arms and beckoned Brier. "Don't I get a hug?"



Releasing the breath he'd been holding, Brier started to run into Jackie's arms. "Be careful!" Bram admonished.

*Oh, yeah.* Brier slowed and knelt beside Jackie. He almost cooed when Jackie's arms surrounded him. Brier rested his head on Jackie's shoulder and sent a quick 'thank you' up to God. "I'm so happy you're home."

Jackie lifted Brier's chin and kissed him. "I've needed that," Jackie said, pulling back from the kiss. "I hear you're planning to help take care of me."

Brier nodded enthusiastically. "If you'll let me."

"Of course I'll let you." Jackie looked over his shoulder at the silent man. He said something in a language Brier didn't understand, but he heard the name Malik. The big guy shook Jackie's hand and turned to get back on the elevator.

"Who was that?" Brier asked, as he began pushing the wheelchair to the parking lot.

"Malik. He's one of Prince Zahar's trusted friends."

By the time Brier got Jackie settled in the backseat, Bram arrived with Jackie's luggage. Brier shut Jackie's door and walked to the trunk to stand beside Bram. "Is it okay if I sit in back?"

Bram grinned. "I'd worry if you wanted to sit anywhere else."

Brier got in and slid next to Jackie. "Bram took me grocery shopping and we bought stuff I know how to cook."

"You're going to do some more cooking for me? You know how sexy I think that is."

Brier felt his face heat. "Yeah," he mumbled, picking at a hole in the knee of his jeans. He remembered what both Jackie and Bram had told him. He shook his finger at his boyfriend. "But no funny business until the doctor says so."

Jackie chuckled and pulled Brier in for a deep kiss. Brier felt Jackie's tongue invade his mouth and moaned. He could feel his cock growing within the confines of the old denim he wore. "You're not making it any easier," he laughed, looking down at the fly of his jeans.

Jackie leaned closer and whispered in Brier's ear. "I may not be up for fucking, but I can sure as hell take care of that problem of yours when we get home."

Brier's eyes widened in surprise, he loved it when Jackie sucked on his cock. "Okay," he whispered back. He ran his tongue over the shell of Jackie's ear and was rewarded with a groan.

Shocked, Brier looked towards Bram to see if his brother had heard. He watched Bram's eyes crinkle at the corners as his brother smiled. Brier decided to be good for the rest of the ride home. Although he didn't move out of Jackie's arms, he laid his head on his lover's chest. The position gave him time to look at Jackie's leg. It looked odd to Brier. The way the bottom of Jackie's pants was pinned up you could tell where the leg had been severed just below the knee.

"Does it bother you?" Jackie asked.

Ashamed of himself for looking, Brier shook his head. "No." He tentatively reached down and ran his fingers over the ball-looking thing. "What's this?"

"Bandages. They'll come off once the nurse arrives at my house. The doctor in Jurru put this big one on for the trip. Would you like to watch the nurse take it off?"

"Will it hurt?" He knew he couldn't watch Jackie in pain.

"No. I'd like you to be there. I need you to know exactly what you're getting in to."

"Okay. Maybe she can show me how to do it."

Jackie kissed the top of Brier's head. "Maybe."

\* \* \* \*

Despite what Jackie had told him in the car, Brier tucked his lover into bed. "You need to sleep, and I need to make us some dinner."

To his surprise, Jackie nodded. "Can you do me a favour and bring me my medicine? It's in the zippered kit inside my suitcase."

Brier noticed how pale Jackie had become since arriving at his house. "Are you hurting?"

"Just a little," Jackie said. Brier could tell by the way Jackie said it that he was in more pain than he'd let on.

Rushing over to the suitcase, Brier rummaged around until he found the leather bag. He carried it over to the bed and unzipped it. "Wow." He couldn't believe how many bottles of pills were inside. Brier began lining them all up on the bedside table. "Which ones?"

Jackie pointed to one of the bottles. "Those. Can you get me out two of them, and I'll also need a glass of water?"

Brier had a hard time opening the bottle at first. He finally got it open and shook out two tiny tablets. After handing them to Jackie, he rushed to the kitchen for a glass of water.

By the time he arrived back in the bedroom, Jackie had already swallowed the pills. Jackie reached out and took the water. "Thanks." Brier watched as Jackie drank the entire glass before handing it back. Jackie closed his eyes and seemed to sink back into his pillows. "So what're you making me for dinner?" he asked, without opening his eyes.

"Does grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup sound okay?" He wished he could make better things but that was one of the few menu items he was allowed to cook.

"Mmm, sounds like just what I need at the moment."

Brier sat on the edge of the bed and feathered his fingers through Jackie's blond hair. "It doesn't take very long. Should I wait until you're done with your nap?"

Jackie opened his eyes and smiled. Brier thought the smile appeared a tad forced. "Go ahead and make it. I'm supposed to eat something with the pain meds. Just wake me up when it's ready."

"Okay." Brier gave Jackie a brief kiss before getting up. "Holler if you need anything."

"I will," Jackie mumbled, his eyes closing again.

Brier looked down at the man he loved for several moments before going into the kitchen. As he got out the supplies he'd need, he began to wonder if he'd be able to take care of Jackie the way he would need. Maybe he could ask Lilly or Declan to teach him a few more things to cook? That would help. Right?

He opened the can of soup and realised he didn't know what to put in it. He reached for the phone and called Declan.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

"Hi, Brier. How're things going with your patient?" Declan sounded concerned, and Brier wanted to put his mind at ease.

"Jackie's took some pain pills and he's taking a nap while I make dinner, but I have a question."

"Okay."

"I can't remember if I should put milk in the tomato soup or water," Brier admitted.

"Technically, either is fine, but I like to make it with half a can of water and fill it the rest of the way with milk."

"Right," Brier said, nodding his head. "I guess that's what got me confused. Okay. Thanks."

"Brier?"

"Yeah?"

"If you need anything at all, call us. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it."

Brier felt his eyes burn at the love and acceptance he heard in Declan's voice. "I will, promise." Brier hung up and dried his eyes, ashamed at himself for getting too emotional. "Jackie needs a man right now so stop being a baby," he told himself.

With the tray of food in hand, Brier walked into the bedroom. Jackie was still sleeping. *That's good.* Before he could wake Jackie, the doorbell rang. "Shoot," Brier said, setting the food on the bedside table.

He left the room without waking Jackie and answered the door. A middle-aged woman smiled at him. "Hi, I'm Dana. The visiting nurse," she further clarified.

"Oh, hi." Brier shook Dana's hand. "I'm Brier, Jackie's boyfriend." He stepped back enough to let Dana inside. "He's asleep."

"How's he feeling?"

Brier bit his lip. He wasn't sure if he should tell Dana what Jackie obviously didn't want him to know. In the end, he decided the important thing was making Jackie better. "I think he hurts, but he won't tell me. He took two pain pills after we got him in bed."

Dana nodded and gave Brier's arm a pat. "He's probably afraid to worry you. It's fairly common so don't take it personally. Men want to pretend they're too tough to be in pain." Dana grinned. "Either that, or they're the world's biggest babies. Sounds like your Jackie falls into the first category."

"I made him some dinner, but he hasn't gotten a chance to eat it yet. He told me he needed something after taking the pills."

"Well then, we'll just have to let him eat before I assess his condition."

Brier smiled. He liked this woman. "Come on. He's back here." Brier led Dana to the master bedroom. "Jackie? It's time to wake up and eat something." Jackie didn't stir and Brier started to worry. He looked over his shoulder at Dana.

Dana motioned for Brier to give Jackie a shake. Reaching down, Brier put his hand on Jackie's shoulder and applied a little pressure, afraid he'd do something to hurt his lover. "Jackie? Your nurse is here. Time to wake up."

Jackie's eyes fluttered for a few moments before opening. Brier leant down and kissed his forehead. "This is Dana. She's here to make sure you're getting better, but first you need to eat your supper."

After rubbing his eyes, Jackie looked at Dana. "It's nice to meet you."

"Do you need help sitting up? You really should eat," Dana advised.

Brier watched as Jackie pushed himself up with his arms, but he seemed to struggle to get back to the headboard. Reaching out, Brier hooked his hands under Jackie's armpits and lifted him into position.

Jackie whistled. "Someone's gotten stronger," he teased Brier.

Brier shrugged. He didn't want to tell Jackie in front of Dana that working out helped him control his mood swings. Instead, he lifted the tray and set it on Jackie's lap. "I hope it's still warm. Let me know because I can always put it in the microwave."

Jackie dipped the corner of his sandwich into the bowl of soup. "Mmm," he groaned after taking a bite. "This is really good."

Brier felt his chest puff out a little at the compliment. It made him feel good to know he'd made Jackie happy. "I can make you another sandwich if you want?"

Jackie swallowed his bite of food. "No. This'll be perfect. I'm not used to eating so well. I think my stomach has shrunk."

Brier gently sat on the edge of the mattress, making sure not to upset Jackie's tray. Jackie finished off his sandwich and picked up the spoon to eat the rest of his soup. "Did you eat?" Jackie asked.

Brier shook his head. "Not yet, but I will. I wanted to get you taken care of first."

Jackie ended up drinking the rest of the soup directly from the bowl. When he pulled the dish from his lips, he had a cute little red moustache. Brier couldn't help giggling. He pulled a napkin from the tray and wiped Jackie's mouth. "You're silly."

Jackie smiled. "Good dinner, sweetheart. Thank you."

Brier stood and lifted the tray from Jackie's lap. "I'll take care of this while Dana does whatever she's gonna do."

Dana pulled the stethoscope from around her neck and put the ends into her ears, ready to start her exam. "You're going to come back when she removes the dressing aren't you?" Jackie asked, before Brier could leave the room.

"Yeah." Brier took the dishes into the kitchen and set them on the counter. He eyed the pot of soup and decided he'd better eat something. After Dana left, he was hoping to snuggle up with Jackie if he wasn't in too much pain. Instead of getting another bowl out of the cabinet, Brier lifted the soup pot and drank it like Jackie had. He felt a little guilty, knowing Bram would have a fit if he saw Brier doing it, but that made it even more fun.

By the time he arrived back in the bedroom, Dana had Jackie's clothes off. Brier looked from a nude Jackie to Dana. "What's going on?"

Jackie held out his hand and Brier took it, noticing the bright pink scars on his lover's body. "Don't worry. Dana's a nurse. She's just making sure nothing's infected."

"And everything looks like it should so far," Dana added, getting a pair of scissors out of her big bag. "I'm going to cut away these bandages. Would you like to help me?"

Brier nodded. Maybe if he learned how to change Jackie's dressing, Dana wouldn't need to see his boyfriend naked anymore. He watched closely as she snipped away the big ball of bandages.

"Sure you're ready to see this?" Jackie asked. "It's kinda gross looking."

"I'll be okay," Brier answered, refusing to look away from the task at hand.

When Dana pulled off the outer shell of bandages and then what she called a shrink bandage, Brier gasped. "It's all red."

"That's pretty natural," Dana informed him. "The skin is still healing."

Brier squeezed Jackie's hand. "Okay."

"Could you get me a warm wet washcloth? I think a spit-bath might make Jackie feel better."

Brier released Jackie's hand and went to the bathroom. As he ran water over the thick terrycloth, he noticed himself in the mirror. His bronzed skin was paler than usual and his face appeared a little pinched. Brier took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself before returning to Jackie's side. He knew if Jackie suspected this was upsetting Brier, he'd never send the nurse away. "You can do this," he told his reflection.

He returned to the bedroom and handed Dana the wet cloth. She placed it over the end of Jackie's stump and held it there for several moments. Brier looked at Jackie's face to make sure Dana wasn't hurting him.

"It's okay, sweetheart. I've been through this several times a day for the last month." Jackie tapped his lips with his finger. "But a little kiss sure wouldn't hurt."

Brier leant down and kissed his boyfriend. "I love you."

"I know you do. That's why I told the doctors I needed to get home. I couldn't have the man I love stewing over me."

"Okay, I think we're ready," Dana said, setting the washcloth aside.

The stump, as the nurse had referred to it, looked strange to him. Dana got into her bag and pulled out a bottle of clear liquid and some gauze pads. She soaked the pads and began gently cleaning the stump. There was a big scar, but Brier was pleased to see it looked like it was doing well. He'd had a cut that had gotten infected before, so at least he had an idea of what to look for.

"Looks good," Dana said. "I think you should be about ready to get fitted with your prosthetic limb. Have you been touching it? It'll be quite sensitive, but in order to help with the addition of the prosthesis, you'll need to get used to something touching it."

"I have," Jackie informed her. His gaze shot from Dana's to Brier's. "Uh, when do you think I can resume...intimate relations?"

Dana chuckled. "As soon as you feel up to it. Just be careful." Dana shook her head. "Most men have a hard time resuming sex after an amputation. Though it's usually due to depression more than anything."

Jackie shook his head. "I'm not most men. I'm thankful I lived. If the cost for surviving that blast was losing a leg, I consider myself lucky."

Dana reached out and patted Jackie's good leg. "Then you're definitely not most men. You've got a fantastic attitude. That's good because you're going to need it."

Brier watched Dana pick up the shrink bandage once again. "Do you want this on, or would you rather leave it off for a while?"

"Leave it off." Jackie glanced at Brier. "I think *we* need to get used to seeing it as it is."

Dana packed her bag and Brier saw her out. "Thanks for being patient with me," Brier told Dana. "I know you can probably tell I'm not as smart as most people, but I really love Jackie, and I want to help him get better."

Dana smiled. "I wish all my patients were lucky enough to have someone like you to look after them. And for the record, intelligence has little to do with it, having patience and compassion is the most important part."

Brier nodded. "I have those."

"I know. I can see it in your eyes when you look at him." Dana handed Brier a white business card. "Don't be afraid to call me with any questions."

"Thanks." Brier closed and locked the door. He walked around the house and turned off all the lights before retreating back to the bedroom. Jackie was once again asleep when he entered.

Brier quietly got undressed and turned off the overhead light before sliding under the covers. Jackie mumbled something that Brier couldn't understand and pulled Brier against his side. Brier draped his arm over Jackie's chest, making sure not to hurt him and snuggled in. He was asleep within moments.



## Chapter Three

"I need you to do something for me," Jackie said.

Brier put down the breakfast tray and sat on the edge of the bed. "Do you need more pills?"

Shaking his head, Jackie reached out and pulled Brier against his nude chest. It had been three days since he'd been home and Brier was still treating him with kid gloves. "No. I feel great this morning. So good that I'd like for you to get back in bed with me."

Brier's dark brown eyes rounded in surprise. "Really?"

Jackie kissed him. The man in his arms had no idea just how much he was loved. Jackie had been honest when he'd told Dana he didn't begrudge his injury. It sucked, but it was what it was. While in the military, he'd seen first-hand what depression did to the strongest men. Jackie didn't plan on becoming a statistic.

In the past few days, he'd gotten Brier used to looking and lightly touching his stump. Now, he needed him to touch something else. As the kiss continued, he ran his hands down Brier's back to the bottom of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. "Need to feel you."

Brier stood and started to undress. "What about your breakfast?"

"As good as those frozen waffles look, they aren't half as appetising as you." Jackie flipped back the covers on Brier's side of the bed. "I'm not sure how we're going to do this, but I need to make love to you."

Brier slid under the covers and ran his hand down Jackie's chest. "You'll tell me if anything hurts, right?"

Before he could answer, Brier leant down and took Jackie's nipple between his teeth, giving the protruding nub teasing bites. Jackie buried the fingers of one hand in Brier's hair, while smoothing his hand down Brier's spine with the other.

Brier must've known what Jackie was after and repositioned himself slightly, giving Jackie access to that sweet butt he loved so much. He palmed Brier's ass cheek and squeezed.

When Brier started to lick his way down Jackie's chest, he groaned. Giving Brier's ass a playful slap, he tugged on his lover's hip. "Swing your legs around here so I can taste you."

Grinning, Brier straddled Jackie's face, putting his ass and hard cock within reach. With so many choices, Jackie didn't know where to start. He finally sucked one of Brier's balls into his mouth, laving the slightly furry skin with his tongue.

"That feels good," Brier moaned, moments before engulfing Jackie's cock.

Jackie released Brier's testicle and chuckled. Making love to Brier was always a joy. His man was very vocal about what he liked and didn't like. Jackie's amusement was interrupted by Brier's swirling tongue against the sensitive skin of his shaft. It had been too long since he'd felt that beautifully warm mouth perform its tricks, and Jackie knew he wouldn't last long.

Instead of returning the favour, Jackie decided to concentrate on getting Brier's ass stretched and ready. He reached under his pillow for the tube of lube he'd tucked under there earlier. As he flipped open the top, he ran his tongue up the crease of Brier's crack from his sac to the sweetly puckered hole.

Brier released Jackie's cock. "Oh, yeah, right there. I've missed you doing that to me."

Jackie chuckled again and replaced his tongue with his lubed thumb. He applied pressure to the sensitive opening and waited for Brier's body to open up and accept the invasion. Brier didn't disappoint. Within minutes, Jackie had both thumbs inside his lover's heat.

Brier moved his ass from side to side, totally forgetting about sucking Jackie's cock. That was fine with Jackie. He wanted to come inside Brier's ass, not his mouth, and he was already so close to the edge, he was grinding his teeth.

Pulling away, Brier spun around and faced Jackie. "I need it now."

"Climb on," Jackie instructed, reaching out to pet Brier's cock.

Brier bit his lip and Jackie could see the indecision in his lover's eyes. "Don't worry. You're not going to hurt me." The fresh scars on his hip, thigh and groin were all but healed, but Jackie had a feeling he'd want inside Brier even if they weren't.

With a slight nod, Brier straddled Jackie's groin and guided himself down to the crown of Jackie's cock. "It's been a long time," Brier croaked, as Jackie's cock breeched his opening.

"Too long," Jackie agreed. He could tell by the rigid set of Brier's shoulders he needed a few seconds to acclimate his body's reaction to the invasion. "Hopefully we'll never have to be apart for that length of time again. I'm finished with field work."

Brier looked down at him with a hopeful expression. "Really?"

"Yep. Mac promised me a full-time job, training bodyguards. With the increased need for security specialists in the Middle East, Mac wants me to teach classes on customs and language."

"Remind me to give Mac a hug when I see him," Brier said, as he began to move up and down on Jackie's cock.

Jackie grunted, thrusting deeper inside Brier. He knew he'd never meet a more loyal lover, but the thought of Brier hugging anyone outside his family bugged him. "I think a handshake would do."

Brier's chuckle turned into a moan as he continued to fuck himself on Jackie's cock. Words were no longer necessary as they stared into each other's eyes. Jackie could see his own love reflected in the almost black eyes of his man. He ran his hands up Brier's muscular thighs to the tight six-pack his lover had further sculpted. Brier's body was a thing of beauty. His thumbs travelled to the dark brown discs placed perfectly on Brier's chest. Circling the sensitive skin, he was rewarded with an all over body shiver.

"Pinch them," Brier groaned.

Taking the pebbled nubs between his thumbs and forefingers, Jackie did as asked. The aroused flesh hardened even further. "God, you're breathtaking," Jackie said in awe.

Brier reached down and wrapped a hand around his cock. "Wanna come," Brier announced.

"Do it, baby. Paint my chest." Jackie's sac drew up tight as the first strand of cum shot from Brier's cock. His lover's face had gone angelic as he continued to ride out his climax.

Jackie released Brier's nipples and slid his hands to his lover's shoulders. "Now," he groaned, pulling Brier down to bury himself as deep as possible in the gorgeous man's ass. Jackie's cock erupted, shooting his seed deep into Brier's ass.

Brier started to fall to Jackie's side, but Jackie wanted to feel the weight of his lover on his chest. He redirected Brier until the slightly smaller man was nestled in his arms. Jackie felt a bite of pain as Brier's body settled against the newly-healed abdominal scar, but it was worth it. Waking in the hospital, all Jackie could think about was making love to Brier again.

"I love you," Jackie said, kissing the top of Brier's head.

"I love you, too," Brier cooed.

Brier knocked on Bram's office door. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure," Bram replied, looking up from his computer. "How're things going with Jackie?"

"Really good. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Jackie got fitted for his new leg a couple days ago."

"Good."

"Yeah, but he needs to go to therapy every day, and since I can't drive, we'll have to have someone take him."

"Not a problem. I'm sure we can have one of the guys drive over and pick him up."

Brier knew that would be Bram's reaction. Instead of continuing to beat around the bush he decided to tell his brother exactly what was on his mind. "I want you to talk to my doctor and teach me how to drive."

Bram's brows rose as he took off his reading glasses. "I thought we'd decided to give it another six months or so."

"We did, but that was before Jackie's injury. I can learn, Bram, I swear it."

Bram stood and walked around to lean against the front of his desk, directly in front of Brier. "I know you can learn, but we're worried because of all the medication you're on."

"I know that, but I don't need the meds anymore. Jackie makes me calm." Brier looked into eyes identical to his own. "Please. I want to take care of him on my own."

Bram sighed and pulled the thong out of his long, black braid. Brier knew it was a sure sign his brother was deep in thought. "I'll discuss it with Declan and your doctor."

Brier smiled. He wasn't offended Bram was going to talk to Declan. The two of them shared everything. "Thanks."

He started to leave, but stopped in the doorway, remembering what else he'd come in for. "Oh, I wanted to invite you and Declan over for dinner."

Bram chuckled. "You're really getting into this cooking thing, huh?"

"I like it. Jackie taught me how to make meatloaf."

"Mmm, you know that's one of my favourites," Bram groaned.

"Yep. Although I'm making instant mashed potatoes. I hope that's okay?"

"Sounds good. As far as I know Declan doesn't have anything planned, so I'm sure we'll be able to make it. What time?"

"Umm, six?"

Bram nodded and walked back around the desk. "We'll be there."

"And you'll call the doctor?" Brier prompted.

Bram appeared to study Brier for several moments. "Yeah."

"Thanks." Brier went back to the accounting office with a little skip in his step. He couldn't wait to get a driver's licence like most adults. He knew it was a small step, but it made him happy.

\* \* \* \*

Jackie placed the last of the biscuits on the cookie tray. "These are ready for the oven, but I wouldn't put them in until Bram and Declan get here."

Without saying a word, Brier put down the box of instant mashed potatoes and crossed the distance to the table. He started to take the sheet from Jackie's hand, but Jackie held on until Brier looked at him.

"What's going on?" Jackie asked.

Brier started to say something, but stopped, took a deep breath and smiled. "Nothing. I'm just scared. This is my first dinner party."

Damn his man was cute. Jackie looked around the kitchen. "Well, the meatloaf's in the oven, the table's been set and the rest of the stuff can be cooked once your guests arrive."

Jackie took the tray out of Brier's hand and pulled his lover onto his lap. "Relax."

"I know. I just want them to see how well I can take care of you," Brier mumbled.

"They'll be able to tell by the smile on my face." Jackie pointed towards his over-exaggerated smile.

Brier started laughing. "You're so funny."

Jackie hugged his lover tighter. What would he have done these past several weeks without Brier? He wondered if he'd ever be able to tell him what an inspiration he'd been. He hadn't told him, but Brier's determination to live a normal life despite his head injury was what had given Jackie the drive to persevere despite losing his lower leg.

Brier began placing angel kisses along the side of Jackie's head and neck. Jackie answered Brier's passion by unbuttoning his lover's shirt. Once Brier's bronzed muscled chest was exposed, Jackie couldn't keep his hands to himself. His fingers traced the dips in

between the abdominal muscles before roaming up to circle and pinch Brier's dark brown nipples.

Brier moaned and moved to straddle Jackie's lap. "Touch me."

Now it was Jackie's turn to moan as Brier licked up the side of his face. Jackie reached between them and unfastened Brier's low-rise jeans, fishing out the dark-skinned cock he'd become obsessed with.

Brier's hips began to move, thrusting his length in and out of Jackie's tight grip. Brier was the most erotic, sensual man Jackie had ever had the good fortune to make love to, and they'd indulged almost non-stop since his return.

Fingernails scraped his flesh as Brier scrambled to pull up Jackie's shirt. The stinging sensation only added to Jackie's pleasure. With his other hand, Jackie pulled Brier in for a deep kiss. He thrust his tongue in Brier's mouth like he wanted to thrust into his lover's ass.

Jackie was about to suggest they get naked and fuck around the fancy dinnerware already set on the table, when the doorbell rang. "Fuck!"

Brier gazed into Jackie's eyes. "I need."

Knowing Bram and Declan were waiting, Jackie slipped a hand down the back of Brier's jeans. With one hand still jacking his lover, he pressed two fingers deep into Brier's still-stretched hole.

Back bowing, Brier grunted as he painted Jackie's fist and chest with seed. Once he'd milked his lover dry, Jackie removed his hands. "You know Bram will be barging in here any second, love. Best we clean up before that happens."

With a sly grin, Brier stood and went to the sink, wetting a dishtowel. He cleaned the drying cum from his cock while giving Jackie a particularly erotic show.

"You're killing me," Jackie moaned, pressing the heel of his hand against his still-trapped erection.

Brier chuckled and re-wet the cloth before kneeling in front of Jackie. Before wiping the seed from Jackie's chest, Brier scraped his teeth against the bulging fly of Jackie's jeans.

"As much as I want to tell you to keep going, I think I just heard the front door."

Brier's dark brown eyes rounded. He quickly cleaned Jackie's skin, and tossed the towel into the laundry room.

"We're in the kitchen," Jackie called while Brier zipped up.

Bram and Declan came through the swinging door with smiles on their faces. Bram went straight to the fridge and withdrew two cold beers, passing one to Declan. "We knew where you were. It was obvious by the moans."

Jackie winked at Brier who had gone red with embarrassment. Brier finally glanced at Bram. "Sorry."

Declan started to laugh. "Don't apologise. Bram's just jealous because we didn't have time before leaving the house."

Jackie didn't know that it was possible for Brier to go any redder. Deciding to take his lover's mind off the awkward situation, he cleared his throat. "Brier? Would you like to take the meatloaf out of the warmer and put the biscuits in?"

A relieved smile crossed Brier's gorgeous face as he grabbed the potholders and removed the baking dish from the oven. "I'll let that set while I make the rest of the food," Brier proclaimed.

With his nose in the air, Bram inhaled. "Mmm mmm, brother. That smells good."

"I chopped the bell peppers and onions in tiny pieces like you like them," Brier informed Bram.

Jackie crossed his arms, smiling at Bram. It was nice to see the two brothers together. It was obvious how much they loved each other. Still, it was hard to believe they'd only known each other for a little more than ten years.

"Declan called your doctor," Bram told Brier.

In the midst of stirring the gravy, Brier spun around, flinging the dark brown liquid onto the floor. "Really? What'd he say?"

"That he'd like to see you off your medication for at least ten days before he makes a final decision."

"Wait. What?" Jackie broke in.

Brier took the pan of gravy off the burner and grabbed a paper towel to wipe the floor. "I told Bram I wanted to get my driver's licence, but before I can, I need to go off my pills."

Jackie was surprised Bram would even consider it. He'd heard the story of Brier's meltdown at the Triple Spur after Jackie had left for the job in the Middle East.

"You think that's a good idea?" he asked Bram and Declan.

"According to my love-sick brother, you make him calm enough that he doesn't need the medicine anymore." Bram chuckled. "Though from what I heard when I walked into this house earlier, I'm beginning to question whether calm is the appropriate word."

Jackie could tell by Bram's expression he was trying to downplay his concerns about Brier coming off his pills. He decided to let the subject slide for the moment and get with Bram later. It wasn't that he didn't believe in Brier, but his lover's meltdowns in the past had proved detrimental to Brier's health. The last thing Jackie wanted was for Brier to hurt himself again.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello?" Jackie answered the phone.

"Hey, it's me. Just calling to check on Brier," Bram said.

"What? Isn't he there at work?" Jackie's heart sped up as he thought of all the things that could've gone wrong. Brier had been off his medication for eight days without any problems.

"Yeah, he's here. I can keep an eye on him here, it's what happens the rest of the day that I'm asking about," Bram told him.

"Oh." Jackie breathed a sigh of relief.

"He's good. He's found if he starts to feel anxious, pumping iron helps," Jackie continued.

"Just make sure he doesn't do too much of it. He became obsessed with lifting right after you left and we both know how that ended."

"Yeah. I'll watch him."

"Listen, the reason I called is because I received a message from the Oklahoma State Police."

Jackie's stomach dropped. "And?"

"The FBI arrested Rick earlier this morning in Lubbock, Texas."

"The FBI? Why are they in on this?" Jackie questioned.

"Because the state guys tracked a string of complaints involving Rick Sutcliff across four states. Seems our guy has been a busy pervert."

"So what does it mean for Brier?"



"Well that's what I'm trying to determine. The message said the FBI wanted to question Brier, but I'd already talked to the state guys and told them he wasn't up to it. From the message, I'd say the FBI doesn't give a fuck what Brier wants."

"Typical." Jackie rubbed the back of his neck.

"So what do we tell Brier?" Jackie asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure he can even get through a simple questioning session without his medication. The first time he had to tell the police about those bastards molesting him while he was in the hospital, it really did a number on his emotional control."

"It'll break his heart if you put him back on it though. He's so damn proud of himself for working his anxieties out on his own. Besides, he's been studying the driver's manual every single evening." The whole thing made Jackie sick to his stomach. It was bad enough Rick and the other assholes took advantage of patients in a mental hospital, but to make those same patients go through the torture of telling and retelling their stories should be a crime in itself.

"I'll call Declan and we'll decide what's best."

Jackie felt he'd been slapped in the face. "Wait. You and Declan are gonna decide? Don't I have a say in this?"

Bram cleared his throat. "Sure you do, it's just that Brier's my legal responsibility."

And there was the crux of the matter. Despite loving and living with Brier, Jackie knew he had no legal say-so in the man's life. "That's something we need to talk about."

Bram sighed heavily into the phone. "Declan said this was going to become an issue. I'll tell you the same thing I told him. I know you care for my brother, and I thank God you do, but it's too early in your relationship to consider something so long-term."

"Fuck you," Jackie seethed. "How long were you with Declan before you knew you wanted him forever?"

"You can't compare the two, Jackie, and you know it," Bram sputtered.

"Why, you think because Brier isn't as intelligent as Declan that my love can't be real?"

"Stop putting words into my mouth," Bram yelled.

"And you stop spouting off and take a moment to determine how you really feel. In the meantime, I think we should tell Brier about Rick when we're together."

Bram started to say something, but Jackie cut him off. "Yeah, I know, you'll have to talk to Declan. Whatever. Just don't tell Brier without me being there."

Jackie hung up and slammed his fist against the kitchen table, upsetting his bowl of soup. "Fuck!"

\* \* \* \*

"We're gonna swing by and pick Declan up before I take you home," Bram told Brier.

Brier looked at his brother and shrugged. "Okay."

He didn't know what was going on, but Bram had acted strange all afternoon. Brier had gone into Bram's office earlier and found his twin arguing with Declan on the phone. When Bram had spotted Brier in the doorway, he whispered something into the receiver and hung up. Bram didn't say anything about the argument he'd had with Declan, but Brier could tell it was really bothering him.

"Are you taking Declan out to dinner?" he asked, trying to start a conversation.

"No," Bram replied.

When it was obvious he wasn't going to get any more out of Bram, Brier started to wring his hands. He hated that Bram wouldn't talk to him. Brier knew if he was like a normal brother, Bram would tell him everything.

"What's wrong?" Bram asked, gesturing to Brier's hands.

"Nothing," Brier mumbled.

"Bullshit. You're feeling anxious again, aren't you?" Bram accused.

"I can handle it."

Brier didn't miss the way Bram gripped the steering wheel tighter. "What? You think I can't?"

"Damn. I didn't say that. Why does everyone feel the need for a confrontation today?"

Brier jumped slightly in his seat. He wasn't used to Bram yelling at him, and Brier immediately felt bad for snapping at his brother in the first place. "Sorry, didn't mean to make you mad."

Bram pulled into the driveway in front of the house. Putting the car into park, he turned to Brier. "I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to yell. It's just been a bad day."

Brier bit his lip. He didn't know if he should bring up the fight he knew Bram had had earlier with Declan. "Are you mad at Declan, too?"

"No," Bram soothed, reaching out to put his hand on Brier's thigh. "Sometimes couples have disagreements. That's all it was."

Brier nodded and opened the door when he spotted Declan coming out of the house. "I'll get in back."

"You don't have to, you know," Bram called after him.

Settling into the back seat, Brier grinned. "Yeah, I know, but I also know you want to kiss him when he gets in."

Bram was still chuckling when Declan sat in the front passenger seat. With a wink towards Brier, Bram pulled Declan in for a kiss.

"What was that for?" Declan asked when Bram released him.

"To put Brier's mind at ease. I don't think he likes it when we argue."

Declan reached across the back of the seat and gave Brier an affectionate pat on the knee. "Brier's not the only one."

Bram backed out of the drive and headed towards Jackie's house. "Mind if Declan and I come in for a few minutes?" Bram asked.

Brier knew it was pizza night, but he didn't want to be rude. "No, that's fine. But if you stay too long, you'll have to eat pizza with us. Jackie has to take his medicine with food and he needs it by six."

"Pizza night? Yum." Declan rubbed his stomach. "You're lucky. Bram never lets me order pizza."

Brier hugged himself, feeling special because Jackie loved him so much. "Jackie said there's no reason I should have to cook every night, so Wednesdays are pizza and Saturdays we order Chinese."

"Lucky dog," Declan laughed.

Brier thought of all the little things Jackie did for him. "Yeah, I am pretty lucky."

## Chapter Four

Sitting on the sofa, Jackie rubbed more cream into the tender skin of his stump. He knew the new prosthetic would take some time to get used to, but it sure made for a sore couple of days. At least he was getting around with the aid of crutches, and although he was anxious to get back to work, he knew taking things slow would pay off in the end.

He heard the car pull up outside and quickly slid back into his modified jeans. The conversation he was about to have had set like a stone in his gut all afternoon. How Brier would react to the news the FBI had arrested Rick was anyone's guess.

The phone call with Bram earlier in the day still had his blood a tad hot. What the hell did he need to do to prove himself to the guy? Didn't Bram realise how special his brother was? The fantastic sex was only a small part of Brier's charm. The man had the biggest heart of anyone Jackie had met.

The front door opened and a smiling Brier walked in with Bram and Declan in tow. His lover shrugged out of his jacket on his way to Jackie's chair.

"Hey, don't you look happy," Jackie greeted, tilting his head up for a kiss.

"Of course I'm happy, I'm home with you."

Brier grinned and gave Jackie another kiss. "Do we have any of that grape Kool-Aid left?"

Seeing the opportunity to talk with Bram and Declan alone for a minute, Jackie shook his head. "Sorry, I had it for lunch. Would you mind making some more?"

"Nope. How 'bout cherry this time?"

"Sounds good, babe."

Brier turned to Declan and Bram who'd made themselves comfortable on the couch. "Can I bring you some?"

Bram chuckled. "No thanks. I'd rather have a beer if you have one."

"I'll take a glass," Declan spoke up.

With a nod and a jump in his step, Brier retreated to the kitchen. Jackie watched his lover until he was out of sight. Would he ever tire of that cute muscled ass?

"He seems to be in a pretty good mood," Jackie observed.

"Now," Bram replied. "It's one of the things that bothers me. On the way over he was anxious and out of sorts. Now he's Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky."

"Are you sure it wasn't you who was anxious and out of sorts? Or *maybe* it's possible that I'm actually good for him. I think it's obvious he's happy with me."

Bram leaned back on the couch and rubbed his hands over his face. "I never said you weren't good for him. I know what you mean to Brier."

"Then what is it?" Jackie prodded.

Bram sighed. "No matter how hard he works, in some respects, Brier will always be more like a child than a man. I know that you care for him, but no one can expect you to want that forever."

Anger filled his veins. Jackie wished he could launch himself across the room and plough his fist into Bram's face. He leant forward in the chair to give Bram a piece of his mind when he noticed Declan had gone pale. Following Declan's gaze, Jackie spotted Brier in the doorway, bottle of beer in hand.

Jackie's heart plummeted at the hurt expression on his lover's face. Without saying a word, Brier turned and retreated to the kitchen once again. Bram's indrawn breath signalled he'd also seen Brier.

"Fuck!" Jackie reached for his crutches to go after Brier, but was stopped by Bram.

"I'll go talk to him."

"No," Declan said, pushing Bram back to the sofa. "I think you've done enough for the moment. I'll go."

Jackie didn't miss the narrowing of Declan's eyes when he said it. Evidently this wasn't the first discussion the two of them had had regarding Brier. Jackie followed Declan with his eyes as the smaller man disappeared into the kitchen. He turned his attention back to Bram. "I think there are a few things we need to get straight."

\* \* \* \*

"Brier?" Declan called.

Brier squeezed his muscled frame further into the corner of the tool shed. His head was throbbing and his heart felt broken. He lifted his arm to wipe away the tears and knocked

over a rake, sending several garden tools to the ground in a loud clanking of metal on metal. *Dammit.*

Brier closed his eyes, hoping Declan wouldn't see him. He heard the shed door open, the evening's pink sunlight filtering in against his closed lids.

"Brier?"

Brier felt the brush of Declan's body as his friend sat in the dirt beside him. A comforting arm wrapped itself around him, and Declan's head landed on Brier's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Opening his eyes, Brier once again attempted to wipe away the ever-flowing tears. "I hate being me," he sobbed.

"No," Declan pulled Brier's head down to place a kiss on his forehead. "Don't ever feel that way."

Brier hiccupped and stared into Declan's sad face. He knew his friend loved him, but did Declan see him the way Bram did? Did Jackie see him that way?

"I try so hard," he gasped as another sob escaped him. "But people will never see me any different, no matter what I do."

Declan's cheeks became wet with his own tears. "That's not true. I love Bram with all my heart, but sometimes he says things..." Declan shook his head. "He feels guilty. Every time he looks at you, he's reminded that he couldn't protect either you or Thor against your father's abuse. I think by trying to protect you now, he's attempting to make up for that. Bram goes too far and it's something he's going to have to deal with, but don't ever let what another person says affect the way you see yourself."

When Brier attempted to look away, Declan caught his chin and held it. "How many times do I have to tell you what a special person you are for you to believe it? And if I'm not mistaken, Jackie sees you the same way."

"But Bram was right. Jackie deserves someone who's smart. He's really, really smart. He reads the newspaper and watches the news. Sometimes he'll start to say something about junk he's seen or read and then stops himself. I think he'd like to talk to me about stuff, but then he's afraid I won't understand."

The corner of Declan's mouth tilted up. "Perhaps Jackie needs a swift kick in the ass as well."

Brier shook his head. "No, I could never hurt Jackie."

Declan chuckled, and rubbed the top of Brier's head playfully. "I didn't mean you should really kick him. I just mean you should tell him that it hurts your feelings when he does that. He may not even be aware he's doing it."

A small bug on the ground caught Brier's attention. He reached down and picked the black beetle up, letting it crawl around his hand. "Do you agree with Bram? Do you think Jackie will get tired of living with a stupid person?"

"Now you listen up, Brier. You are not stupid," Declan began, tapping a finger on Brier's head. "What was damaged up here was not your fault. Give yourself some credit, will ya? Look at all the things you've accomplished since being released from the hospital. You have a full-time job, a savings account, and most importantly, you've found true love. I don't doubt for a second that Jackie will always love you. But it takes work, hard work. You have to learn to be honest with him. Tell him how you feel and when he makes you mad or upset, let him have it."

Brier returned his attention to the bug crawling up his arm. "I know I need to work on standing up for myself, but when I get mad, I can't always control it."

He set the beetle back on the ground. "I don't want people to be afraid of me."

"You're still going to counselling aren't you?" Declan asked.

"Yeah."

Declan stood and brushed the dirt from the seat of his pants. "Maybe you should take Bram with you sometime. You weren't the only one hurt by your father's actions."

Brier blinked several times. He'd never considered Bram might need to talk to Dr. Morgan. His brother always seemed so strong. "I should go in and say I'm sorry, huh?"

Declan held out his hand to help pull Brier to his feet. "That's the last thing you should do. Bram's the one who owes *you* an apology."

Brier grinned and gave Declan a big squishy hug. "I love you."

"Good, because I love you too. Now let's go get that Kool-Aid fixed. All this talking has made me thirsty."

Brier nodded and led the way out of the shed. When they entered the kitchen, Jackie was sitting at the table.

"It appears you have all the help you need. I'll just go find Bram," Declan excused himself.

Feeling embarrassed by his childish behaviour, Brier returned to the task of fixing the Kool-Aid. He carefully measured the sugar and poured it into a pitcher.

"Brier?"

"Yeah," he answered without turning around. Brier tore open the two packets of cherry flavoured powder and poured them on top of the sugar.

"Will you come over here and talk to me?" Jackie asked.

Brier thought about everything Declan had said and sighed. Turning to face Jackie, he realised his lover had done nothing wrong. "I'm okay. Bram hurt my feelings, but Declan made me feel better."

Jackie opened his arms. "I bet I can make you feel even better."

Brier knew Jackie's leg had been sore the last several days because of his new leg, so he repositioned one of the chairs to face his lover.

Jackie shook his head. "The day I can't handle you on my lap is the day I'll be ready for a retirement home."

Brier knew Jackie was only joking, but the thought of the two of them being together that long warmed him. "I found a bug," Brier blurted.

"Huh?"

"In the shed. There was a pretty beetle. Kinda looked green." He knew he was stalling, but Brier really wasn't interested in rehashing his earlier pain.

"Cool. Next time you should bring it in to show me."

"Really? I didn't know you liked bugs." Brier faced Jackie and straddled his lap, trying to put the majority of his weight on his boyfriend's good leg.

Jackie grinned. "To be honest, I don't think I ever paid much attention to them before, but you have a way of helping me look at everything through a fresh set of eyes."

Brier tried to work out what Jackie meant by that. He finally decided to take Declan's advice. "What do you mean?"

Instead of answering right away, Jackie pulled Brier in for a kiss. "It's like Kool-Aid. I suppose I probably drank it as a kid, but I'd forgotten how great it tastes until you came along to remind me. There are a lot of things like that. I'm not sure if it's because you were shut inside a hospital for so long or what, but the simplest things bring you pleasure. I wish everyone had that gift. I think the world would be a much happier place if we stopped to enjoy the everyday beauty around us."



*Wow. Do I really do that?* Brier could tell Jackie meant what he'd said, and it made him proud.

"You know how much I love you, right?" Jackie asked, running his hands in circles against Brier's back.

"Yeah, I know." Brier wondered whether or not he should bring up the stuff he'd talked about with Declan.

He thought about a show he'd seen on TV about dog training. The man said you have to scold your dog when he does something wrong, not before or after. Brier decided to follow that same advice. Jackie hadn't done anything recently, so he decided to wait until he did or said something to hurt his feelings.

"I have a confession to make," Jackie told Brier.

"Really? Like church?"

Jackie smiled. "Yeah, something like that. I had an argument with Bram earlier."

Brier was shocked. Jackie never got mad at people. "About what?"

"You. Sometimes I get upset because Bram makes decisions about you without talking to me about them first."

"And that makes you feel sad?"

"Yes," Jackie mumbled, not meeting Brier's gaze.

"Jackie? Don't be sad," Brier soothed, cupping his boyfriend's cheeks.

"I'm ashamed of myself because I just realised something. I get my feelings hurt because I'm jealous, not because Bram doesn't consult me."

Brier chuckled. "Why would you be jealous of Bram?"

Jackie shrugged. "Because I think you depend on him more than you do me. I want to be your number one." Jackie rolled his eyes. "I know, it's stupid, huh?"

"Yeah," Brier agreed. "It is pretty silly because you are number one."

"What? I am?" Jackie's expression was so cute Brier wanted to give him a hundred million kisses.

"Yeah, silly. I love my brother, but it's not like I'm *in* love with my brother. Geeze, that would be wrong."

Laughing, Jackie gave Brier one of those really good kisses with the tongue that Brier liked so much. Wanting more, Brier held Jackie's head still while he thrust his tongue into his boyfriend's mouth.

When they broke apart for air, Jackie jerked his head towards the door. "There's something Bram needs to talk to you about. I'd like to sit in there with you, but if you don't want me to, I'll understand."

Brier's tummy started to feel funny. It always did that when he got nervous. He could tell by the way Jackie said it, it was something really important. "I'd like you to sit by me."

"As long as you need me to."

\* \* \* \*

Once he helped Brier finish the Kool-Aid and grab another beer for Bram, Jackie settled uneasily into his chair. He was still pissed at Bram for the things he'd said earlier, but he also knew this wasn't the time. They had more important items to discuss.

Jackie accepted the glass of cherry flavoured sugar water and smiled. "Thanks, babe."

After taking several sips, he put his glass on the side table and waited for Brier to join him. His lover settled on the arm of the chair and wrapped his arm around Jackie's shoulders.

"You need to talk to me?" Brier asked Bram.

Bram sat up on the edge of the couch and rested his elbows on his knees. "I'm not sure how to say this without just coming out with it. I got a call from the police. The FBI apprehended Rick in Texas."

"Apprehended?" Brier asked, a questioning look in his eyes.

Jackie put a comforting hand on Brier's thigh. "He means they caught him."

"Oh." Brier sat for a moment. "Oh! That's good, right?"

"Yep. But the FBI wants to talk to you. Ya know, to ask a few questions," Jackie explained further.

"Okay. Are they like the people that helped Gabe at the Triple Spur?"

"Not the same men, but yeah, they're the good guys. Do you think you feel up to answering some questions?"

"Sure. I'll need to meet them if I'm going to tell the court all the bad things Rick did."

Bram rose from the sofa to kneel at Brier's feet. "No, buddy. You won't be testifying in court."

Brier's back went ramrod straight. "Yes I will. I made a deal."

Jackie glanced from Bram to Brier. "A deal? With who, the police?"

Brier rolled his eyes. "Noooo, with God."

Jackie took a deep breath. He now knew what Brier was referring to. Both Brier and Bram had told Jackie about the long hours Brier had put in at the church after he'd found out about Jackie's accident.

"You mean in exchange for my life," he surmised.

"Yeah. I promised I'd do everything I could to be a better man if he saved you."

Jackie put his hand to the back of Brier's neck to pull his lover down for a kiss. "Thanks, babe, but I think God would understand if you didn't testify at this hearing."

Brier shook his head. "God may understand, but I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

Tilting his head to the side, Brier studied the three men in the room. "Would any of you testify?"

"This isn't about us," Bram cut in, reaching for Brier's hand. "We both know how upsetting it will be for you. Unless you want to go back on your medication, there's absolutely no way you'd be able to handle it emotionally."

Brier gripped Bram's hand. Although Jackie wasn't being addressed directly, it wasn't difficult to see the vehemence swimming in Brier's eyes when he spoke. "I don't want to go back on the medicine, it makes me feel different. Please, let me do this. How am I supposed to become a better man if I run away the first time things get bad?"

Bram broke away from Brier's gaze to glance over his shoulder at Declan. "What do you think?"

Jackie was surprised when Declan's eyes swung towards him. "I think we should discuss it with Jackie, since he'll be the one travelling to Oklahoma with Brier, don't you?"

Jackie held his breath as Declan and Bram continued to stare at each other for several moments. Eventually, Bram glanced at Jackie. "What do you think?"

No one would ever believe how much peace that simple question filled him with. All he'd wanted was to be consulted about Brier's care. "I think Brier's a grown man. If he thinks he's strong enough to give it a shot, I say we let him. We can take his medicine with us in case he needs it, but I've got faith in him."

Jackie looked at Brier. "I believe in you."

## Chapter Five

Brier rolled a chicken breast in bread crumbs and put it on a cookie sheet. "So this'll really taste like fried chicken?"

"Near enough, and it's a heck of a lot safer than frying it in oil," Lilly answered.

*Safer.* Everyone was always trying to keep him safe. Although he appreciated that his loved ones cared so much, it also made him sad. He set another piece in the pan and glanced at Lilly. "Is this how you fry your chicken?"

The older woman's expression softened, "Sometimes."

"But not always," Brier finished for her.

Picking up the baking sheet, Lilly put the pan into the oven. "Let's have a visit while that cooks."

Brier nodded and washed his hands. He knew he could talk to Ms. Lilly. It was one of the reasons he'd called and invited himself over to her house. After getting his hands dried he settled at the kitchen table with his glass of sweet tea.

Lilly's hand covered his. Brier noticed how thin it was. His other hand began tracing the blue veins standing out in stark relief against the pale skin. When he'd first met Lilly, she'd been almost as brown as him, but now she was sick a lot, and needed to stay inside, instead of riding the horses she loved.

"Ugly, aren't they?" Lilly chuckled.

*Ugly?* "No. I think they're neat. They remind me of the worms we used to dig up to go fishing."

Lilly's chuckle turned into a laugh. "Just what every woman loves to hear."

Brier suddenly realised he probably shouldn't have said that. "Oh, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

Lilly patted his hand. "You didn't. I was teasing."

Emotions threatened to overwhelm him. It never mattered what he said or did around Ms. Lilly. She loved him no matter what, and he knew it. He'd often wondered how different his life would've been if... "I wish you were my mom."

Lilly's frail hand gripped his momentarily. "I wasn't a good mother to Nicco. Haven't you heard the story?"

He thought of Nicco and how much he doted on his mother. Brier couldn't imagine why Lilly would say such a thing. "I know how much Nicco loves you."

"Yes, now, but it wasn't always that way. When Nicco was very young, I ran off and left him with his father. Many years passed before I had the chance to become a real mother to him, and then he didn't really need me for that."

"People always need a mother," Brier corrected, seeing the sadness in Lilly's eyes.

Brier swallowed around the lump in his throat. He thought of the mother he never knew growing up. He'd suffered his head injury as a direct result of his father's abusive anger, and had been given away to the state when his parents didn't feel like dealing with a stupid son.

It was many years before he'd grown into a man and was able to track his mother down after escaping from the mental hospital. For over thirty-five years all he'd thought about was finding his mom. He'd wanted her to throw open her arms and hug him. How many years had he hoped it had all been a mistake, and his mom still loved and wanted him? His head had been full of dreams but when he finally found his mom, she said really ugly things to him.

"I killed my mom," he admitted.

He still hadn't come to terms with what he'd done in a state of confusion, sadness and rage. He'd been lucky the judge agreed to send him back to the mental hospital instead of prison. Despite the years of intensive therapy, Brier knew it was the love and support of his brothers that helped him overcome his handicap.

Although he tried to be the man he wanted to be, nothing could erase the horrible things he'd done in his past. How could someone like Jackie really love him knowing what he'd done?

"I know," Lilly whispered.

"You do?" Brier shook his head. "And you still trust me to spend time with you?"

Tears slowly dripped down Lilly's face. "Of course I trust you. I love you like a son. I have since the first day Bram brought you over."

"Why? I've done really bad things."

"Yes, you have, but you were sick then. You're better now."

"Am I? Then why can't I make real fried chicken? Or talk to those FBI guys by myself? That's what I want, ya know. I don't want Jackie or Bram in there with me when I tell them."

"Tell them what? What're you afraid of them hearing?" Lilly asked.

Brier pulled his hands away from Ms. Lilly and put them into his lap. Gazing down at the table, he closed his eyes. "That I didn't say no to those men who hurt me."

He heard Lilly sigh and then a chair scooting out. When frail arms enveloped him, he was shocked. Brier looked up into the loving eyes of the older woman.

"Whether you said no or not isn't in question. The fact is, those men took advantage of their positions by having sex with you."

"But even though it hurt, sometimes I liked it when they would put their arms around me and hold me tight. What if the FBI guys decide I should go to jail, too? What if Jackie decides he doesn't love me anymore?"

Lilly squeezed him harder. "Have you talked to Jackie about what you're afraid of?"

"No!" he exclaimed, shaking his head.

Lilly kissed the top of Brier's head. He loved it when she did stuff like that. It made him feel safe. "You won't tell him, will ya?"

"No, it's not my place, it's yours. But I can tell you a thing or two. Regardless of what you felt when those men had sex with you, they did something wrong. You were a patient, and they should've respected that boundary."

Lilly knelt on the floor and gazed up at Brier. "Everyone has the desire to be held and loved. At the time you didn't know the difference. No one can fault you for that. Look into your heart. Now that you're loved by a good man, can you tell the difference between what those awful men did to you and how Jackie makes you feel?"

Making love with Jackie was nothing like what Rick and the other two had done to him. "Yeah."

Lilly smiled. "Then there's your answer. And don't sell Jackie short. I'm sure he'd understand everything you've just told me. Love like his doesn't go away, you just have to trust that."

Brier nodded. Deciding he'd had enough of being sad, he grinned. "So does that mean I can talk you into teaching me how to make real fried chicken?"

Turning off the alarm, Jackie rolled back over and wrapped a still-sleeping Brier in his arms. They'd talked long into the night, and the emotions still showed in the puffiness surrounding his lover's eyes.

Their talk had been a hard one, but Jackie was glad they'd had it. He had no idea that Brier was worried about going to jail along with Rick, Jimmy and possibly Carl. Jackie just hoped he'd done a good job of reassuring his partner that going to jail wasn't an option, and he'd never stop loving him. That more than anything seemed to bring comfort to Brier.

"Hey, sleepyhead, it's time to get ready for work."

Brier grunted and snuggled in closer.

Jackie ran his hands across the soft skin of Brier's naked hip to land on one firm globe of his lover's ass. "I'm picking you up at three to take you to get your driver's licence."

Brier's eyes popped open. "Really? I didn't study last night."

Jackie chuckled, slipping his finger between Brier's butt cheeks to trace the still loose hole. They'd made love several times the previous night and Brier's body, it seemed, was ready for another round. The last time they'd come together, they'd fallen asleep with Jackie still buried to the hilt in Brier's body. The faint traces of his seed under his finger allowed him to push in easily.

Brier moaned and crawled his way up Jackie's body until their lips met in a deep morning kiss. Brier was the only man Jackie had ever been with who actually tasted good in the morning. Too bad he couldn't say the same for himself, but Brier never seemed to mind.

Swinging his leg over, Brier straddled Jackie's lap. "Want you," he whispered, breaking the kiss.

Always willing to make his lover feel good, Jackie reached for the lube on the side table. Handing it to Brier, he grinned. "Slick me up, babe."

Jackie chuckled as Brier licked his lips.

"Taste first," Jackie replied.

Jackie removed his finger from the gorgeous man's ass, allowing Brier to scoot down and envelop his hard shaft in that hot mouth he was so in love with. As Brier's tongue pressed against the large vein on the underside of Jackie's cock he couldn't help but to moan. "Feels so good, too good. If you keep it up you'll get breakfast instead of the fucking you're after."

Laughing, Brier pulled his mouth from Jackie's cock and picked up the lube. "As much as I like breakfast, I like you inside me even more."

The cold lube dripping down his cock was in stark contrast to the warm mouth of a few seconds earlier and Jackie's cock jumped in surprise.

The action made Brier laugh harder. "I like it when it dances for me."

"It'll always dance for you," Jackie answered.

Brier used the rest of the lube on his fingers to slick his own hole before shimmying back up Jackie's body. He lined Jackie's cock up with his hole and sat back, impaling himself in one smooth move.

"Damn, babe," Jackie groaned, feeling the squeeze of Brier's muscles around his shaft.

He reached out and pulled Brier in for a kiss, thrusting his tongue deep into Brier's mouth as he pumped his cock into his lover's ass. Aware of the time, he rolled them both over until Brier was under him.

His stump was healed enough to hold his weight, as he positioned his cock at Brier's hole once more. Gripping Brier's ankles in his hands, Jackie spread his lover's legs wide as he drove in and out of the tight sheath. He felt his balls draw up and gave Brier a warning. "Can't hold back any longer."

Brier nodded and jacked his own erection faster. Gazing down into those dark brown eyes, Jackie slipped over the edge into pure bliss. His climax was so intense he collapsed even before his cock was finished spurting its bounty.

It wasn't until after he'd regained his senses that Jackie realised Brier had already come as well. Dammit, he'd missed it. Few things gave him greater pleasure than watching Brier's face when he came.

He nuzzled his face against Brier's sweaty neck. "I love you."

Brier sighed. "I love you too."

Jackie groaned when Brier pushed against his chest. "I need to get into the shower or I'm going to be really late for work."

Jackie moved, his cock slipping from Brier's ass. "I know. I'll get dressed while you take a shower."

Brier swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. "What about you? Aren't you gonna take one?"



"Later, after I take you to work. If I jump in with you, we'll never get you there on time."

Brier turned and strutted towards the bathroom, doing his best to tempt Jackie into joining him. As much as Jackie would've enjoyed running soapy hands all over Brier's gorgeous body, he knew how much getting to work on time meant to his partner.

Jackie was determined to make the day a good one for Brier. He'd already planned to take his lover to get his licence, but what Brier didn't know was about the small dinner party he'd planned for afterward.

With the FBI interview scheduled for the following day, Jackie felt it was important to surround Brier with the people he cared about. Hopefully, the added support would help calm his lover's nerves.

He heard the shower turn off, snapping him out of his thoughts. Reaching for his prosthesis, Jackie put his thoughts on the back burner.

\* \* \* \*

"I still can't believe you got a perfect score on both the written and driving portions of the test," Jackie proclaimed, shaking his head. "You're so amazing. I actually took that damn thing twice before I passed."

Brier was filled with pride at Jackie's statement. He knew it had helped that the woman giving him the test had thought he was cute. She even flirted with him. Brier still didn't know what to make of that. He thought of the small piece of paper in his pocket. "Did you see that lady give me her phone number?"

"What? Who?" Jackie asked.

"That nice lady who gave me the test. She gave me her number and asked me to call her."

Jackie whistled. "Damn, babe, she was a good-looker, too. Did you say anything?"

"Umm, no, not really. I just told her that I didn't think my boyfriend would like it, but she told me to keep it and ask you about a threesome." Brier glanced over at Jackie. "What did she mean by that?"

Jackie chuckled. "She meant she'd be interested in fucking us both at the same time."

"Oh. Oooh, yuck. I don't think I could have sex with a woman. I don't know anything about their parts, but I've heard they're different from mine."

Laughing, Jackie gestured towards a Mexican restaurant. "Pull in there and let's get something to eat."

Brier did as instructed. When he turned off the engine, Jackie pulled him into his arms and kissed him. "You know, if you'd like to try sex with a woman, I wouldn't stop you. I wouldn't like it, and I'd be jealous as hell, but I'd understand."

That shocked Brier. "Have you ever done it?"

"Sure. When I was younger, I fucked quite a few women before I realised it wasn't the woman, but their womanly parts that I didn't get off on."

Brier reached between them and massaged Jackie's cock through his jeans. "What do they feel like?"

"Soft and squishy. Some women have big boobs, too large to fit in your hand, while others have itty bitty breasts that kinda look like a man's only squishy instead of hard with muscle."

Brier managed to unzip Jackie's jeans as he talked. Fishing out the semi-hard cock, he licked his lips. "They don't have this though, do they?"

Jackie spread his thighs further apart and shook his head. "Nope. They have two warm holes to fuck instead of just the one that we have."

Brier thought about it. It all sounded so alien to him. "I can't imagine what that would look like, but I'm pretty sure I'd prefer this anyway."

He continued to stroke Jackie's cock, making sure to watch for people walking close to the car. Although he was curious about women, he really couldn't imagine enjoying sex with anyone besides Jackie, but that didn't mean his lover would always be satisfied without a woman. "Do you want to? Have sex with that woman, I mean?"

Jackie carefully removed Brier's hand from around his cock. "No, babe. I've had my fill of pussy. I much prefer what you have hanging between your legs, but now isn't the time. We've got reservations inside for dinner."

Brier felt let down when Jackie tucked his cock back into his underwear and zipped up. "Later? Cuz I'm really hard now."

Chuckling, Jackie kissed him, slow and deep. "Just try and keep me away from this pretty ass."

Feeling much better about the rebuff, Brier climbed out the driver's side. Although it took his boyfriend longer to get the single crutch he was down to and get out of the car, Brier knew from experience Jackie preferred to do it himself. He noticed Jackie staring at the front of his jeans and grinned. Yeah, he was still as hard as a rock and nothing would make him soft until he came, it was just the way his body worked.

Before going inside, Jackie casually brushed the front of Brier's jeans. "Am I going to be tempted by this throughout dinner?"

"I sure hope so," Brier quipped.

Brier held the door for Jackie, not ashamed in the least to be sporting a woody that tested the zipper in his denims. It was a natural state when around his boyfriend and others would have to get used to it.

He was concentrating so hard on getting Jackie in bed, the appearance of his brother, and the rest of his friends, surprised him. The first thing out of Bram's mouth shocked him even more.

"So, let me see it, brother," Bram demanded, arms crossed over his chest.

Brier thought his eyes would bug out of his head. He glanced worriedly at Jackie. "What? Here?"

"Of course here. Jackie said you passed your test. I want to see your licence picture. It has to be better than mine."

With a sigh of relief, and a red face, Brier dug the wallet out of his back pocket. He'd never admit out loud what he thought his brother was asking to see. He handed over the small plastic card with pride. "The lady said I got an A."

Jackie ran a hand down Brier's spine. "Although from the sounds of it, the woman was after more than giving him the test."

Bram's brows shot up. "Well, well, aren't you just the ladies man."

Brier rolled his eyes and took his licence back. "Stop teasing me."

He found two chairs at the table and pulled one out for Jackie. "Hi, everybody."

It was nice to see Ms. Lilly, Nicco, Amir and Mac. He sat down amongst a round of congratulations. Brier noticed Jackie's best friend was missing from the group. "Where's Taggart?"

Jackie rested his crutch against the wall behind him and put his hand on Brier's thigh. "He's at the safe-house with Lon and Alec."

Brier leant over and whispered in Jackie's ear. "Is all this for me?"

Jackie turned his head and gave Brier a brief but passionate kiss. "Of course it's for you, or do you know someone else who passed his driving test today with flying colours?"

Brier stared into his lover's eyes. Jackie was always so thoughtful when it came to things like that. "Thanks."

Jackie gave Brier's leg a squeeze before sliding his hand up and down the inside of Brier's thigh. "Thank me later."

"Oh, I intend to. Several times," he added.

\* \* \* \*

After seeing the two FBI agents out, Jackie sat next to a shaken Brier. "You okay?"

Brier nodded, but continued to study his hands, which had become almost raw from the constant rubbing his lover did when he was anxious. "They made it sound like Rick was really a bad man."

"They just told the truth, babe. Rick's been skirting the authorities for years. Most of his victims aren't as brave as you."

He wrapped a comforting arm around his partner. "Do you still think you want to testify?"

Brier's back stiffened. "Sure I do."

Jackie closed his eyes and rested his chin against the top of Brier's head. According to the agents who'd just left, they'd been close to pinning charges on Rick once before, but the victim had backed out before it could go to trial. Even though they hadn't come out and said it, Jackie got the feeling they believed the victim had been threatened in some way.

Normally it wouldn't have scared Jackie, but he still wasn't able to walk like he used to. He questioned whether or not he'd be able to protect Brier if it ever came to it. Jackie knew he needed to talk to Mac, but it would have to wait. "Are you hungry?"

"No." Brier didn't say anything else for a few minutes. "Would you just watch some TV and hold me like this for a while?"

Jackie could tell by the slight catch in Brier's speech that his lover was struggling to hold himself together. Without taking the medication, he was doing remarkably well considering the circumstances.

"Would you rather watch the tube in the bedroom? That way you can sleep if you want."

Brier shook his head again, burying his face against Jackie's chest. "I don't want to move from here."

Jackie reached over to the side table and grabbed the remote. He got himself into a comfortable position with his foot up on the coffee table and turned on a baseball game. He knew from experience the white noise of the cheering crowd always put Brier to sleep.

His lover spread his legs out on the couch and rested his head on a pillow in Jackie's lap. Jackie couldn't keep his fingers from running through the silky black strands as he began going over all the things that needed to be done before they left for Oklahoma.

Within minutes, Brier's breathing evened out as he drifted off to sleep. Jackie ran a finger down the bronzed skin of his lover's cheek. Part of him felt guilty at the bargain Brier had made with God, but the other part felt nothing but pride. The fact that Brier was willing to hold up his end of the promise spoke volumes about his lover's character. Jackie wondered how many others would keep their word given the same circumstances.

## Chapter Six

"How's the new job going?" Mac asked, taking a seat in front of Jackie's desk.

"Fine so far." Jackie twirled a pen between his fingers. The phone call he'd received from Bram earlier was weighing heavily on his mind. "You talk to Bram?"

"Yeah," Mac confessed.

"I just don't get it. Why isn't Brier's testimony enough to convict those assholes?"

Jackie dropped the pen and rubbed his eyes. "Brier's going to feel like he reneged on his deal with God."

Mac shook his head. Everyone at Three Partner's knew what that promise meant to Brier. "There might be a way to still put Rick before a judge, but I'm not sure about the other two."

"I'm listening." Jackie leaned against the top of his desk. He wasn't as concerned with the other two. According to Brier, Rick had pretty much made them do it so they couldn't tell on him for fucking the patients.

"There has to be more people this happened to. What if we talk to the federal prosecutor and see if he won't get us a list..."

"And we could talk them into joining Brier," Jackie finished for his friend.

"Exactly."

Jackie wondered if he should mention any of it to Brier before they talked to the prosecutor. Although Brier had been on edge several times since going off his medication, he'd done a damn good job of coping. Would the news that Rick could walk away push his lover over the edge?

Mac cleared his throat. "I think Bram needs to be the one to call the prosecutor. I know it's been a sore subject between the two of you, but he's still Brier's legal guardian. I think the prosecutor would take that into account when trying to build a stronger case against Rick."

Jackie ground his teeth. It was still an area of his relationship with Brier that he didn't like to think about. When would Bram see his love for Brier was the real deal?

He finally nodded. "Would you talk to him about it? It's still a pretty hot topic between the two of us."

"Sure." Mac sat for a second before continuing. "You know he loves Brier with all his heart, right?"

Jackie couldn't sit still any longer. He rose from his chair and began pacing the small office, glad to finally be free of the cane. Although he still had a small limp, the therapists assured him his walking would only get better.

"I'm torn in that respect. Yeah, I know Bram only wants what's best for Brier, but it hurts to know he doesn't think what's best for his brother is me."

Mac rose and put a hand to Jackie's shoulder. "I don't think that has anything to do with it. Everyone with eyes can see how much you and Brier mean to each other. You've been damn good for him. He's grown more with you than he has since he was released from the hospital. I think that may be part of Bram's problem."

"How the fuck does that make any sense? What? Bram doesn't want Brier to get better?"

Gripping both of Jackie's shoulders, Mac looked him directly in the eyes. "You weren't around when Bram first found out Brier even existed. I've known Bram for years and have never seen him that upset. I don't pretend to understand it, but Bram feels incredibly guilty. Taking care of Brier is the only way he knows how to atone for that guilt. When Brier was finally released from the hospital, Bram picked up his entire life and moved here so Brier could be with him and Declan."

"I know that, but why can't he see how much better Brier's getting? Hell, I'm not sure he needs a guardian at all anymore."

"That's because you weren't here when Brier had his meltdown after you left."

Mac sighed and released his hold on Jackie. "Look, I love Brier as if he were my own brother, but he's not only socially stunted, he's mentally handicapped. I don't know the extent of brain damage he suffered as an infant, but Brier's inability to control his temper is still a real issue."

Jackie thought of the things he'd helped Brier work through in the past several weeks. "I'm good for him."

"Yeah, you are. I don't think anyone is disputing that. Bram's just worried that dealing with Brier's limitations might become too much. It's a valid worry."

Jackie crossed his arms. "Amir puts himself into some pretty dangerous situations. What would happen...?"

"Stop right there," Mac ordered.

"You see my point though, right? I know you, Mac. You wouldn't love that man any less if he wasn't perfect."

Mac scoffed. "He's far from perfect now, but I see your point."

Why was it so hard for people to understand how much he loved Brier? He felt like he could talk until he was blue in the face and still be questioned. "Believe me, I'm not trying to take Bram's brother away from him. I just don't like the idea of him always making the decisions for Brier. Because what affects Brier, affects me."

Mac nodded. "I get ya. I'll talk to Bram about calling the prosecutor. Maybe while I'm at it, I'll bring up a few of the things we've discussed."

Jackie held out his hand. One of the reasons Mac made such a good boss and friend was his ability to see both sides of a situation. "I'd appreciate anything you could do."

After Mac left, Jackie called the accounting office. "Hey, Sheila, you got a good-looking stud wandering around your office with an empty stomach?"

\* \* \* \*

After picking up a couple of sub sandwiches, Jackie suggested they go to the park. Brier liked the idea of being spread out on a blanket in the sun with the man he loved, so he readily agreed.

He let Jackie drive because he knew his lover needed the practice more than he did. Brier hated to toot his own horn, but he had passed his driver's test with flying colours.

Glancing over at his boyfriend, Brier's brow furrowed. Jackie had such a look of concentration on his face it began to worry him. "Everything okay?"

Jackie didn't even acknowledge that Brier had spoken. Biting his lip, Brier reached over and put a hand to his lover's leg. "Jackie?"

"Huh?" Jackie asked.

"What's wrong?"

Jackie turned to gaze at Brier, his eyes full of worry. "Nothing's wrong."

Jackie pulled into the park and stopped beside one of the shelter houses. Brier wasn't sure what to do. He remembered his talk with Declan. "Why do you do that to me?"

Switching off the engine, Jackie turned to Brier. "Do what, baby?"



"Keep things from me. Sometimes...it hurts my feelings." He knew it was because Jackie didn't think he was smart enough to understand bad things, but Brier knew he understood more than people gave him credit for.

Jackie opened his mouth to say something before snapping it shut. He got out of the car and slammed the door. Brier sat there, his insides making him feel like he might throw up. He watched as Jackie paced back and forth in front of the car. By the way Jackie's lips were moving, Brier had a feeling he was fighting with himself over something. Brier just hoped it wasn't him. He wasn't sure what he'd do if Jackie left him.

After several minutes, Jackie walked back to the car and opened Brier's door. Without a word, Jackie held his hand out. With a deep breath, Brier took it and Jackie helped him out of the car.

With Brier trapped between Jackie's broad chest and the car, he waited. It wasn't long before Jackie leaned in and kissed him. Brier was so relieved, he opened immediately, accepting his lover's tongue. His arms went around Jackie's neck as he sank heart and soul into his boyfriend's embrace.

Before things had a chance to go further, Jackie broke the kiss. "I'm sorry if I do that to you."

Brier's mind was so foggy from the kiss he didn't know what Jackie was talking about. "Do what?"

"Keep things from you. There's no excuse for it. It's wrong and it's as simple as that." Jackie bent his head down and wiped the sweat from his forehead on his biceps.

"Okay, so will you tell me what's wrong?" Brier asked.

"Bram got a call from the prosecutor. He doesn't have enough evidence to make a conviction in your case on any of the three men."

"Not even Rick?"

Jackie shook his head. "In all the time Rick's been doing this, there have only been two people who've filed charges. Both of whom were somehow scared off before a trial could even be set."

Jackie stepped back and motioned towards a picnic table. "Let's talk while we eat our lunch."

Brier turned and grabbed the sack of sandwiches from the floorboard and handed them to Jackie before pulling their large sweet teas out of the cup holders. He followed Jackie to the table and sat down.

Once he began eating his sandwich, Brier let his mind travel back over what Jackie had told him. How was it possible that Rick and the other men could go free?

"Is it because they think I'm too stupid to know what happened?"

Jackie set his cup down and reached across the table to grip Brier's hand. "You're not stupid. You can't think of yourself like that."

Brier nodded. "But is that the reason?"

He watched as a muscle in Jackie's jaw began to move. "There's no physical proof of what they did. All the prosecutor has to go on is your word. Since you're the only one who's had the guts to come forward, he's afraid to spend the government's money on a trial."

Brier ran his fingers through his hair. "Doesn't the government take money out of my cheque every week?"

"Yeah."

"So isn't the government's money also my money?"

Jackie grinned. "Yeah."

Brier chewed his bottom lip. "Well maybe I just don't understand things, but shouldn't they ask me if I still want to try and get him sent to jail?"

Jackie stood and leaned over the table. Putting his hands on either side of Brier's head he pulled him in for a kiss. "Yes."

Sitting back down, Jackie laughed. "There's nothing about you that's stupid, babe. Let's get back to the office and give the prosecutor a call back. Maybe we can convince him to talk to Jared and Peter."

\* \* \* \*

Jackie hung up the phone and turned to Brier. The hopeful expression was now gone from Brier's face. Although the prosecutor had been very receptive earlier in the day, the phone call he'd just received had dashed their hopes. Jackie didn't tell Brier, but the FBI had had no choice but to let Rick go. Jackie wondered what it would mean to any hopes of

furthering their case against the slimeball. "He said neither Jared, nor Peter will talk about what happened. I'm sorry, babe, it doesn't look good."

Brier shook his head. "Well maybe we could try calling them."

With an internal sigh of exasperation, Jackie held out his arms. "Come here."

Brier crawled into Jackie's lap. Despite the situation they were in, Jackie's cock took notice of the wiggling ass of his lover. He tried to reign in his lust enough to explain things to his partner, but Brier's soft sweatpants weren't making it easy.

"We can't make someone talk to us if they don't want to, babe. Maybe if we wait a few days we can try again."

Brier started playing with the buttons on Jackie's dress shirt, slowly slipping them through the hole one by one. "Why can't we go see them? I know if I talked to them they'd understand why telling the judge about Rick is the right thing to do."

Jackie allowed Brier to push the shirt from his shoulders. Maybe if he could distract Brier with sex he'd forget about Jared and Peter for the night. With a hand to the back of Brier's head, Jackie brought his lover's mouth to his left nipple.

Brier was eager to please and soon began licking and sucking the pebbled nub. Jackie's head fell against the back of the couch as he gave himself over to Brier's skilled mouth. Licking across Jackie's chest, his lover spent several moments teasing the other nipple before travelling south.

"You didn't answer my question," Brier reminded, unfastening Jackie's dress pants.

How the hell was he supposed to think with Brier mouthing his erection through his underwear? "What?"

Brier hooked his fingers under the elastic waistband and gave a tug. Jackie lifted his ass and Brier pulled the garments down his legs, over the prosthesis and off. Moving back between Jackie's spread thighs Brier poised his mouth over the leaking crown.

"I want to go see Jared and Peter."

Jackie thrust up trying to get his cockhead into Brier's mouth, but Brier was too quick and pulled back. *Shit.*

"We can't do that. If we push these guys too hard by showing up on their doorstep they could file a harassment complaint against us, and then we'd be the ones in trouble with the police."

"So you could get into trouble?" Brier asked.

"Yeah, we both could."

Brier's tongue absently licked the head of Jackie's cock. Jackie could tell his lover was deep in thought trying to work through what he'd been told. Jackie tried thrusting his hips towards Brier's mouth once again.

Brier glanced up, teasing his tongue along Jackie's shaft. "I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Good, now can we do this thing before my nuts turn blue?"

## Chapter Seven

Brier made sure no one else was in Sebastian's office before he knocked on the open door. "Seb? Do you have a minute?"

Dressed in his customary low-rise jeans, black T-shirt and black leather blazer, Seb glanced over his shoulder. "Sure. Just give me a second while I find this elusive summary report."

Brier took a seat in front of the desk and crossed his right leg over his left knee. He'd always thought Seb was handsome in a dangerous sort of way. With long black hair and a neatly trimmed beard and moustache, Seb was the office bad boy.

"Finally!" Seb declared, holding up a thin file. He walked back to his chair and sat down. "Now, what can I do for ya?"

With shaking hands, Brier dug the small sheet of paper out of his back pocket. He handed it to Seb and smiled. He knew what he was about to do was wrong, but he didn't have much choice. The last thing he wanted was to get Jackie in trouble with the police, but he had to talk to Jared and Peter.

"I want to find a couple of my friends from the hospital, but I don't know where they're living now."

Seb looked at the names written on the sheet. "You want me to find them, is that it?"

"Yeah."

Seb leaned back in his chair and threaded his fingers together over his broad chest. "Why not ask Bram or Jackie?"

Brier quickly said another prayer, asking forgiveness before he told yet another lie. "They don't think I should be friends with Peter and Jared anymore. But I miss them. I thought I'd send them a letter, maybe we could be like pen-pals or something."

Reaching up, Seb ran his fingers through his short beard. "If anyone finds out, you can't tell them I did this."

"I won't. I promise." Brier used his index finger to cross his heart.

Looking at the slip of paper again, Seb picked up a pen. "What was the name of the hospital again?"

Brier smiled. The first part of his plan to keep his bargain with God had gone smoothly.

\* \* \* \*

Brier was doing the daily filing when he spotted Seb enter the room. He glanced over at Sheila who was staring intently at her computer screen. Seb stepped up and slid a folded piece of paper under the stack of files.

"Thanks," Brier whispered.

"Don't mention it. Ever," Seb answered, leaving the room.

Just in case Sheila had witnessed the exchange, he put several more files in their place before sliding the folded yellow sheet out and opening it. Jared was the closest, living in Lubbock, Texas. Peter was further away in Tulsa, but Brier knew he'd make the trip if he needed to.

Brier had vowed on his knees to step up and be the man Jackie deserved and he took that oath very seriously. Slipping the paper back under the files, he wondered if he was doing the right thing. He remembered the conversation he'd had with Jackie the previous night. No matter what, he knew he couldn't let his lover get into trouble with the police.

He thrummed his fingers on top of the metal file cabinet as he tried to figure out how he was going to borrow a car. If he took Jackie's, the police might think he was part of Brier's plan. No, he couldn't do that.

A hand to his shoulder spooked him and Brier let out a squeal as he jumped.

"Hey, hey, babe, it's just me."

Brier spun around to face Jackie. He wondered if his boyfriend could see the guilt of his earlier actions. "Hi. You scared me."

Chuckling, Jackie leaned in and placed a kiss on Brier's temple. "I didn't mean to. I thought you might be ready to go home."

Brier glanced at the stack of files yet to be put away. The yellow piece of paper was just sitting there out in the open. "Can you give me another fifteen minutes? I don't like to leave until everything is done."

"Would you like some help?" Jackie asked, reaching towards the stack.

"No!" Brier quickly stepped between Jackie and the file cabinet. "It's my job."

Jackie held up both hands and took a step back. "Okay. I'll go find something else to do."

Brier huffed. He knew Jackie had been trying to help, and now he'd made him mad. "I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me."

Jackie took Brier in his arms and kissed him. "I'm not mad. You do what you need to and then come find me."

Seeing his chance, Brier cleared his throat. "Well, you could always go ask Bram if he'd let me use my savings to buy a car. I don't need anything fancy, but on days like this it would be nice for us to have two cars."

Jackie shook his head. "I don't mind waiting."

Brier fingered the light blue button of Jackie's work shirt. "Yeah, but I kinda wanted to stop by the church, too. See? It would be nice if I could make my own decisions about when I wanted to go home."

Jackie's body stiffened and he dropped his arms to his sides. "I'll go talk to Bram."

"Thanks."

Brier watched Jackie leave the room with mixed emotions. He wasn't sure what he'd said, but it was easy enough to tell his boyfriend wasn't very happy. Maybe he shouldn't have brought up the church.

Turning back to the file cabinet, he stuffed the paper with the addresses into his pocket. If he could buy a car then he wouldn't have to worry about stealing Jackie's, because he knew that's what it would be. Bram had taught him that to take something that wasn't yours was stealing, and the last thing Brier wanted was to go to jail.

\* \* \* \*

Bram was on the phone when Jackie stepped into his office. He could tell by the jovial conversation it had to be one of his buddies.

"Okay, tell Locky I'll get some more in the mail Saturday. Give everyone my love. Yeah, I will. Bye." Bram hung up the phone smiling. "That was Cree."

"Something up?" Jackie asked.

"Nope, Locky wanted to call to thank me for the books I'd taken him a few months back and to let me know he was all finished." Bram chuckled. "That part of the conversation was

intercepted by Cree who wasn't happy his son was asking for more books in his own subtle way."

"Gotta love a kid who reads though."

"Yep, which is why I'll never listen to Cree when he tells me the boy has enough." Bram swung his legs onto the desk and leant back in his chair. "What's up?"

Following Bram's lead, Jackie made himself comfortable. "Is there something going on with Brier that I don't know about?"

Bram's black brows shot up. "No, not that I know of, why?"

"He wants a car of his own." Jackie shifted in his chair. He didn't like the implications of Brier's statement earlier. Was his lover trying to tell him something?

"Well, he's been saving his money for one. I guess I can't think of a reason he shouldn't be able to get one," Bram answered.

Jackie felt like a stone had landed in his gut. Just a few days earlier Bram was wrapping his brother in cotton wool, and now he up and agrees with Brier getting a car? It didn't make sense to Jackie. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Bram grinned. "Declan helped me see a few things."

"Like?"

"Like if I didn't lighten up, I'd lose my brother entirely. I'd do just about anything to protect him, but Declan made me see I couldn't live his life for him."

"He said he wants to have the freedom to come home when he's ready." Jackie shrugged. Now he was sounding like the overprotective one. "I'm not sure what that means other than he doesn't want to be tied to me anymore."

Bram seemed to study Jackie for several moments. "I don't think you need to worry. Sounds like Brier's simply trying to exert his independence. Don't forget he's spent a lifetime doing what other people told him to do. Maybe he wants to feel he has more control over his own life now."

*Why does that bother me so much?* "So you think I should give him more space?"

"For a while, maybe. I think it's the same phase most of us went through in our teenage years. He loves you, but he also wants to prove to himself that he's man enough to do things on his own."

Jackie rested his head against the back of the chair. He shouldn't feel like he was being left behind, but he did. The broader Brier's world became, the less chance he'd want to stick



with him for the long haul. How many lovers had come and gone from his life over the years? He thought things would be different this time. He liked taking care of Brier. It made him feel safe knowing Brier needed him as much as he needed Brier. If his lover started gaining more independence, what use would he have for Jackie?

"You want to take him, or do you want me to?" Bram asked.

"Huh?" he asked, trying to get back into the conversation.

"To get a car?"

Jackie's head was pounding. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to clear his head. "I'll take him. Maybe we'll drive by one of the lots on the way home. Do you have a preference about what he should look at?"

Bram shook his head. "He's got a pretty big nest egg built up, so anything reasonably priced would be fine."

Jackie tapped his fingers against the arm of the chair. He didn't have anything else to say to Bram, but didn't quite know what to do with himself while he waited. Standing, he made sure to regain his balance on the artificial foot before turning towards the door.

"I guess I'll see how he's doing with the filing and give him the good news." Jackie just wished he felt better about it. He waved goodbye to Bram and started out the door, almost getting rundown by Brier in the process.

Jackie's knee hyper extended as he felt something give. Falling backward, Jackie was saved from a potentially embarrassing situation when Brier's arms wrapped around his waist.

"I'm so sorry," Brier apologised.

Steadying himself with his hands on Brier's shoulders, Jackie shrugged off the incident, swallowing the bile threatening to rise in his throat. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

He didn't dare tell Brier the movement had caused his artificial limb to dig into his tender flesh. "I think I'll go to the restroom before we leave."

Brier nodded and released his hold on Jackie. Trying his best to put one foot in front of the other, Jackie waited until he was out of sight before bending to rub the sore knee. He managed to make it into the restroom and took a seat in one of the stalls. Raising the leg of his dress pants, he pulled off his prosthesis and looked at the swelling knee. It appeared the skin had been pinched when the prosthesis was almost jarred loose.

Carefully, Jackie ran his fingers over the injury. The blood was blossoming just under the surface of the thin skin. He readjusted his stump sock and reattached his limb. Standing, he braced his hands on the wall as he worked through the pain.

Jackie took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his brow as he checked himself in the mirror. He knew how upset his lover would be if he thought he'd hurt him. Trying to relieve a little of his tension, Jackie rocked his head from side to side, until he heard and felt a satisfying pop.

The door swung open and there stood a concerned Brier. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just washing up." He turned and followed Brier from the room, biting the side of his cheek with each step.

Although he wanted nothing more than to get home and take off the prosthesis, Jackie reached for Brier's hand as they entered the parking lot. "You feel like running by a car lot or two on the way to the house?"

Brier's entire face seemed to light up at the words. "Really?"

Jackie used his key fob to unlock the doors as they neared. "Yep, really. As a matter of fact, why don't you drive us there?"

Getting behind the wheel, Brier held his hand out for the keys. After passing them over, Jackie pulled Brier's head in for a deep kiss. He knew if he tried to hold Brier back from becoming the man he wanted to be, his lover would bolt in a heartbeat. No, better to give Brier all the love he felt, and hope like hell he still needed him a month down the road.

\* \* \* \*

Brier couldn't get over the number of cars. "What does it mean, new and used?"

Instead of answering right away, Jackie opened the trunk and pulled out the crutches he hadn't used in a long time. "Jackie? Are you feeling okay?"

He'd noticed earlier that his boyfriend's face appeared paler than usual, but had quickly forgotten about it once Jackie said they were going car shopping.

"Yeah. I guess I'm a little tired. Thought I'd rely on these things while we shop around."

Brier watched Jackie struggle towards him. "Would you rather go home?"

Jackie stepped up to him and gave him a brief kiss. "Don't worry so much. I'm fine. Now. Let's find you a car."

"Okay," Brier agreed as they started down the first row. "So what's the difference between new and used?"

"Oh, about ten thousand dollars." Jackie chuckled. "Actually, a used car means that someone else has already owned it, driven it and most likely puked in it at one time or another."

Brier scrunched up his nose. "Did they clean it?"

Jackie laughed harder. "Yeah, truth is you won't see much difference between the new and used cars."

"Well, they're all really shiny."

Brier looked around the big parking lot. He saw a lot of cars that looked like the kind of four-door car Jackie drove. Maybe that's what he should go with? He walked towards a dark blue car. On the way, a bright shiny red Jeep caught his eye. Brier couldn't help but gaze at the sexy car.

"Sweet, isn't it?" A short guy with brown hair strode up and stuck out his hand. "The name's Jim Forkland."

"Nice to meet you, sir, I'm Brier, and this is my boyfriend Jackie."

He couldn't get over how friendly the man was, and they'd only just met. Brier glanced over his shoulder at Jackie as he shook Jim's hand. His eyes kept straying back to the tomato coloured four-wheel drive.

None of the men he knew drove cars that looked like the Jeep, they all had cars similar to Jackie's. Brier turned away from the temptation and pointed towards the sedan. "I think I should look closer at that one."

"Oh, well, okay. Hey, let me go ahead and get your name and phone number while we're looking."

"That won't be necessary unless we find something we really like," Jackie replied, before Brier could give Jim his information.

Brier stuck his hands in his pockets and walked around the dark blue car. He knew it was probably a really good car, because it had letters on the back with a fancy design, but it just didn't speak to him. Owning his own car had been a dream since he'd been out of the

hospital. Once again, the red Jeep came to mind. That was the car he'd always wanted, but how did he tell Jackie?

"Hey, Jim," Jackie broke into Brier's thoughts as he called the salesman over. "Could we get the keys to that one over there? I think Brier needs to take it for a spin."

Brier turned to Jackie. "But it's not...like..."

"It's not like that boring sedan you're looking at. Who wants that? Go for the sexy one."

"But you have one with the four doors."

"Yeah, and it's boring as hell. That's a company car, Brier. If I had my pick, I'd go with the red."

Brier wanted to jump into Jackie's arms and kiss him right there in front of the salesman, only the crutches stopped him. Instead, he bounded over to gaze into his lover's eyes. "You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. How're you supposed to know if this is the one for you if you don't test drive it?"

The salesman agreed and went to get the keys and something called a dealer plate. Brier didn't really know what that was, but he didn't care. He couldn't believe he was actually going to drive the shiny Jeep.

Jim came back and handed Brier a set of keys. "I'll have to ride along, of course, for insurance reasons."

"Okay." Brier would've agreed to almost anything at that point.

Brier helped Jackie stow his crutches in the car before they both climbed in. He buckled his seat belt and turned the key in the ignition. The sound the Jeep made as it came to life thrilled him. He grinned over at Jackie. "I think I'm in love."

Jackie smiled back and placed a hand on Brier's thigh. Brier pulled out of the parking lot and turned right. At the first stop light, he glanced down and was surprised to see he was hard. A quick check of the rear view mirror told him the salesman had no idea how much Brier was aroused by the Jeep.

"So what do you think?" Jim asked from the backseat.

"Yes, Brier, what do you think?" Jackie asked, squeezing Brier's thigh.

"I love it. I want it." He winked at Jackie.

"Good. Let's get back to the dealership so I can check under the hood for a few minutes before we discuss price." Jackie gave Brier knowing look. "The faster we can take care of this, the better."

"I agree," Brier chuckled.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Brier walked into the house, Jackie was already naked and in bed. "What took you so long?"

Brier grinned and started undressing. "Bram insisted he take the Jeep for a test drive to make sure it was safe."

Brier pushed his pants down and stepped out of them. Jackie's mouth began to water at the hardness bobbing between his lover's legs. "I think he just wanted to drive it though. Declan said Bram'll be buying one next."

"Turn off the light, babe," Jackie instructed. Although they usually made love with the lights on, he didn't want Brier to see his bruised and swollen knee. He had things other than pity and first aid on his mind.

The room was suddenly dark, save for the streetlight shining through the bedroom curtains. Jackie felt the bed dip, and moved his sore knee as far away as he could.

Brier started to chuckle when he felt how far apart Jackie's legs were spread. "Does this mean you want me to fuck you?"

"I figured it was your turn. You've opened yourself to my cock every night for the past week."

He pulled Brier into a kiss, thrusting his tongue inside the warmth of the man he loved. The Jeep had been an unexpected surprise, but it sure seemed to make Brier happy, and that was Jackie's goal in life. Hopefully, as long as he kept Brier happy, his lover would have no reason to stray.

Brier's hands began exploring Jackie's body, those beautiful long fingers tracing each ridge and dip. Jackie moaned as Brier's hand wrapped around his cock. He put his hands on Brier's shoulders and gave him a nudge. "Need to feel your mouth on me."

With a moan of agreement, Brier's mouth began working its way down Jackie's body. Closing his eyes, Jackie gave himself over to his lover's teeth and tongue. He loved the way Brier nipped gently at his skin before laving it.

Reaching over to the bedside table, Jackie's hand closed around the ever-present bottle of lube. Brier settled between Jackie's spread thighs and began running his tongue up the length of Jackie's cock. "Oh, yeah."

Brier groaned and swallowed Jackie's length. With the lube in one hand, Jackie used his other to bury his fingers in Brier's silky black hair as he began thrusting in and out of his lover's mouth. He was sorry the lights were out. Nothing in the world was sexier than watching himself fuck Brier's mouth.

Jackie was so turned on he forgot about his knee and tried to use both legs to thrust deeper. As soon as he put his weight on his stump, the pain seared through his entire leg and into his hip.

"Fuck," he yelled out in pain.

Brier's mouth popped off Jackie's cock. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Jackie swallowed around the bile rising in his throat. He couldn't catch his breath as his knee continued to throb. "Turn on the light, babe."

Brier crawled up to the head of the bed and switched on the lamp. Sitting back on his haunches, he stared down at Jackie. "What's wrong?"

"My knee," Jackie panted through the pain.

Swinging back the sheet that covered Jackie's knee, Brier gasped. "Oh my God, what did you do?"

When Jackie didn't answer right away, Brier jumped out of bed and left the bedroom. Jackie heard the water running in the bathroom and the medicine cabinet open and close. He felt a sudden moment of pride that even without being told, Brier knew exactly what he needed.

Within seconds Brier was back. He had a glass of water, medicine bottle and cold washcloth in his hands. Shaking out two pills, Brier helped Jackie sit up enough to take them and swallow half the water in the glass. Next the cool rag was placed on Jackie's forehead.

"Hold on and I'll get that bag of peas from the freezer."

Brier once again raced out of the room. Lying there, Jackie couldn't help but wonder if the injury would set his therapy back. He was finally starting to get around pain-free again.

A naked Brier came back into the room and gently laid the ad-hoc ice pack on his knee.

"You should've told me," Brier pouted.

"I didn't want to upset you. Some things are better dealt with alone," Jackie tried to explain.

Brier curled up against him. "It's hard being a man sometimes, isn't it?"

"Yeah. We're supposed to be so strong and do things for ourselves, but it's not always easy."

"No, it's not," Brier mumbled, pushing his face against Jackie's neck.

Jackie wrapped both arms around his partner and kissed the top of his head. He could feel the pain medication taking effect and yawned. "I think I'm going to call in sick in the morning. Maybe a day off my feet will be enough to get me back on track."

Brier nodded. "No matter what, you know I love you, right?"

"Sure, babe." Jackie wondered where that had come from. "Something wrong?"

Brier shook his head. "I just want you to be proud of me, that's all."

"I'm proud of you every day." Jackie drifted off to sleep still puzzling Brier's mood.

## Chapter Eight

The ringing phone woke Jackie from his mid-morning nap. He reached over and clumsily picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"How's the knee?" Mac asked.

"Not too bad as long as I don't walk on it, look at it or breathe on it," Jackie answered.

"Damn, you must've done a number on it."

"Yeah, something like that."

"You need me to find someone to take over your classes again tomorrow?" Mac asked.

"Yeah, as much as I hate it, I should probably stay in bed another day."

"What about Brier?"

"What about him?" Jackie rubbed his eyes as he started to drift back to sleep.

"Will he be gone again tomorrow?"

"Huh? What do you mean gone again? Isn't he there?" Jackie had a sinking feeling. It wasn't like Brier to miss a day of work, especially because Jackie had kissed him this morning before sending his lover out the door.

"No. He called in this morning and told me about your knee. Said he needed to take the day off. I just assumed he was taking care of you."

Flashes of Brier's strange mood the previous day came back to him. "Can you patch me through to Bram?"

"Sure, is there something wrong?" Mac asked.

"I sure as hell hope not."

"Hang on, I'll get Bram for you."

Jackie was put on hold. A thought struck him. Maybe Brier was just downstairs making him soup or something. He lifted himself enough to look out the window beside his bed. *Shit*. His sedan was the only vehicle in the driveway. His mind was whirling through possible scenarios until Bram came on the line.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Have you heard from Brier?"

"No. Why?"



Jackie sat up. He knew if Bram hadn't heard from his twin, it couldn't be good. "Brier left this morning. I thought he was going to work, but Mac just told me he called in."

"What? Where the hell's he at then?"

"Good question." Jackie fought back and forth with himself for several seconds before proceeding. "He was acting strange yesterday. I thought it was the car thing, but then when we got back to the house his mood seemed to continue."

"What kind of mood. Like a going-off-the-deep-end kind of mood?"

"No, I don't think so." He thought about Brier's bristly attitude in the accounting office. "Hell, I don't know. He seemed edgy and then last night he was talking about how hard it was to be a man..."

Jackie swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Fuck! How could I have misread him? Brier said he wanted me to remember that no matter what happened he loved me."

Images of Brier hurting himself came to mind. "You don't think he would do anything to himself..."

"Dammit! Don't fucking talk like that," Bram cursed, cutting him off.

Jackie hissed through his teeth as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Can you put me on hold and try and call his cell?"

"Hang on."

Hearing the familiar music of Brier's cell phone coming from the living room, Jackie groaned. The music eventually cut off and Bram came back on the line.

"No answer, but I left a message."

"He left his phone on the charger again," Jackie said, feeling totally defeated. "Maybe he's at the church? He told me yesterday he wanted to go by there, but then the whole car thing came up and I forgot."

"I'll go down the street and check."

"Okay. I'm gonna get dressed and head your way. Call me when you find something out."

"Will do," Bram answered before hanging up.

Jackie looked down at his swollen knee. He knew there was no way he'd be able to walk on it, so he didn't bother putting on his prosthesis. Standing, he balanced himself on one foot as he hopped over to the dresser. With a pair of sweats and T-shirt in hand, Jackie used the furniture and walls to balance him as he made his way to the living room.

As he sat on the sofa to dress, he tried to remember where he'd left his crutches the night before. One of the first things he'd done when he came into the house was go to the kitchen for aspirin and a beer.

He slowly made his way to the kitchen. The white envelope with his name neatly printed on the front nearly stopped his heart. He collapsed in the kitchen chair and fingered the envelope resting neatly on the table. Was it a Dear John?

Before he could gather the nerve to open the envelope, the phone started to ring. Sliding his chair over enough to reach the phone on the wall, Jackie answered, already sure of what Bram had found.

"He's not there."

"Yeah, I didn't think so. There's a letter here on the kitchen table addressed to me," Jackie confided.

"What's it say?"

"I don't know. I haven't had the guts to read it yet."

"Well open it, man. I'm worried sick here."

Scooting himself back to the table, Jackie picked up the envelope and slid the single sheet of notebook paper out. He unfolded it. There were only five lines written on the page.

"Jackie," he began to read aloud.

"I hope you're not mad at me. I love you so much, but this is something I have to do. I made a bargain, and you and Bram always tell me a man is only as good as his word. If you don't want me anymore, turn off the porch-light, and I'll know I'm no longer welcome."

Jackie read the short note again. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Bram groaned. "He mentioned his bargain. The only one I know he's made is the one with God."

Jackie re-read the note with Brier's bargain in mind. "You don't think he went to talk to the prosecutor or one of the witnesses, do you?"

"That's exactly what I think," Bram answered.

"But he's never even driven out of the area. How's he supposed to drive all the way to Oklahoma by himself?"

"That's not the biggest question," Bram said.

"Yeah, and what's that?"

"How did he find out where to go in the first place?"

\* \* \* \*

Brier stopped at a gas station to pee and get something to eat. After taking care of business, he browsed the aisles for something that looked good. He'd already had three candy bars for breakfast, but he didn't know if he had enough cash on him to pay for the gas he'd need and a real lunch.

He spotted a sandwich wrapped in plastic in the refrigerated section and pulled the money out of his front jeans pocket. He still had a fifty and a twenty. He'd just filled his tank and knew that would cost him thirty-eight dollars, and the sandwich was three dollars. That would only leave him about twenty-nine dollars. What would he do if Jared refused to talk to him and he needed to drive all the way to Oklahoma? He'd definitely need more gas.

With a sigh, Brier bypassed the sandwich and grabbed a small bag of chips instead. At least he'd remembered to take a couple of bottles of water before leaving the house earlier. He may get hungry, but at least he should have enough for gas.

He paid for his stuff and got back into the Jeep. For some reason, he didn't like his new car nearly as much as he had the previous night. Even though he'd taken the soft-top off and had spent the day in the open air and sunshine, it almost felt suffocating. He wondered if it was because he felt so guilty about lying to Jackie.

He took out the map and studied it. He'd asked the man inside how much further to Lubbock and the man had said he was within twenty-three miles. His plan was to stop at another station once he got into Lubbock and ask someone how to get to Jared's address.

Pulling out of the station, Brier drove the remaining distance in a fog of mixed emotions. He thought about the letter he'd left for Jackie. Maybe he was doing this all wrong. What if God got mad at him for hurting Jackie?

By the time he pulled into the first gas station he saw, his cheeks were wet with tears. Address in hand, he got out of the Jeep and walked inside the small, dirty building. "Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me how to get to 1325 Oakmont?"

The nice man gave him directions, while Brier furiously scribbled them on his sheet of paper. "And could you tell me where the nearest church is that might be open?"

"Which denomination?"

"Huh?"

"Are you Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, what?"

Brier shrugged. "It doesn't really matter. I just want to talk to God. I don't think he cares which church I'm in."

The guy chuckled. "You're alright, man. Go down about a mile and take a left. There'll be one on your right hand side."

"Thanks."

Armed with directions to both the church and Jared's house, Brier decided to go to the church first. The big brick building was easy to find, and he pulled into the parking lot. Quietly opening the door, he stepped inside and made his way to one of the wooden benches towards the front.

Bowing his head, he spoke to God. "It's me, Brier. I'm in a different place than usual, but I figure you know that already. I had to come down here to talk to Jared. Remember I already told you about him. He was the guy that Rick hurt after he left the hospital I was in. By the sound of it, I was really lucky. Jackie told me Rick actually beat Jared up really bad when he threatened to tell on him. Rick never did that to me, but to be honest, God, I never thought of telling anyone until that day with Jackie."

Brier heard a noise behind him and glanced over his shoulder. A woman had come in and was watering the big plants in the back of the church. Turning back to the conversation at hand, Brier spoke even softer.

"I didn't forget about the deal I made with you when Jackie was sick. It's been a lot harder than I thought it'd be. As a matter of fact, that's kinda why I'm here. I'm really confused between doing what I think you want and doing what my heart wants. I don't know that I would be able to live without Jackie. He means everything to me, but so do you."

Brier sat with his head down for another thirty minutes. Drying his eyes, he decided he'd stop by Jared's house and try and talk to him. If Jared refused, he'd forget about convincing the others to go to court and drive back home to Jackie. What he realised while sitting there was that he had fulfilled his promise to God. He'd done everything in his power to see that Rick was in trouble for the things he'd done. Although his word alone hadn't been enough, it wasn't his fault. The really important thing was taking care of the love between him and Jackie. He knew God would see it the same way.

With a final nod to the altar, Brier went back out to his Jeep. He pulled out the piece of paper and followed the directions to an old, run-down white house. The scraggly brush in the front yard looked like it had never even been mowed or cut down.

Brier shook his head, suddenly feeling sorry for Jared. He'd been lucky. Having brothers like Bram and Thor had changed Brier's life dramatically. Brier didn't know if Jared had any family, but by the looks of the house he'd have to say either he didn't, or they didn't care about him.

Climbing out of the Jeep, Brier walked up the crumbling front walk to the small porch. He'd rehearsed what he wanted to say most of the five hour drive. Squaring his shoulders, Brier raised his fist and knocked on the door. The torn screen flapped with each tap of Brier's knuckles, reminding him once again of how little Jared seemed to have.

He could hear some shuffling around behind the screen door before a man finally appeared in front of him. Small in stature, with white blond hair, a pair of deep blue eyes stared out at Brier. "Can I help you?"

"Jared Grant?" Brier thought he detected bruising on the man's face earlier, but when the smaller man spoke, the split in his lip was quite clear.

"Are you okay?" Brier asked.

The man took a step back. "What do you want?"

"Are you Jared Grant?"

"Yes."

"I'm Brier Blackstone..."

Before he could go any further, Jared shook his head and tried to shut the door in his face. Knowing his chance to talk to the man was slipping away, Brier opened the screen door and blocked the door with his body. "Please. I just need to talk to you for a minute. I've come all the way from Albuquerque."

"I'm not supposed to talk to anyone." Jared's voice was so soft Brier could barely hear him.

With nothing between them, it was easier to see the bruises covering Jared's face, neck and arms. "Oh my God, who did that to you?"

The tip of Jared's tongue snaked out to touch against the fresh cut on his lip. "You have to leave. He'll be home any second," he spoke in a rushed fashion.

"Who?" Brier repeated.

Tears began to run down Jared's face. "He'll kill you if he finds you here."

"Who? Please, come with me. I can take you somewhere where you'll be safe from whoever's hurting you." He could see the desire to escape in Jared's eyes.

"I can't. I have a cat." Jared's eyes continued to search the street behind Brier. "You need to go now."

"I'm not leaving unless you come with me. We can take the cat if that's what you're worried about."

Jared shuffled from foot to foot. "I have a carrier."

Seeing the information as a good sign, Brier nodded. "Good, that's good. Go get it, grab your cat and let's go."

Jared's slim delicate finger lifted to run over his cut lip. "How can you promise he won't find me?"

"I work for a bodyguard agency. Their job is to protect people. We can help you."

Jared's blue eyes closed momentarily. When he opened them again, Brier saw a new resolve in the previously frightened man. "Okay. See if you can get Jelly Beans while I find her carrier."

Before he could say anything else, Jared turned and rushed through the house. Brier stepped further inside. He couldn't get over the interior of the place. Though everything appeared to be neat as a pin, Jared's poverty was evident everywhere he looked. No wonder the poor guy thought he had to put up with abuse.

He spotted a fluffy tail scurry behind a chair and knelt down on the threadbare carpeting. "Jelly Bean," he called.

"Come on girl," Brier coaxed. A cute little face with a pink nose peaked out.

"Hey, girl." Brier reached for the long-haired calico cat. With a loud meow, Jelly Bean snuggled against his chest.

"Found it," Jared proclaimed, running back into the room with a half-empty bag of cat food tucked under his arm and the carrier in his hands.

Brier took the carrier and managed to get Jelly Bean inside and headed for the door. "Okay, let's go."

"Hang on, I need to get something." Jared disappeared and Brier started to get nervous. "Come on, Jared!"

Out of breath, Jared came back into the room carrying a small box. "I'm ready."

They ran out of the house and towards the Jeep. Brier was buckling the carrier into the backseat when he heard screeching tires and a startled scream from Jared.

"He's back."

Brier clicked the seatbelt into its slot and stood. What he saw nearly dropped him to his knees. He looked from Jared to Rick. All the memories of abuse he suffered at the hands of the big orderly came rushing back.

Jared started to cry while trying to hide behind the Jeep.

"What the fuck is goin' on?" Rick bellowed, opening the door before he'd even put the old pickup into park.

"Oh no, oh no..." Jared continued to mutter in his crouched position.

"Get in the Jeep, Jared," Brier ordered, putting himself between the small battered man and his former abuser. Jared remained frozen until Jelly Bean meowed, trying to get out of her carrier.

The simple sound from his beloved cat seemed to help Jared make up his mind. Once he was in the passenger's seat, Brier tossed him the keys. "Lean over and start it up."

"Get outta that Jeep you perverted little fuck!" Rick screamed.

Brier noticed how Jared almost immediately started to follow Rick's orders, leaving no doubt of the control Rick had over him.

"Stay where you are, Jared. I'll take care of this."

Facing the demon, Brier squared his shoulders. "Don't you talk to him. I'm going to make sure you never hurt him again."

Rick started to cackle. "Really, fag? And how're you going to do that? You couldn't even protect that cherry ass of yours. How're you plannin' to protect a girlie man like ole Jared here?"

Brier heard the Jeep's engine come to life. Looking Rick in the eyes, Brier held his ground between the Jeep and Rick. "I'm not the same person I used to be."

"What, you mean you're not stupid anymore?" Rick laughed, stalking closer to Brier.

Brier could feel his fragile control begin to slip. Memories of his own mother calling him stupid came back to haunt him, as well as his hands wrapping around her neck until she took her last breath.

No. He told himself. *Think of Jackie. Think of all the real men you've come to know and love.* His breathing began to even out. He took several steps back towards the vehicle. He knew he didn't need to fight Rick to win this battle.

He spun quickly and jumped into the Jeep. Putting it into gear he stepped on the gas just as a meaty fist slammed into his jaw. Brier's head snapped to the side as he peeled away from the kerb.

Jared squeaked beside him. "Oh my God, are you okay?"

Brier rubbed his jaw as he watched Rick in the rear view mirror. Turning the corner, Brier headed out of town, but a quick glance in his mirror had him worried. "We can't make it like this," he yelled over the blowing wind. "Where's a police station?"

"No. We can't go to the police, he'll kill me."

Even though he knew Jackie would get mad at him, Brier took one hand off the wheel and reached for Jared's frail hand. "Listen to me. I promise you. Cross my heart. Nothing bad will happen to you."

Jared squeezed Brier's hand. "Turn right at the next light."



## Chapter Nine

Mac had half the agency out looking for Brier, so the only thing for Jackie to do was sit home and worry. With his knee the way it was, actively searching for his lover wasn't an option. They had a team on the way to Tulsa, and one heading for Lubbock.

When his cell phone rang, Jackie prayed it was good news. He looked at the display on his phone and saw the Lubbock Police Department. *Shit*. "Hello?"

"Jackie?"

Jackie released the breath he wasn't even aware he'd been holding. Slumping back in the chair, he felt like crying. "Are you okay, babe?"

"Yeah. I'm so sorry I went behind your back," Brier apologised.

"You're safe aren't you?"

"For now, but I need you. I went to Jared's house, and he was bruised, and I could tell someone had been hitting him, and I told him he should leave with me, but he was really scared, and then there was Jelly Bean..."

"Brier, baby, take a deep breath and slow down. Who's Jelly Bean?"

"Jared's cat, but it's okay, because we managed to bring her with us when we got away from Rick."

Jackie's instincts kicked in and he bolted up from the chair, before collapsing to the floor. "Fuck!" he screamed as pain tore through his knee.

"Jackie," he heard Brier yell.

Putting the phone back to his ear, Jackie grunted. "I'm here, just hurt my knee again. Tell me what the hell Rick was doing there?"

"He'd been living with Jared, beating him up and...ya know, doin' stuff to him."

"Okay, so why are you calling from the police station?"

"Because Rick came when we were trying to leave and followed us. I didn't know what else to do, so I came here."

"You did the right thing, babe. Did the police go after Rick?"

"Yeah, they're looking for him now."

"Okay, sit tight. We've got a couple of guards headed that way anyway. I'll give them a call and send them your way."

"I can't leave my Jeep down here."

Jackie couldn't help but grin. Despite all the tension of the day and everything Brier had been through, his lover was still worried about his car.

"Have Merritt drive it back for you."

"And Jared and Jelly Bean?" Brier asked.

"They should be fine back in their house if they arrest Rick, right?"

Brier got very quiet on the other end of the phone. "Brier?"

"You didn't see how they lived, Jackie. Jared doesn't have anyone like I do to help look after him."

"So what're you asking?" Jackie loved the shit out of Brier, but he wasn't sure about taking on a houseguest with a cat.

"I don't know. I promised him I'd keep him safe." Brier seemed to cup his hand over the phone. "He's really scared. I think if we make him feel safe, I can get him to testify."

"Okay, he can stay with us for a few days until we can find him something," Jackie relented.

"Well I was thinking maybe he could stay in the dorm at the agency. I think he'd feel a lot safer there."

*Even better.* "I'll talk to Amir. He's in charge of the training facility."

Silence once again came from Brier's end. "Brier?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I just don't know what to say to you. I know what I did was wrong, but I'm glad I was able to help Jared."

"Me too, babe. Don't worry. I'm only a little mad at you. We'll work it out."

"I love you, Jackie."

"I love you too. I'll meet you guys at the training facility. It'll give me a chance to get a few things ready."

"Thanks."

Jackie could still hear the worry in his lover's voice. "Just get home so I can kiss that gorgeous face of yours."

Brier chuckled. "Not so gorgeous any more. Rick about broke my jaw when he punched me..."

Jackie's fist clenched tighter around the phone. The thought of Rick getting close enough to Brier to punch him didn't sit well at all. He'd promised Brier he'd never again be hurt by Rick.

Before he could reply to Brier's comment, his other line beeped. Pulling the phone away from his ear, he glanced at the display.

"Listen, babe, Bram's on the other line. I need to tell him you're safe. I'll meet you at the facility."

"Okay, bye, Jackie."

"Bye, babe."

Jackie ended the call and clicked over. "He's safe."

\* \* \* \*

"Another cup?" Seb asked.

Jackie drained the dregs of his coffee and handed his mug over. "Thanks."

*Dammit.* He couldn't sit there any longer. If it weren't for his knee, he would've headed towards Lubbock to pick up Brier himself. Other than getting things set up for Jared, he'd done nothing but worry.

He glanced over to where Bram and Declan were sitting. Bram had been on the phone with Thor non-stop since he'd heard the news. Jackie knew he'd be welcome to sit with them, but getting into any kind of argument with Bram wasn't worth it just then.

Seb took a seat next to him and handed over a fresh cup of coffee. "It's all my fault, ya know."

"What?"

Seb, who seemed as restless as Jackie, jumped up from his chair and started pacing the bottom-floor dorm lounge. "I'm the one who gave Brier Jared's address. He said they'd been friends in the hospital and he wanted to write to him."

Well, at least that answered one of the questions he was going to put to Brier. "Didn't you think it odd that he didn't ask me or Bram to get that information?"

"Yeah, and I asked him about that." Seb's black eyes shifted to the side. "He said the two of you didn't approve of his friendship with the guys from his past. I knew I was going behind your back giving it to him, but he's a hard guy to say no to."

"Tell me about it," Jackie mumbled.

He knew by the cat-like stance Seb was maintaining he was waiting for Jackie to let loose on him. "Relax. I'm not mad."

After a short nod, Seb continued pacing. Jackie was surprised the guy was so wound up. He knew Brier was friendly with the man, but he had no idea anyone could crack through Seb's shell to elicit such concern. He wondered how deep Seb's feelings for Brier ran.

"You got designs on my man?" he finally asked.

Seb stopped in his tracks and spun around. "What? No."

"Then why the over-the-top concern?" Jackie had dealt with a lot of men in this profession, and Seb was usually colder than any of them.

Seb shrugged and gazed out the window. "He reminds me of my own brother."

The statement further shocked Jackie. No one knew anything about Seb, other than he'd grown up in foster care. The fact that he'd let slip something about his personal life was definitely a first.

"How so?" Jackie prodded.

"Just does."

A car pulled up in front of the big window followed by Brier's Jeep. "That's them."

Jackie grabbed his crutches and got to his feet while Seb unlocked the security door. Jackie pulled out his phone and called Mac. "They're here."

"Okay, I'm trying to deal with a situation in Chicago right now, but I'll be over as soon as I can to check on them."

"Trouble in Chicago?"

"Yeah, and I think it's only the beginning. I've put the guys protecting Alec on alert as well. I think Lenny Constantine is flexing his muscles from jail."

"Shit. Okay, keep me posted." Although he wasn't involved in the Constantine mess any longer, both sets of agents protecting the members of the crime family were his friends.

Brier was the first one out of the car and through the door. Balancing his weight on his good leg, Jackie tossed down one of the crutches so he could wrap an arm around the man he loved.

The bruise on Brier's jaw started to raise his blood pressure until his man soothed him with a kiss. Damn, how he loved Brier's kisses. He swept the interior of Brier's mouth with his tongue wishing the two of them were already naked in their bed at home.

"Don't ever do that to me again," Jackie warned, breaking the kiss.

"Never," Brier agreed. Turning towards the door, he said, "Jared, come over here and meet my boyfriend."

Jackie focused on the small, battered man standing just inside the room. He appeared completely lost and bewildered as he clutched a cat carrier in his arms. Jackie couldn't believe this was the man he'd cussed so many times for being a coward. No wonder the man was too afraid to talk to the prosecutor.

Jared studied the room and the people in it, before walking towards them. Brier held out his hand, putting it on Jared's shoulder when he got close enough. "Jared, this is my boyfriend Jackie."

Jackie had to take his arm from around Brier to reach out to the man. "Nice to meet you."

Jared tried to balance the carrier under one arm, eliciting several meows from Jelly Bean, before finally setting it on the ground in front of his feet. "Nice to meet you, too. Brier's told me a lot about you."

Jackie zeroed in on the scars running up Jared's wrists. The prosecutor had never divulged why Jared had been in a mental hospital, but Jackie had a pretty good idea. He shook the man's hand gently and motioned for Seb.

"I'd like you to meet a friend of ours, Sebastian James."

"Call me Seb," Seb corrected, shaking Jared's hand.

Without letting go of Jared's hand, Seb leaned closer to the man and practically growled. "Who did that to you?"

Jared quickly pulled his hand away and took several steps back, fear in his eyes. Brier immediately went to Jared and stood in front of him, blocking Jackie's view of the frightened man. The two of them spoke quietly for several moments before Brier turned back to Seb.

"I'm going to help Jared and Jelly Bean get settled in their room. Can you tell me which one?"

Jackie glanced at Seb. The man's jaws were clenching, showing his apparent anger. He wondered if he should have Jared moved to another wing. Seb had offered to look after their new arrival, so Jared had been given the room next to his, but now Jackie was questioning that decision.

"Room 217," Jackie finally said when Seb remained silent.

Brier gave Jackie another kiss before picking up the cat carrier. "Where's your box of stuff?"

"Johnny carried it in," Jared informed Brier.

"Why don't you go get it from him, and I'll hold Jelly Bean."

Jackie noticed the way Jared took several steps backward before finally turning around. He'd known men like that, men who were leery of turning their backs to people. Jared's scars ran deeper than the ones on his skin.

Once Jared was far enough away, Brier addressed Seb. "Don't think he doesn't like you. He's afraid of almost everyone."

"Who did that to him?" Seb asked again.

"Rick Sutcliff. The same guy who hurt me. He must've followed Jared when he was released from the hospital." Brier shook his head. "I got away from Rick, but Jared wasn't strong enough."

Jackie noticed the way Seb's hands fisted at his sides. "Where's this Rick Sutcliff now?"

"The police caught him before he was able to get out of Lubbock."

"Lucky for him," Seb mumbled.

Jared appeared at Brier's side holding a small wooden box. "I need a bowl for Jelly Bean's water."

"Okay. All the rooms have a tiny kitchen in the corner, so there should be some bowls there," Brier assured Jared.

Jackie watched as Brier led Jared towards the elevator. "I'm not sure how he's going to do here. Maybe we should talk him into going back to the hospital for a while."

"He'll be fine. Now that I know some of what he's gone through, I'll be better able to handle the situation. I'll make sure he's okay," Seb replied, watching the two men step onto the elevator.

"Until you're called off on your next assignment. Do me a favour and don't get attached. I've seen what happens when you're forced to leave someone you care about."

"Don't worry. I don't attach myself anymore. That's why I'm in this business."

Jackie hid his grin by bending over to pick up his fallen crutch. By the ferocity in which Seb reacted to Jared's bruises, Jackie would guess the man was already more attached than he was aware.

\* \* \* \*

Watching Brier sleep, Jackie thanked God once again that he'd been returned safely. He had to admit, Brier had done a damn good job of handling the situation with Jared and Rick. He knew standing up to his abuser hadn't been easy, but from their talk the previous night, Brier was happy he'd done it.

Of course they still needed to convince Jared to testify, but with the frail, battered man now safe, Jackie had a feeling it would be much easier. The pictures Brier told him the police had taken of Jared would also go a long way in getting Rick locked up. If nothing else, the assault on Brier would get Rick some time in the pokey.

Jackie smiled thinking about Rick at the mercy of the guys in prison. It would serve the fucker right if they used Rick as their bitch. Turning the tables never sounded so satisfying.

Brier's eyelids fluttered several times before opening fully. "Morning."

Finally free to touch, Jackie ran his hand down Brier's side to smooth across his nude hip. "Morning, babe."

"What time is it?" Brier asked.

"Almost nine."

Brier's eyes popped open. "I need to get up. I'm late for work." Although he said it, Brier didn't move a muscle.

"I've already called in and told them you'll be late. Things are so crazy at the office they probably won't even miss you."

"Why, what's going on?"

"Someone broke into the Constantine mansion last night and nearly got to Addy. Mac's hot to say the least. I'd be surprised if the Black Dog Four unit gets out of this one with their asses intact."

Jackie's hand wandered to the morning erection poking him. "Mmm, something else's finally awake."

Brier grinned, ducking his head as Jackie started to stroke the cock in his hand. As the blood continued to fill the beautiful shaft, Jackie rubbed his fingers over the thick veins. If he didn't know better, he'd think Brier preferred getting a hand job more than an ass fucking.

Brier's moans filled the room as he began thrusting his hips in earnest. Jackie's own cock was leaking so much pre-cum it was pooling at the base of his shaft before running down his hip and onto the sheets below. "Need you."

Opening his eyes, Brier bit his lip. "I don't want to hurt your knee."

Jackie grinned. Leave it to his lover to be concerned about him even in the midst of passion. "I guess you'll have to give up your turn at my ass and ride me instead."

Brier practically jumped over Jackie to grab the lube on the nightstand. By his obvious enthusiasm, Jackie took it the arrangement was just fine with his lover. He knew Brier preferred to be on the receiving end of their lovemaking, which was just fine with Jackie most of the time.

While he was stretched out over him, Jackie didn't miss the opportunity to lick the head of Brier's cock. Damn, the man's pre-cum was sweet. Jackie suspected it was all the fruit his lover ate.

Brier braced his hands on the mattress and took several seconds to fuck Jackie's mouth before resuming his position beside him. After handing the bottle to Jackie, Brier got on all fours and turned around.

Jackie had to reach down and squeeze the base of his cock to stem off impending orgasm at the site of Brier's pretty hole. "Damn, babe, that looks good enough to eat."

With a wiggle of his ass, Brier scooted back enough for Jackie to reach him. "Breakfast is served."

Leaning up on his elbow, Jackie tasted the puckered skin before zeroing in with the tip of his tongue. He prodded the rosette for several seconds before Brier's body opened for him. Brier's entire body started to move as he fucked himself on Jackie's tongue.

Although his lover seemed to be enjoying himself, Jackie needed more, and his cock was in complete agreement. Balancing himself on one elbow, he managed to get the top off the lube. Holding the bottle above Brier's crack, Jackie let the slick fluid dribble down the channel towards its ultimate goal.

He quickly snapped the top back on and tossed the bottle back onto the bed. Using his thumb, Jackie began massaging Brier's hole. Moans of pleasure echoed through the bedroom as Jackie easily slipped two fingers inside Brier's ass. "You like this?"

"You know I do." Brier pulled away and turned to straddle Jackie's hips. "But I need more."



Reaching behind himself, Brier guided the crown of Jackie's cock to his hole. With a grunt and a sigh, his lover slowly impaled himself.

Jackie bit the inside of his cheek as Brier's body enveloped his shaft. He lifted his hands and pinched both dark brown discs on Brier's chest, pleased when the tiny nubs pebbled.

Catching Brier's gaze, Jackie smiled, seeing the love in the other man's eyes. He wanted to see that look for the rest of his life. Even if Bram continued to question his staying power, Jackie knew the truth. It had nothing to do with how smart Brier was or wasn't, and everything to do with the man's capacity to love and be loved.

## About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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