

WRANGLERS

VOIR DIRE



VIVIEN DEAN

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BY

VIVIEN DEAN

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WRANGLERS: VOIR IRE
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CHAPTER 1

Sam Kimball stared at the tiny blonde behind the counter, unbelieving what he'd just heard. "What do you mean, it's not ready?"

Her narrow shoulders lifted in a shrug, but he suspected she wasn't smart enough for it to be anything malicious. "It's not ready."

"It has to be ready. I paid double to make sure it would be."

She glanced down at the dry cleaner receipt he'd handed over to pick up his suit. "It doesn't say anything here about a special pick-up time."

"That's because I talked to Mr. Zielinski himself about it. Just this morning when I dropped it off." His shoulders ached from how tightly he was wound. For a Friday, it had been a bitch of a day.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

Everything that could've gone wrong, had. Spilling his coffee onto his suit when he was packing for the weekend, thus necessitating the emergency trip to the dry cleaners. Running late for court, only to lose his motion to compel in the Keck case. Returning to the parking garage to find one of the back tires on his truck had gone flat, thus forcing him to cancel a lunch meeting to get the tire replaced. Now, it looked like he was going to end up losing part of his big weekend away, because he had to go out and buy a suit off the rack to replace the one he'd hoped to wear. What he wouldn't give to start this whole bad day over again.

"I'm sorry, sir. I can make it a priority now, if you want."

He took a deep breath. Affecting his most charming smile, one that had disarmed more than one female jury member, he leaned forward onto his elbows and lowered his voice. "And how fast of a priority will that be, darlin'?"

Sometimes, thickening his Texan accent did the trick. Just like the nicknames. He wasn't embarrassed about using whatever advantages he could. This world wasn't the kind of place that gave anyone unconditional favors.

"You could pick it up tomorrow morning," she said, eager to please. "First thing."

He shook his head in dismay. "Tomorrow's no good. I'm not going to be around this weekend."

"Then, you could come in first thing Monday morning. We open at five on Mondays."

Clearly, the definition of "priority" escaped her. Sam took a deep breath to try and explain it to her, when the bell jingled behind him, drawing both of their gazes to the door.

Familiar brown eyes met his, and the tightness in Sam's body took on a whole new tenor. Derek Rossi was a wall of muscle, six-

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

three and a hundred and ninety pounds of mouth-watering goodness. In Derek's presence, Sam always fought the urge to pull himself taller than his five-feet-seven, but he was the first to admit that every inch the other man had on him made his blood burn. Everything about Derek had done it from the first time they'd met across a conference table. His perfectly trimmed dark hair brought attention to the harsh slash of his cheekbones, while his wide, firm mouth taunted Sam into misbehaving, even when he strove not to.

Sam straightened and turned around. He had to shove his hands into his pants pockets to stop from reaching out and grabbing Derek, but it also had the added bonus of drawing Derek's gaze—even if only for a fleeting moment—to his groin. "Didn't expect to see you today," he said with a grin. "I didn't even know you came here."

"I don't. Meryl told me you'd run out to pick up your cleaning."

"Oh?" He masked the sudden lurch of his heart with a casual curiosity. Derek rarely allowed their paths to cross at the office, let alone deliberately sought him out during business hours. That had been the arrangement ever since the beginning, ever since Sam had accepted the job offer with Derek's firm. Nobody knew they saw each other outside the office, not even Meryl, Sam's secretary. Nobody knew they were...well, Sam wasn't sure what exactly they were. He wasn't exactly sure Derek knew, either. He just knew they *were*, which was all that mattered. "And you're checking to make sure I don't come back without it?"

The corner of Derek's mouth lifted. Shit, but Sam loved that little smirk.

"I was hoping I could get you for a few minutes before the weekend, actually." He glanced past Sam's shoulder. "Are you

almost done here?”

He'd actually forgotten about the idiotic counter girl. “No. Give me a sec.” Turning back around, he resumed his earlier position, flashing another smile at her. “Listen, darlin’. That suit? I need it for this weekend. That’s why I made sure your boss and I had an agreement this morning when I dropped it off. Now, if the best you can do is tomorrow morning, I’m not going to have a choice but call him and let him know what’s happened here.” He grimaced. “You don’t really want me to do that, now do you? ’Cause that’ll mean interrupting him out on the Bay. You and I both know how much he loves his boat.”

That was a partial lie. Sam wasn’t actually privy to Zielinski’s boating habits. But he’d listened to the man talk for almost half an hour that morning about how much he was looking forward to finally getting a free afternoon to do some sailing. Sam was playing the odds the girl would be a little more clued in.

When she started gnawing at her lower lip, he knew he’d won. Even better, he knew Derek had seen it, too.

“An hour,” she finally said. “That’s the best I can do.”

With a pleased smile, Sam straightened and reached for his wallet. “An hour’s great.” He pulled out a ten and slid it toward her. “I’ll be back then.”

Derek held the door open for him as they exited, jerking his chin toward the Starbucks across the street. “How about we get a coffee while you wait?”

“Sounds good.”

He let Derek lead the way, for a whole myriad of reasons. Derek was more comfortable when he felt he was in charge, for instance, even if that wasn’t necessarily the case. Plus, there was the whole fact he’d deliberately sought Sam out, something he

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

hadn't done in the two months they'd had this arrangement. That had Sam's mind twisting and turning, trying to fathom out the purpose.

But the biggest reason, and the one that would get him shoved into a wall if he ever gave voice to it, was the view he got of Derek's ass. Even encased in Derek's perfectly tailored suit, it left Sam throbbing. Maybe especially because it was covered, because then his imagination went wild. He hadn't yet had a chance to sink into it—mostly because every time he mentioned the possibility, their dirty talk got out of control, which invariably led to Derek bending him over and fucking his brains out—but he would. One of these days.

They ordered their coffees separately, then took a table in the far back corner of the café. The location piqued Sam's curiosity even more. Derek chose privacy for personal issues. If this had been related to work, he would have chosen a seat near the window so they could appreciate the gorgeous afternoon sunshine.

Sam stretched his legs beneath the table, not quite slouching but definitely low enough to let his knees graze across Derek's. "So what's this all about? You've got me busting to find out here."

A pleased smile spread over Derek's handsome features. "I closed Zoe Barragan's case today. Nailed that bastard ex of hers to the wall."

Sam brightened at the announcement. He'd referred his neighbor to Derek while they'd still been just colleagues. He'd known Derek might see it as a calculated move, but the fact of the matter was, Derek was one of the best lawyers in San Francisco for good reason. Zoe had needed someone who was both tenacious and adept at navigating the somewhat sticky waters of her upper class world. Sam had known the two would be perfect for each

other—she had lots of money to spend on getting her life back in order, and Derek had the skill to make it happen. The bonus side effect had been proving to Derek once and for all that, when it came to Derek, Sam didn't always think with his dick.

"I'll bet she's thrilled. She can finally relax again."

Derek snorted. "The day that woman relaxes is the day she dies. But she can breathe easier, at least."

"And you know you can count on her for referrals now. She's loyal that way."

"Maybe. I'm just glad it all had a happy ending."

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"I've had them for a while," he said. "Friends of mine are having a commitment ceremony in Napa on Sunday. I'm one of the best men."

"Oh. That's why you need the suit." Derek shifted in his seat, breaking the spare contact of their legs beneath the table. "Well, we can just do it some other time. It's not a big deal."

Except it was. Because Derek had made the effort to find him and to extend a weekend-long invitation he'd never dared before. And Sam knew Derek. He'd use this as an excuse to back off again, and it would be another week—or worse, two—before he'd crumble and even speak to Sam.

"You could come with me, you know." He blurted the invitation without thinking, but there was no way he'd stop and take it back once it was out there. "I do get to bring along a guest if I want."

Derek was already shaking his head. "You don't want me along."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"Why would I have invited you if I didn't want you to go?"

"You feel obligated because I cornered you." Derek sipped at his coffee. Though he kept his face a blank mask, Sam saw through the façade. He always had. "If you'd really wanted me to go, you

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

would've told me about it before now."

Snorting, Sam shook his head. "I didn't tell you about it, because I knew you'd turn me down. I thought I was saving both of us the trouble."

"Why would I turn you down? I love Napa."

"And you hate public displays."

"You think I've never been to a wedding before?"

"I'd bet my truck you've never been to a gay one, yeah."

Derek's mouth thinned. Sam didn't blink in the unspoken acknowledgement that he'd guessed right.

"Look," Sam tried, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "I knew what I signed up for when we first hooked up. Casual. No strings. No pressures. Hell, I've never met anybody you hang out with outside of the office—"

"That's because I don't."

"That's because you're a workaholic."

"Like you're not."

Sam smiled. "We're not debating my work ethic here. We're talking about the fact we don't know much at all about the other people in our lives."

"And you think I can't handle that?"

This was more treacherous territory. "I don't know," Sam conceded. "You tell me."

Derek sipped more at his coffee, relaxing in his seat as his gaze shifted to the rest of the patrons. This was his contemplative pose, retreating into silence to weigh his options before announcing any sort of decision. Sam had never liked it, but then, he'd always been a bit more impetuous than Derek could ever be. His only choice was to sit and wait it out.

"How big is this wedding?" Derek finally asked.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

So it was going to be a cross-examination. Sam could live with that. "It's a commitment ceremony. And small. About twenty, twenty-five people. Maybe a few extra dates."

"Where?"

"A private vineyard. Abel and Geoff have been going there every year since they met."

"How'd you meet them?"

"I met Abel first, actually. He owns the stable where I keep Flossie." He decided to omit the part where he'd asked Abel out. It wasn't relevant. Abel had turned him down flat, and Sam had been more than okay just to be friends. "Geoff works at Oracle in Pleasanton."

Derek's brow went up at that. "A computer geek, and a stable guy? That's an interesting combination."

"Pronouncing their everlasting love at an upscale vineyard." Sam grinned. "Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

Derek was intrigued, there was no doubt about it. He kept turning his coffee cup around without lifting it up from the table. It was one of his clearest tells.

Sam decided to go for broke. After all, he had nothing to lose. He'd already planned on spending this weekend alone. If he lost, he was just back where he'd always expected to be.

"The wedding will be more fun with you there," he said. "And I meant what I said, about not wanting to ask because I didn't want to be turned down. I was afraid you wouldn't be interested in something a little bit more than what we've got. Even if that's what I want."

For whatever reason, playing true confessions with Derek was easy. It always had been. He'd been the first one to admit to his attraction, and to the fact that he wanted to be friends and more. It

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

had thrown Derek at first, but knowing what he did now, that wasn't so surprising. Any kind of talk about feelings always threw Derek off his game, because he kept his so tightly walled up inside himself. Playing the feelings card ran the risk of pushing Derek even farther away, but at the same time, Sam knew it was the only way for them to ever move on to the next step.

"When are you leaving?"

Sam's heart leapt, but somehow, he managed not to do the same out of his chair. "As soon as my suit's done."

Derek's mouth slanted, sly, sure, and sexy. "You do look good in a suit. I'm not sure I can resist."

"You don't have to."

"An hour's cutting it a little close, though."

No way was he letting Derek go on a technicality. "Are you done at the office?"

"Done enough."

"Then go home and pack what you need for the weekend. I'll swing by and pick you up."

Derek snorted. "I am not riding all the way to Napa in your truck."

Sam smiled and sprawled back in his chair. "You don't have a choice. You don't know where the B&B is."

Another sip of his coffee. More seconds ticking away where Sam's pulse rat-a-tat-tatted in anticipation. If Derek ever knew how much Sam put in store on his every move and decision, he'd never let Sam live it down.

"I guess you can make it up to me later." Draining the rest of his coffee, he stood and tossed it into the nearby bin. He towered over Sam, especially when he moved directly next to him, blocking his view to the rest of the café. Derek leaned down and rested his

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

hand on the table, pinning Sam into the space of his chair, bringing their faces close enough to feel his warm breath across Sam's heating cheeks. When he spoke, his voice was low and husky, meant only for Sam's ears. "Nothing says we can't celebrate in Napa, too."

The kiss that followed was hard, hungry, and far too fast. It left Sam's mouth bruised and his cock aching, with a fucking fantastic view of Derek's ass as he turned on his heel and strode away. Sam ran his tongue over his lips, chasing the strong taste of Derek's coffee and mouthwash, replaying the last few minutes in his head.

More than one first there.

A kiss in public, even if he'd blocked Sam off so nobody could actually see them.

A weekend away.

Meeting Sam's friends.

With a broad smile, Sam picked up his coffee and leaned back in his chair. The mix-up with his suit had managed to turn his whole day around. A certain dry cleaners clerk was going to get herself a big fat tip.

CHAPTER 2

When Abel had asked him to be best man months earlier, Sam hadn't known how to react. He was happy for his friend, but at the time, it had been a reminder that he wasn't any closer to the man who'd been torturing his thoughts and dreams. He'd sublimated his jealousy to focus on helping Abel with the arrangements, though what he knew about wine and Napa could fit in a thimble.

When his relationship with Derek had finally shifted in a better direction, Sam had respected Derek's privacy—even though nothing had been said about not telling people outside of work—and refrained from telling Abel about it. It'd been easier than anticipated, due to Abel's obsession with the ceremony.

But when he and Derek walked into the wood-paneled foyer of the Preciado Inn, laughing over the new idiot associate at the

office, Abel's strong voice calling out his name reminded him he really should have told his friends that he was bringing a date after all.

"You said you were going to be here in time for dinner!" Abel Evers burst out of the adjoining sitting room, filling a good half of the space left by the open French doors. Pale blue eyes leapt from Sam to Derek and Sam again, his brows leaping out of view beneath his mop of hair. The top was long and bleached blond from the sun, while the closely trimmed sides and back had to be his natural shade, a soft honey that matched his sun-burnished skin. The soft white shirt he wore was rolled up at the sleeves, revealing the purple and black edges of the tattoos adorning his muscular left arm, and beneath his hooked nose, the result of an unfortunate fall from a brassy new mare in his youth, his wide mouth curved into a brilliant smile. "Well, at least it looks like you had good reason."

Sam strode forward with a matching grin. Better to head this one off at the pass before Derek tucked tail and ran. "Some of us have real day jobs, you know." He caught Abel's outstretched hand, letting him pull Sam into a one-armed hug.

"He looks like I just snatched away his favorite ball," Abel murmured in Sam's ear. "Guess I better not do something like pinch your ass, or he'll come over here and kick mine."

Sam pulled away from the casual embrace before Abel got the urge to test his theory. Stepping out of the way, he gestured for Derek to approach. "Derek, this is my good friend, Abel Evers, one of the unfortunate grooms this weekend. Abel, Derek Rossi."

The two men shook hands, and though each was politely smiling and saying the right words, there was no mistaking the wary inspection each gave the other. It wasn't the reaction Sam had expected. Derek would naturally be cautious around a stranger,

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

weighing how it was best to react, but Abel seemed to be just as thorough in his scrutiny. Sam was left feeling like his saddle was on crooked with no way of immediately stopping to fix it.

“Geoff’s changing,” Abel said, hooking a thumb toward the winding staircase. “We were thinking of going out for a walk, work off some of dinner.”

Sam smirked. “Yeah. A walk. Now I know why you wanted me here. You need a lawyer present when you get yourself arrested for public indecency again.”

“One time. That happened one time.”

“Because you’ve got a damn good lawyer who put the fear of God and the legal system in your boyfriend.”

“Partner,” Abel corrected. He flushed with obvious pleasure at the term. “That’s what we’re using from now on.”

“And it’s about time.”

Abel glanced at Derek, then said to Sam, “Since you’re here, we should walk over to the bar together. Get some drinks and catch up on everything.”

Everything meant Derek. It was on the tip of Sam’s tongue to politely turn him down, using weariness from the long day as an excuse, when Derek’s voice stopped him.

“Do they serve food over there? We didn’t get a chance to stop and eat.”

Abel seemed as surprised by the response as Sam was. “Yeah.”

“Drinks sound good, then.” To Sam, “You want to get us checked in? I’ll go out and get the bags.”

When Sam agreed, still more than a little surprised by Derek’s amiability about the invitation, Derek nodded and left, the front door clicking quietly behind him.

“If he’s the reason you’re late, I can’t say that I blame you,”

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

Abel commented. "Though he seems a little stiff to be your usual type."

Sam swept a grin toward him. "As far as you're concerned, palominos are my type."

Abel tilted his head, his pale gaze contemplative. "You didn't tell us you were bringing a date, though."

Not a question. A statement of fact. One they both knew. "No, I didn't."

"So what's this all about?"

The echo of Derek's voice and the memory of a certain, coffee-flavored kiss flashed through Sam's mind. "I really have no idea."

* * *

Sam was all too aware of Derek's arm at his side as they followed a few paces behind Geoff and Abel. Derek hadn't said much of anything as they'd hastily unpacked and freshened up—other than to comment that the granite tub for two in their bathroom made him want to forget about food—and even now, with the rich scent of soil and sweet smile of wine somehow managing to overcome the exhaust of all the traffic that went through Napa, he seemed far more content in his own thoughts than in making conversation. It made Sam wonder why he'd agreed to this excursion in the first place, if he wasn't in a talking kind of mood. They could have found something to eat at the B&B, then crashed for an early night. There was no need to spend the next couple of hours with Sam's friends.

"What did you want to do tomorrow?" Sam asked, trying to fill the silence.

Derek glanced in his direction. "There's no rehearsal dinner?"

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

“Not really. The ceremony’s small enough, it would just end up being another reception. We’ve got the day pretty much to ourselves.”

Derek’s gaze slid back to the pair in front of them. Their heads were tilted toward each other, their hands interlinked, their voices low except for the occasional chuckle that floated back to Sam and Derek. It was the exact kind of public display that Derek always avoided, the sort he had a tendency to disparage when it was thrust into his face, and yet, he wasn’t uttering a single word of protest to being witness to it now. Sam could only conclude it was out of respect for their hosts, but still, it was more than a little odd to bear Derek’s silence on the matter.

“You’d planned on coming up here all by yourself,” Derek said. “What had you planned on doing before I tagged along?”

Sam shrugged. “I probably would’ve just hung around with Geoff and Abel. Helped them keep the weekend on schedule. I made sure they booked us someplace with Wi-Fi so I could get some work done if I got too bored.”

Derek chuckled. “You don’t get bored. You get restless.”

“That, too.”

“I don’t suppose you got us a room with a game system.”

It was Sam’s turn to laugh. “No, there’s no Xbox, no Wii, no Playstation. You’re stuck with good ol’ human contact for the weekend. Unless you resort to playing Minesweeper.”

“The act of a truly desperate addict.”

“You said it. I didn’t.”

They rounded the corner and had to come up short when Abel stopped in the doorway of the bar. He held the door open for everyone, smiling at Derek as he passed.

“Last chance to dump us for the next few hours,” he said. “I’ll

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

bet Sam wouldn't mind having you all to himself tonight."

Derek paused. "Sam wants to make sure I've got enough fuel in me to actually make it all night," he said with a straight face, leaving both Abel and Sam gaping at his back as he followed Geoff inside.

"Five bucks says he's in your pants before you even get food," Abel said.

The suggested bet broke Sam's spell. Snorting, he shook his head. "You don't know Derek. He'll be the perfect gentleman until we're back in our room. That's just the way he rolls."

The door drifted shut behind them. Sam's eyes instinctively went to where Derek and Geoff stood at the end of the bar, talking to the bartender. His gaze fixed on Derek's sharp profile and the way his lips moved as he spoke, the twitch of muscles in his cheek as he fought a smile at something the bartender said, the powerful bunch of his shoulders beneath his shirt as he leaned forward to see something out of sight behind the counter. Every nerve in his body responded to the other man's unspoken call, like a spark to a pile of tinder, and he licked at his dry lips, wondering distractedly why it was so hot in the place.

"Let's make it twenty," Abel said at his ear. "The way you keep looking at him, there's no way he'll be able to resist."

Sam dismissed his claim with a wave and a scoff, but when Geoff waved them over to a corner booth and Derek glanced up at him with a half-smile, he wondered for a brief second whether Abel might actually have it pegged for a change.

Like much of Napa, the restaurant wasn't exactly what Sam would call home, not with its marble floor and white wainscoting, but the booth was plush, and the table free of sticky stains or remnants from previous patrons. Derek slid onto the seat next to

him, trapping him inside, the solid muscle of his thigh pressing distinctly against Sam's beneath the table.

"I ordered nachos for us to start," he said, sliding one of the beer bottles he'd carried over in front of Sam. "We can order real food when that gets here."

"Derek was telling me how you two met," Geoff said. Next to Abel's robust outdoorsiness, he looked very much like he held down a desk job, but Sam could see the differences the other man had had on him. He would always be a slim man, but his lanky form had filled out a little in the past couple years. The lines at the corner of his mouth came from laughing, not the decade he had on Abel, and his hazel eyes danced with a constant merriment rather than the occasional jig from when they'd first started dating. "I can't believe he agreed to go out with you after you kicked his ass in court."

Sam glanced at Derek sharply. That was definitely an interesting interpretation of how things had gone. The first time they'd met after the decision in Sam's favor had only been for drinks. It hardly constituted a date.

"I told you," Derek said with a smile. "Sam's a persistent little shit."

Abel barked in amusement. "That about hits him on the head."

"My clients certainly don't complain," Sam drawled.

Geoff picked up his beer. "Neither does Derek, I'll bet."

Derek stretched his arm across the back of the booth seat. It didn't touch Sam's shoulder, but the possessive move didn't go unnoticed by anybody at the table, especially Sam. "Sam never mentioned how you two got together," Derek said, steering the topic in a new direction. "Just that you guys come here every year."

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

As Geoff and Abel launched into what was probably their favorite story, Sam settled back to enjoy his beer. He'd heard this story dozens of times—hell, he'd lived part of it. His mind could wander without losing vital threads of the conversation. Like to why in hell Derek was acting like this. Possessive boyfriend was not his usual style. Any kind of boyfriend wasn't his style.

Except...how could Sam be sure of that? They didn't go out in public together with a group. Most of their time was spent alone, either at his place or Derek's. And when they did go out, it was for meals, or drinks, or once, a trip to the mall. It was entirely possible that this was how Derek got when he was in a relationship, though Sam would be the first to admit that he wouldn't have predicted this. Maybe Derek wouldn't either. He'd been brutally honest from the beginning that he just didn't have time or the inclination for any real kind of commitments other than work.

Their nachos arrived in the middle of Geoff's story, finally forcing Derek to move. As they dug into the food, Abel pulled out his wallet and slid a twenty across the table.

Heat rose in Sam's cheeks, but he ignored Derek's curious stare to slowly pocket the bill.

"He overpaid on Flossie's feed last month," Abel said, in smooth explanation. "I forgot about it until the food came out."

The leg next to Sam's relaxed as Derek settled in the seat. "He pampers that horse way too much."

"Food is not pampering," Sam argued.

"And, I'd argue, a man who knows how to take care of an animal knows how to take care of the rest of the parts of his life," Abel added.

Geoff nodded. "I'll vouch for that."

Derek's attention grew thoughtful. "Are you two originally

from around here?”

“I am.” Abel jerked his chin toward Geoff. “Geoff’s family’s on the east coast.”

“Philadelphia,” Geoff elaborated. “I moved out for the job at Oracle.”

“Any of them flying out for the ceremony?”

Inwardly, Sam winced at the question, but Geoff took it in stride. “My family doesn’t really get it. I mean, they’ve always said they’re okay with my being gay, but they don’t like seeing it.”

“A bunch of ostriches,” Abel muttered.

“Well, it’s not like you’re getting married,” Derek said.

Everyone froze. A slow frown pulled Abel’s brows together. “What are you talking about?”

If he was bothered by the sudden focus, Derek didn’t show it. He simply shrugged. “Just that, to some people, a commitment ceremony doesn’t really mean a whole lot. If we’re not recognized by the law, then that pretty much gives them a built-in excuse to ignore us, too. Of course, that makes them idiots, but that doesn’t change the fact that it happens.”

It was the most definitive stance Sam had ever heard Derek take on gay social issues. He kept his sexuality so securely private, it might as well not exist anywhere but with Sam. For whatever reason, he didn’t want the world pigeonholing him as a gay man. Hearing his vocal condemnation of those who dismissed gay relationships on such flimsy reasoning left Sam with even more questions than before.

His response took the edge off Geoff and Abel’s reactions, though it managed to launch a rather heated discussion about California politics that ended up having little to do with gay rights. They argued back and forth over the empty nachos platter and

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

innumerable rounds of beers, and when the waitress came around two hours later and asked if they needed anything else, Derek shocked Sam by turning her down.

“What happened to being hungry?” Sam asked.

Glittering brown eyes flickered from the empty bottle cradled between his fingers, then to Sam’s, then finally to slowly slide up the length of Sam’s arm. The hair on the back of Sam’s neck stood on end, each inch of his skin seething with heat under the scrutiny. His cock was like steel by the time he met Derek’s gaze, but rather than back down from the dare there, he smirked and waited.

“And people say we need a room,” Abel commented from the other side of the table. “C’mon, Geoff. Let’s leave the lovebirds.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw them leave, but he was still too riveted by the lust in Derek’s to look away. “Who are you, and what have you done with Derek Rossi?”

An almost imperceptible shake of his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, remind me to find out whatever they put in their beer around here, then.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“You’re a little drunk.”

“Okay, I’m a little drunk. I still don’t know what you’re talking about.” Derek abandoned his bottle and dropped cold, wet fingertips to the back of Sam’s hand, stroking up to his wrist.

“That.” Sam pointed at the caress. “That. You never do that.”

Derek frowned and looked down at their hands. “I touch you all the time.”

“While we’re fucking, sure. When we’re out in public? Not so much.”

The weight on the back of his hand increased, until Derek

finally withdrew. Sam immediately regretted bringing his attention to it, but the damage was already done.

“So maybe I’m horny.” Pulling out his wallet, Derek tossed a couple bills onto the table before sliding out. “Watching those two paw each other all night probably got to me.”

“They weren’t—wait!”

Derek was already striding for the door, his gait long and sure in spite of his inebriation. Sam fucking hated it when he did that. Derek decided he was done with a conversation and just walked away. Like it didn’t matter that somebody else was in it. All that mattered was that it was over for the precious Derek Rossi.

Sam jogged after him, his annoyance growing with every step it took to reach Derek’s side. He didn’t try stopping Derek, though he knew he could. The bracing evening air cut through the alcoholic haze, sharpening his thoughts, and he doubled his step in order to match every one of Derek’s.

“It looked like you were getting along with Geoff and Abel,” he tried. Focus Derek on something mundane to get him off his anger, then go in for the kill. That was the best way to deal with him. “What bee’s got in your bonnet now?”

“It’s not a bee.” Though he couldn’t see Derek’s face well in the dark, he recognized the tone well enough. Derek’s face would be set in stone, his back teeth likely grinding together. “And I like them just fine.”

“Then what’s your problem?”

For several seconds, the only sound was the click of Derek’s hard-soled shoes against the sidewalk. It felt like that first night all over again, when Sam had casually mentioned Derek’s homosexuality and Derek had shot out of the bar like a bat out of hell. What had he said this time? All he’d wanted was a little

insight into what was going through Derek's head, because this time, it was too fucking murky in there for Sam to ferret anything out.

They rounded the corner to the B&B. Derek took two steps, then halted quickly enough to fool Sam into passing him for another three. Sam glanced back at him quizzically, but when he saw Derek's grim gaze locked farther down the road, Sam turned around to see what had compelled him into stopping.

Geoff and Abel had stopped on their way back to their room, and were now pressed against the large hedge lining the sidewalk. Their bodies molded together, Geoff's hands fervent along Abel's back as they devoured each other's mouths, and the sounds they made—hungry, needy—drifted along the cool night air to re-awaken Sam's flagging arousal.

"What was that about not pawing each other?" Derek said.

The sound of his voice broke the lovers apart. With a disgusted snort, Derek resumed his pace, faster than before, and swept past Sam and the others to march straight for the inn.

Sam let him go. He tried to smile at Geoff and Abel, but it was feeble at best.

"You two have a fight?" Geoff asked.

Sam shook his head. "Just too much to drink." He gave them a little wave. "Good night, guys."

They let him go, not that he was looking forward to returning to his room. What had seemed like such a promising start to the weekend now faded into a dull headache. He should've known it was a mistake to bring Derek along. It wasn't time yet in their whatever they had to talk about weekends away, especially momentous weekends like this one.

As he pulled open the front door of the B&B, he wondered

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

whether or not they would have ever reached that point organically, or if he was just fooling himself that they might ever have something beyond being fuck buddies.

The way this getaway was shaping, he was sincerely starting to fear it was the latter.

CHAPTER 3

The shower was running when Sam returned to the room, the bathroom door firmly closed. For a moment, he debated pushing his way in and finishing their argument. These were his friends, for Christ's sake. On the weekend of their commitment ceremony. They deserved a little fucking respect, which Derek should very well know.

But Sam didn't. He ignored the muffled sound of the water and the images it inevitably raised of a wet and naked Derek standing under the spray, and stripped out of his clothes in record time. For all of Derek's earlier innuendo, or outright promises occasionally, Sam wasn't counting on anything physical happening. He was pretty sure if Derek could have gotten another room, he would have. He would retreat, overthink whatever was bugging him, and

then face Sam in the morning with little to no hints about what had ever been wrong. He'd probably expect Sam to drag it out of him. Well, this time, he was going to be wrong. Very wrong. Sam didn't need his shit right now. This wasn't about them, and if Derek couldn't figure that out on his own, that was his fucking problem.

By the time the water turned off, Sam was in the king-sized bed on the side closest to the window and furthest from the bathroom. Derek wouldn't have to climb over him, or come around the edge of the bed this way. No awkward conversations, nothing to make it hard. He'd been paving the way for Derek since that first kiss, he thought a little more bitterly than he'd expected. There was no reason to stop now.

The door opened, and what little light filtered through his closed eyes disappeared. Steam and the rich scent of Derek's deodorant drifted out, mingling into a new elixir that slithered beneath Sam's defenses. Against his will, his cock responded, stiffening and lengthening until he ached again. At least the room was dark and the blankets thick. He had little to fear of Derek noticing his arousal.

He held his breath, waiting for the bed to dip. Any second now, any second now...

A soft, electrical whirr came instead, followed by the distinct beep of a laptop booting up.

In hindsight, he shouldn't have been surprised. They had both brought their computers with them, too much an extension of themselves to be left behind. Sam hadn't seriously entertained the possibility of working, but it was always there, always a fallback, always ready to take him in its embrace when the rest of the world didn't want him. One of the things he'd liked about Derek from the start was his work ethic. He pushed himself as hard as Sam did. It

shouldn't have shocked him in the least that he'd pull out a brief or two before going to bed.

Except it did. And oddly enough, it hurt, too.

He peered through his lashes to see where Derek might be. The room was still mostly dark, but the one vestige of light came from the desk near the fireplace, drawing his eye as assuredly as Derek's imposing form usually did. Derek sat behind it, in three-quarter profile. The glow from the computer screen cast his normally tawny skin in ghostly shades, revealing his bare chest and the fine sprinkling of dark hair disappearing behind the edge of the desk, and his wide mouth was set in a firm line as he stared at the laptop. Muscles twitched as his hands flew over the keyboard, yet further evidence of his expert touch. He looked like he was carved from marble, some pagan statuary ready to be worshipped. Untouchable. Formidable. Unbreakable.

Sometimes, Sam wondered whatever possessed him to think there might be more there. Then, he'd think on those times when they laughed so hard, their sides hurt, or the rare moments when he'd wake up after a terrific fuck to find Derek's arms tight around him and lips against the back of his neck.

Derek wasn't stone. He just had walls a mile thick. Sam had scaled over them before. He knew he'd do it again.

"What're you doing?" he asked.

Derek didn't glance away from his laptop. "Working."

"Forget something from the office?"

"I'm not tired."

Which was as good a reason as any, Sam knew.

Rolling onto his side, he let the blankets fall away from his upper body as he propped his head on his hand. "We never did figure out what we're going to do tomorrow." That was a safe

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

topic for both of them. “Did you have any ideas?”

Derek’s hands slowed, then settled, fingertips resting lightly on the keyboard as he finally looked at Sam. The light turned his dark eyes into fathomless mirrors, even as it highlighted the softening of his mouth.

“Most of my ideas are just you and me.”

The hesitation in the confession hooked into Sam’s gut and pulled. He offered a smile he hoped would coax Derek to say more. “My favorite combination. Like what?”

A moment passed, filled with thoughts, both his and Derek’s.

“Have you ever been up here before?”

“A couple times. Once with Abel and Geoff, and once with a client.”

A ghost of a smile sank the hook even deeper. “It’s not really your kind of place, is it?”

He knew what Derek meant, and was glad the clarification didn’t come with a judgment attached to it. Derek had assumed a lot about him when they’d first met, and though some of the cowboy stuff was true, Sam liked to think he’d grown into more.

“Maybe I’ll surprise you,” he said. “What kind of thing did you have in mind?”

Derek finally eased back in his chair. The distance shadowed half his face, but revealed the side of his sweats-covered legs beneath the desk. Sam hadn’t really thought he was sitting there naked, but the thought of him in only a towel had been tempting.

“I thought maybe we could do a bike tour. It’s purely a tourist thing, easy roads, lots of stops. They pick a couple wineries to visit, and there’s a van that’ll take back anything you buy so you don’t have to lug it around on the bike.”

The suggestion made him straighten. Cycling was his thing, not

Derek's. They both knew that. Derek preferred a gym to stay in shape, because it fit better in his regimented life. Offering it as an option meant something. The trick was to find out what.

"That would interest you?" he asked carefully.

Derek shrugged. "Sure. It's supposed to be warm and sunny tomorrow, which means it'll be a pretty ride. And we don't have to do the all-day one. In fact, if it interests you, I'd rather do the half-day one in the afternoon. That leaves our morning free, and if we find something nice to drink, we're set for dinner." The corner of his mouth lifted. "You just have to promise not to bitch about all us amateurs who haven't been on a bike in years. Or leave me in the dust when you realize it's a ride for grannies."

Sam chuckled at that. "I'm always up for something that makes me look good. All right. Let's do that."

"Okay."

He straightened and reached for his keyboard again, his attention once again fixed on the screen. Though he looked more relaxed, it wasn't the move Sam had expected.

"You're still going to work?"

Derek glanced in his direction. "I'm booking the tour."

"They're online?"

"You think I know the ins and outs of Napa tourism that well?"

He wasn't sure what he thought. But if Derek knew they had a website, then that meant he'd done some research. "When did you find it?"

Derek turned back to type information onto the screen. "While I was waiting for you to pick me up today. I bookmarked the site in case it turned out we got some free time."

The more Derek admitted, the bigger of an ass Sam felt. It was a thoughtful gesture, one that required planning, that anticipated

Sam's needs. He'd done it without prompting or even hinting that was what he was doing. He'd clearly had expectations for the weekend that Sam hadn't. Very likely, his behavior at the bar had reflected that.

When Sam started to get out of bed, Derek stiffened and frowned. "If this is keeping you from sleeping, I can shut it down when I'm done making the reservation."

"I thought you weren't tired."

"I'm not. But if you're not going to bed, there are other things we can do to pass the time."

Now, *that* sounded like the Derek Rossi he knew. Sam grinned and flopped back onto the mattress, not bothering pulling the blanket back up. He splayed his hand over his stomach, deliberately drawing Derek's gaze to his midsection and the bulge in his boxer-briefs. "Then, hurry up and get your ass over here, Rossi. I might just start without you."

Derek's fingers were already flying back over the keys, though he hesitated at Sam's dare. "Do it."

His heart accelerated. "What? Get the ball rolling, so to speak?"

"Yeah." Though it might have been a trick of the poor lighting, it seemed as if Derek's nostrils flared. "I want to watch you."

"It's too dark for you to see anything."

"Trust me. I can see just fine."

His hand scorched where it rested on his stomach, though the rest of him alternated between fire and ice. The sex was fantastic—it always had been—but it always had a rushed quality to it, proof of their inability to take it slow once they got going. It was as if the time they had together was so precious, they had to get as much fucking and touching in as they could before it vanished on them.

Sam wasn't complaining. He loved every second of it. But under the hungry weight of Derek's gaze, he felt the allure of languor. More, he craved it.

Slowly, he began caressing his abdomen, keeping the strokes long and light, like a tentative lover might do on a first date. Derek tracked every inch he moved, the keyboard forgotten, but otherwise, remained motionless in his chair.

"You sure you don't want to come over here and do this yourself?" Sam goaded. "Might be more fun for both of us."

Derek licked his lips. "Not yet." His voice had gone hoarse, and he cleared it before adding, "Take off the briefs."

"Something else that's more fun when you do it." But Sam did it anyway, because he ached to be touched, and his thighs were already sweaty from his rising temperature. He rolled the waistband down over his hips, taking his time. The tip of his cock caught in the elastic, and slapped against his skin when it finally sprung free.

Derek made a sound halfway between a snort and a groan. It shot straight to Sam's cock, straight into his veins, to electrify a path up his spine to the base of his neck. Sam squirmed a little against the mattress, and though the sheets were an elegant Egyptian cotton, soft when he'd first lain down, they now chafed against his too hot skin.

"Never knew you for a voyeur," he drawled, deliberately deepening his accent so the last word had more than its original two syllables. He fisted his shaft, but he didn't dare start stroking yet. Just the anticipation was winding him tighter than a virgin hole. "Hell, I would've shucked my clothes months ago if I thought it would get this kind of reaction."

"It's not that I like to watch." Derek tore his eyes away to type

something fast into the laptop. Within seconds, he was fixed on Sam again. "It's that I like to watch you."

The differentiation sent another sizzle through Sam's balls. Slowly, he swiped his thumb over the wet head, smearing around the pre-come already seeping from the slit. "That's because you're a control freak."

"I've never heard you complain about that."

"Ha. You must not be listening very hard, then."

"I listen." His leg stretched under the desk. Sam imagined it was to take the strain off his erection. "You're not the only one who notices things, even if you'd like to think so."

He had no smart rejoinder for that, no snappy comeback. He didn't know what to say at all, in fact, something that surprised him as much as it left him mute. What was he actually doing here? A hand job would be much better from Derek. It would let Sam touch him, too, and there was no way Derek didn't want that.

But he also wanted this. Asked for it specifically. So Sam started stroking, twisting his wrist on the upstroke before he hit the crown to add that extra burn. Derek had commented on it once, saying how Sam even excelled at that, but all Sam knew was this was what felt the best, this was what made his blood boil and his body explode. Just because it worked that way for Derek, too, only meant it was all that much easier to give his lover the ultimate satisfaction.

His impulses told him to close his eyes and get lost in the pleasure. Reality kept his gaze firmly on Derek, making sure Derek saw every detail. Sam didn't want to miss anything, either. Because as his strokes grew longer, Derek's lips parted, and he rubbed his hand along the top of his covered thigh, as if that would stifle the urge to grab himself.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

“Do you beat off when I’m not around?” Sam asked huskily. “When you start thinking about me, and can’t get to me to scratch your itch, do you lock yourself in your bathroom and jerk off, wishing it was me?”

“Yes,” came the soft confession. “You drive me crazy.”

He knew that, but it was always good to hear. “I don’t do it. Not anymore.”

Derek jolted. “You don’t? Really?”

Sam shook his head. He slipped his free hand between his thighs, propping his heels on the bed to expose himself further. He fondled his sac, just lightly for now, just to start the first shivers crawling along his skin. “I did at first. But I figured something out real quick.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t good enough. It didn’t feel nearly as good as you did. Hell, it was better to have you stuffing my mouth than to come by my own hand.”

Derek groaned. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Why not? It’s true.”

“Because it makes it very hard to just sit here and watch you, then.”

“Well, you have a standing invite to any bed I happen to be in. The only one keeping you in that chair is you.”

The material of Derek’s sweats bunched beneath his hand as he dug his fingers into his thigh. He was fighting it, like he fought so many different things in his life. For once, Sam wanted him to let it go, but as the seconds ticked away and all he heard was their raspy breathing, he knew Derek wasn’t going to yield to the urge. Not this time.

“Harder,” Derek said. “You’ve got a lot of jerking off to make

up for.”

A bead of sweat trickled into Sam’s hairline. He desperately wanted to reach up and wipe it away, erase the tickle from his skin. He almost did, until Derek wet his mouth yet again, and the sensation of that talented tongue licking away the moisture replaced the need to do it himself.

His hand closed reflexively around his balls. They throbbed against his palm, slapping lightly against his skin as he pulled harder at his prick. Derek had asked for it. Derek got it. He wouldn’t turn down any request from the man. He wasn’t sure he could.

He wasn’t sure when he started to lift his hips in rhythm with his hand. They were only small movements, tiny thrusts like it was a clenching ass he was driving into instead of the curl of his fingers. His eyes finally shut, unable to hold back the images overwhelming him.

Derek’s ass, round, delectable, with Derek’s body beneath him, pulsing and sweating as he took every slam into his tight hole. He’d make those grunting sounds he did when he was close to coming, and Sam would slap away his hands when he reached for his own cock.

“That’s mine,” he said, then started when he realized he said it out loud. His eyes shot open to lock with Derek’s. The sheer lust in them proved his undoing, his balls tightening, his cock pulsing as he shot over his stomach.

In a flash, Derek was off the chair, across the room, climbing onto the bed to cover Sam’s hand with his own. Before Sam’s orgasm had even begun to subside, their mouths fused together in a tangle of tongues and teeth, and Derek sucked away his breath as they both stroked Sam’s cock. Sam vibrated from head to toe, his

fingers sticky, his shaft stickier, but none of it was nearly as good as the taste of Derek's lips, the expert way he pulled Sam in and made him forget the world even existed outside the heat of their bodies.

He was panting by the time Derek finally let him go, though it was only his mouth he released, not Sam's cock. "Stop," Sam stuttered, and writhed against the sheets when Derek disobeyed, burning over the sensitized skin until he thought he was going to explode. "Fuck, don't do that, don't, fuck..."

Above him, Derek chuckled. "You always say that. Then, you always beg me for more."

"That's usually when you've sucked me off. Not like this." He tried to bat away Derek's hand, but his muscles lacked the strength. All he accomplished was a light slap against his arm. "I mean it."

He moaned when Derek complied, already missing his heat and touch. The return of Derek's mouth brewed new desire deep within Sam's gut, and somehow, he found the fortitude to roll toward him, letting Derek envelop him with his larger body. He clung to Derek's back as the kiss went on and on, gulping for air whenever Derek released him for a fraction of a second.

"Yeah, I think afternoon is definitely better for the tour," Derek muttered, palming Sam's ass.

Sam smiled. It was a good thing it was a beginner's course, after all. He had a feeling his ass was going to appreciate the easy ride after tonight.

CHAPTER 4

The sunny weather brought the tourists out in droves. They flocked along the wide sidewalks and window shopped with fervent intent. SUVs and luxury cars filled the roads, and Sam crawled through traffic in his pickup with half an eye on the man sitting next to him instead of on the road ahead.

They hadn't discussed the argument at the bar. Sam wasn't entirely sure they ever would. Unless he pushed, the subject simply would never come up again, because he could pretty much guarantee Derek wouldn't bring it up. It just wasn't his style. Frankly, though, after the events of the morning, Sam didn't really care all that much. They'd crashed around four, then he'd woken up around ten with Derek's mouth on his cock. Derek had already ordered breakfast brought up to the room, too, and the mood had

been jovial and relaxed ever since.

Status quos were not always bad. In fact, sometimes, they were downright perfect. Sam had no reason to get rid of this one any time soon.

Derek took the lead when they finally arrived at the bike tour place, checking them in and getting the itinerary. They were both dressed for a day out—jeans, T-shirt, tennis shoes—but on Derek, the effect wasn't quite as casual as it seemed to be on the rest of the people milling around. He always had a crispness to him that dared Sam to rumple him up. It was hard not to stare and drool at the broad back and long legs as Derek stood at the counter.

"Hi." The bright feminine voice at his side drew his gaze away. It belonged to a petite brunette, sleek hair drawn back into a ponytail, gimlet eyes as perky as her smile. "You look like someone who might actually know what to expect on this thing."

He chuckled. "Nothing could be farther from the truth, darlin'. First time here."

"Oh!" This answer seemed to please her even more than the possibility of finding experience. "It's our first time, too." She pointed to another brunette, this one a few years older with softer curves and a pixie cut. "I'm here with my friend, Mona. I'm Josie, by the way. Like the pussycats."

"Sam. Like the beer."

She laughed at his stupid joke and waved her friend over. "Well, we can all be newbies together, then. I haven't been on a bike since I was a kid."

"Oh, now I never said I didn't know my way around a good ride." Flirting had always come naturally to him, and though he had no intention of it getting out of hand here, it felt kind of good to be able to bring that glitter to a stranger's eyes. Motion at the

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

edge of his vision distracted him for a moment, and he glanced over to see Derek step up and join them.

“That didn’t take you long,” Derek said with a smile. To Josie, he added, “I can’t take this one anywhere without him finding some kind of trouble.”

“Hey, trouble follows me, not the other way around,” Sam protested good-naturedly.

Derek cocked a brow. “Right.” He stuck his hand out. “Derek Rossi.”

Sam watched Derek exchange introductions with the girls with a keen eye. One of Derek’s greatest strengths as an attorney was the ease with which he always managed to put strangers. He exuded a calm and steady charm that was neither too threatening nor too aloof. Sam had never seen him exercise it outside of a professional setting, though. He certainly hadn’t acted like this the previous night with Geoff and Abel. It was yet another fascinating piece to the puzzle of a man he realized he was only now getting to know.

“Looks like an easy ride,” Derek said, unfolding the map he’d been given for the others to see. He traced a road with his finger. “This part has got some swells, but we’re doing that first to get it out of the way apparently. The rest of it should be smooth as silk.”

Mona shook her head. “My legs are never going to last that long.”

“You’ll be fine,” Derek assured. “Just stick with us. Sam’s an old pro.”

There wasn’t time for more idle chitchat before they were corralled to choose their bikes. True to Derek’s invitation, Mona and Josie stayed with them through the entire process, sharing more than one meaningful look between them whenever they

thought the guys weren't paying attention. Sam was, though. And he suspected Derek noticed. That didn't stop him from pulling Derek aside after Derek instructed the girls to ride in front of them so they could keep an eye on them.

"What're you doing?" Sam murmured.

Derek frowned. "What do you mean? I'm just being friendly."

"There's friendly, and then there's *friendly*."

"So? You were the one talking to them first."

"And I would've made sure it ended before it got out of hand." He glanced at the women, getting onto their bikes. "You know, you keep this up and they're going to expect you to invite them to dinner when we're done, or something like that."

"I'm being friendly," Derek stressed. "Yes, I realize they might ascribe something more to it, but I won't let it get that far. Trust me."

Sam wanted to know how he expected to do that, but the tour leader called for everyone to mount up, and he had no choice but to leave Derek's side.

The road was as smooth and effortless as had been promised. Sunlight dappled the dark asphalt through the fresh foliage overhead, and the rich, sweet scent of wine marked every yard they traveled. Added to the heat warming his skin through his clothes, Sam felt more than a little intoxicated by the time they reached the first vineyard.

"Don't even dare tell me that was too easy," Derek warned as they parked the bikes in the designated area.

"You cannot be feeling anything from that," Sam scoffed.

Derek rubbed discreetly at his butt. "Not all of us are lucky enough to have an ass of steel."

The unexpected compliment brought a flush to his face,

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

noticeable enough to draw comments from the girls when they joined them. Though they lingered in obvious hopes of pairing off, Derek steadfastly remained at Sam's side, forcing the women to stick together. Sam bit back his smile as they followed the guide into the testing area. Part of Derek's plan to keep them at arm's length, apparently.

The tasting area had a communal table for everyone, making private conversations impossible as the hostess brought out tray after tray of testers. Talk turned to wine, and while he added the occasional observation, Sam ceded authority to Derek. He had more experience, like the discussion on variations of color he led with the group. Even Sam learned something, and he was only half listening. It was more interesting to watch the way the others—not just Josie and Mona—responded to Derek.

"I didn't realize you knew so much about wine," Sam commented on the way back to the bikes.

"With my parents? I'm surprised I don't know more."

"So how many times have *you* been up here?"

Derek smiled. "Too many to count. Not for a few years, though."

"Any particular reason?"

"No time, nobody to come with. Doing the wineries on your own is kind of sad."

"Not even to pick up some new wines?"

"If I really cared, I could order a bottle and try it in the comfort of my own home." They stopped at the stands, though Derek hesitated before unlocking his. "Why all the questions?"

The girls were too focused on their own bikes to pay them much attention. "Just wondering if you might be interested in coming back," Sam said. "On our own schedule."

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

“Would you be?”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t interested.”

“Technically, you didn’t suggest it.”

“Does that mean technically you wouldn’t want to?”

A call from the leader spurred Derek into finally getting his bike ready. “No, I think it’s a great idea. I’m just surprised you thought of it.”

Sam didn’t like the sound of that. “Why?”

Another warning from the leader prevented Derek’s immediate response. “We’ll talk about it later,” he said as they edged back to the road. “This isn’t the time or place.”

Sam couldn’t have disagreed more, but Derek turned his attention to the path ahead and didn’t look at him again. Sam got the feeling that if he tried to push it, too, Derek would just close off, and they’d be back where they’d been the previous night. Time to let it go, as much as he hated it. And he did. A lot.

Their second stop had a different set-up in their testing area, with smaller, bar-height tables for people to group themselves around. Mona and Josie planted themselves at Sam and Derek’s table, and Mona rested her elbows against the edge to lean closer and speak to them.

“So are you guys here for the whole weekend, or just for the day?” she asked.

Sam bit the inside of his cheek. He was going to love telling Derek *I told you so* when they got back to the B&B.

“The weekend,” Derek said. “Friends are having a small ceremony tomorrow.”

“And it’s kind of hard to skip out when I’m the best man,” Sam added. There. He’d done his part to wriggle out of any potential plans for Sunday.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

“Oh, this is the perfect time of year for a wedding,” Josie gushed.

Mona looked to Derek. “Are you in the party, too?”

Smiling, he shook his head. “I just get to appreciate how good Sam looks in his suit.”

For a second, Sam thought he was hearing things. Clearly, from the looks on the girls’ faces, they did, too. That was a compliment. More, that was a very pointed compliment by one man for another about how attractive he was. There was only one way for it to be taken.

The girls figured it out a few moments later. Their eyes widened in sudden understanding, before good manners smoothed their features over again. They glanced between themselves, and then burst out laughing.

“Well, that figures,” Mona said.

Sam smiled, carefully watching in case things went south. “What does?”

“You two have been the most interesting guys we’ve met in ages,” Josie said. “We’ve just had the crappiest luck dating lately.”

“So it’s just our usual dumb luck that you two are taken.”

Josie grimaced. “The best ones always are.”

“Or they’re gay.”

“Or they’re both.” Another round of laughter, friendly and relaxed. Sam was able to join in this time, confident the girls were taking the revelation the best way possible. Josie mirrored Mona’s pose, though the conspiratorial tilt of her head no longer had anything to do with scoring a couple dates. “So tell us all about the ceremony.”

* * *

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

Geoff and Abel were just walking out of the B&B when Sam pulled into the small parking lot next to it. They waved and diverted their path to follow them, waiting off to the side as Sam dropped the truck into park.

“Looks like they’re heading out for dinner,” he commented.

Derek unbuckled his seat belt and twisted to get the wine he’d bought from behind the seat. “If you tell them to wait a few minutes, we can join them if you want.”

Though he saw his friends out of the corner of his eye, Sam didn’t move to get out. “Is that what you want?”

Derek wore a frown when he straightened. “Isn’t that what this weekend is about? Celebrating with your friends?”

Sam wasn’t sure what the weekend was about anymore. “I don’t want to force them on you. They make you uncomfortable.” Though, if he was being honest with himself, it bothered him that this was yet another wall looming between them.

The frown deepened. “I never said that.”

“You don’t have to. I know you.”

“If this is about last night—”

“No, look, you don’t have to try and come up with some justification. You have a right to your opinion.”

“Maybe,” Derek conceded. “But I didn’t have a right to be an asshole last night. This is their special weekend. I didn’t have to be a jerk because they want to be able to enjoy it.”

Sam pulled the keys out of the ignition, jingling them in his hand. “So what’s it going to be? Dinner with or without them?”

Derek pressed his lips into a thin line. “Let’s see what their plans are and take it from there, okay?”

Heat slashed into the cab as Derek climbed out without waiting for a response, hefting the wine to his other hand to better shut the

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

door behind him. He came around the front of the truck as Sam got out, too, there with a smile when Geoff and Abel approached.

“Have a good day?” Geoff asked.

Abel nodded to the wine carrier. “Looks like it, considering the haul.”

“Good enough to talk Derek into doing it again some time,” Sam said. “What’re you two up to?”

Geoff curled a possessive arm around Abel’s waist. “Just dinner and then an early night. We’ve been wrangling with the vineyard all day. They’re trying to short us on the time we booked for the reception.”

Though his sunglasses hid his eyes from view, the sudden tension in Derek’s jaw gave away his mood. “Do you need us to suit up and talk to them?”

Abel’s burst of laughter echoed through the lot. “Oh, God, you’re just like Sam. Looking for battlefronts when all there is, is a windmill.”

“We got it settled,” Geoff said. “But thank you for the offer.”

“That might be the first time someone’s beat Sam to it.” Abel was still laughing, a flush creeping beneath his tan. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“It’s not that funny, Abe,” Sam said.

“Maybe not from your angle. From over here? It’s classic Capra.”

With his offer refused, Derek relaxed again. “If you want to wait for us to stow the wine, we’ll join you for dinner. We haven’t eaten yet, either.”

“We’re always waiting on you two,” Abel joked. “Just stow the wine in the truck.”

Sam held his breath, fully expecting Derek to argue. He’d

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

complained good-naturedly on the ride back to the inn that the heat in the car wouldn't be good for the viognier or chardonnay he'd bought, knocking Sam's hand away to turn the air conditioning up full blast. They'd waged their own mini war over the temperature after that, a war Sam had eventually lost.

His eyes widened when Derek turned to him.

"You heard him," Derek said. "Unlock it, so we can get out of here."

Sam was too shocked not to obey, and two minutes later, the four of them were crossing the street, headed over to the bar at Abel's insistence.

"Geoff's got me stuck in cufflinks and a noose all day tomorrow," he complained. "I'm cutting it loose as much as I can before that."

"You got him to wear a tie?" Sam whistled under his breath. "Miracles do happen."

The set-up was exactly as it had been the night before, with Geoff and Derek ordering food and drinks while Abel and Sam grabbed a booth in the crowded bar. As soon as they were seated, Abel leaned forward and said, "You two look better."

Sam's gaze automatically flickered to Derek. "He drank too much last night. Don't hold it against him."

"I don't." His pale eyes zeroed in on Sam's, unexpectedly solemn. "Do you?"

CHAPTER 5

Do you?

Watching Derek square away the bill, Sam couldn't shake Abel's question, seemingly so innocent, unmistakably astute. He'd been turning it over in his head ever since they'd sat down, twisting it this way and that, trying to get to the root of why Abel would utter it in the first place. What had Abel seen that Sam didn't? Or what had Sam done that he'd been unaware of? He hadn't been treating Derek any differently. They'd had a great day together. Things were good. Better than he would have imagined after the blowout the night before.

But still, he couldn't shake the sense he was missing something. It gnawed at the edges of his nerves, silencing him as they merged with the night. Geoff and Abel strolled farther ahead,

hands clasped between them. They were halfway back to the B&B before it dawned on him that Derek had slowed his steps to match Sam's.

"We should stop and get the wine from the truck," Derek said when they reached the edge of the lot.

He'd forgotten completely about the wine. "Oh. Right." His keys jingled as he pulled them out of his jeans. "Abel!" The pair ahead stopped and looked back. Sam nodded toward the parking lot and said, "You two go on. We'll see you in the morning."

He caught Abel's smirk under the streetlamp, but Geoff tugged his partner along, waving back at Sam. Sam led the way to his pickup, the only sound the nervous jangle of his keys.

"Did you sneak shots when I wasn't looking?" Derek joked. "You're jumpier than usual tonight."

Sam immediately caught his keys against his palm, pressing the automatic lock so Derek could get in. "I'm fine."

"Really?" He disappeared for a moment as he leaned in to pull out the carrier. The slam of the car door when he had it made Sam jerk, a movement Derek caught with a lift of his brow. "Yeah, that's fine."

"It's been a long day."

"And a longer one tomorrow."

Their pace without Geoff and Abel as guides turned even more leisurely, though it stayed just as quiet. When he felt the soft nudge of Derek's elbow, he moved a few inches away, giving him more room without thought. They remained that way, all the way to their suite.

Derek set the wine down on the desk, then went to the closet to pull their suits out. "Think it's too late to get these pressed again?"

Sam shook his head. "They're fine." He stepped into the

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

bathroom and got his toothbrush. "You're as bad as Geoff."

"That's not an insult, you know. I like Geoff." He appeared in the doorway while Sam had his head bent, spitting out a mouthful of paste. "How're your hands?"

Sam glanced up with a frown. "What would be wrong with my hands?"

Derek leaned against the jamb. His dark eyes were nearly black, regarding Sam with heavy intent. "Nothing necessarily. Just wondering if you might be up for a massage."

The suggestion derailed his train of thought, distracting him from the question of his behavior and Derek's reactions and all the other crap, and to the much more pleasant proposition of his hands on Derek's tight body. Sam rinsed out his mouth and grabbed a towel to wipe his face, never taking his eyes off an unmoving Derek.

"Guess that Wii isn't quite the same as actually getting your ass on a bike," he taunted.

"I'll remember that the next time you hit yourself in the face with the controller."

"Once. That happened once."

"Once is all it takes." He didn't move when Sam crowded into the doorway. "We up for this massage or not?"

His lashes lowered. Derek's thick arousal brought a smile to Sam's face. "Looks like you're already there."

"My readiness isn't the subject in question here."

"Neither is mine." Grabbing the hem of his T-shirt, he stripped it over his head as he went back out to the main room. "Get out of those clothes and get on the bed."

Derek had the voyeuristic privilege of watching the night before. Now, it was Sam's turn. He'd have his hands on Derek

soon enough.

For such a tall man, Derek moved with the inky grace of shadows slipping before a storm. He peeled away from the doorjamb and stood at the side of the bed, toeing off his shoes without letting Sam out of his sights. Piece by piece, he bared his delectable skin. The flat stomach. The dark arrow of hair spreading over his chest. Coppery nipples already tight and pinched. By the time Derek dropped his jeans and his erection sprang free, Sam had had to swallow against his dry throat twice. Nobody would ever get to him the way Derek did. The knowledge that it was all his for the night only made his heart beat even faster.

Without a word, Derek stretched out on the middle of the bed, resting on his stomach with his head cradled on his folded arms. The muscles in his back rippled, but it was the small dimples at the sides of his ass that drew Sam forward. He could never resist those tiny indentations, and skimmed his fingertips over the smooth skin.

Derek groaned and closed his eyes. "Next time we do this, I want a better padded seat."

Carefully, Sam climbed onto the bed and straddled the back of Derek's legs. His eyes widened when he saw the lube already out on the nightstand. He hadn't left it out that morning, he was sure. Derek had to have put it there while Sam was brushing his teeth.

Always thinking ahead, this one.

Stretching, he half-covered Derek with his own body as he reached for the lube. "So this massage is for your ass?"

Lashes fluttered upward. "Considering that's the part that hurts, yes." Down they went again.

"Just checking." He squirted the lubricant onto his fingers and oiled up both of his hands, rubbing them together to warm them up, too. "Not that I need an excuse to grab your ass, but it's nice to

have permission.”

Derek snorted softly. “Like that’s ever stopped you before.”

“You’d be surprised at the restraint I exercise when we’re at the office.”

“Learn how to avoid seeing me and risking temptation.” He sighed when Sam rested his warmed hands on the back of his tight thigh. “That’s what I did.”

Neither spoke as Sam set to work. He didn’t start with Derek’s ass, though he knew that was the ultimate goal. He began with the hard muscles of Derek’s legs, bunched and tense even if his upper body seemed completely relaxed. He kneaded the flesh in long, hard strokes, slowly working his way higher. His cock strained against his jeans, caught at an awkward angle at the junction of his thigh and hip, but he refused to stop and adjust himself. This felt too damn good to let it go, even for a second, even for the purpose of relieving his own discomfort elsewhere.

When he switched legs, he repositioned himself, pushing Derek’s thighs apart so he could kneel between them. Another sigh drifted from the head of the bed, but when he glanced up from his work, Derek’s eyes were still shut.

Sam cleared his throat. “You really want there to be a next time?”

He kept his question low and unthreatening, unwilling to startle Derek into closing off. This was how best to treat him sometimes. Like a wild colt unused to human contact.

Derek didn’t even blink. “Wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t want it.”

Encouraged by the response, he tried, “Why were you so surprised earlier when I brought it up?” Same tone. Same methodology. Don’t fix what’s not broken.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

“Because you don’t.”

Which was far too oblique a response for Sam’s liking, though it came without hesitation or any sense of recrimination. At least, that was something.

“So let’s talk about it.”

“About our next trip?”

“No, about whatever you said the tour wasn’t the time or place for.”

Now, Derek’s eyes opened. He only had to tilt his head a little bit to meet Sam’s gaze. “We didn’t have time to argue about it then, that’s all.”

Sam paused for a moment in his massage, his hands hovering at the lower swell of Derek’s ass. “You think we’re going to argue about this?”

“I think it’s a very good possibility, yes.” When Sam moved to rise, Derek’s arm shot back, his body twisting enough to reach as he grabbed Sam’s wrist. “Don’t get up.”

He could fight against the hold. Derek was bigger than him, yes, but they were fairly evenly matched when it came to strength. He could break away, and if Derek struggled, they would likely wrestle, and then either fuck or spend the night in a sulky silence. Either way, the discussion Derek so clearly wanted wouldn’t occur, and Sam was more than a little curious about what this was all about.

Slowly, he relaxed, easing back onto his heels as he waited interminable moments for Derek to release him. “Okay,” he said. “I’m not getting up. What do you think we’re going to argue about?”

Derek didn’t let him go right away. “You always get your back up when I tell you you’re wrong about something, cowboy.”

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

He stiffened, and Derek tightened his grip. It looked like he was serious about not letting Sam go. "I think you've got that backward. You're the one who hates losing."

"I didn't say a thing about losing."

"Sure sounded like it."

"If you're paying that kind of attention to your cases, maybe you should start shuttling some of those clients my way before they end up with a judgment against them, then." When he released his hold, it startled Sam enough to sway in his spot, but Derek didn't attempt to lock him in anymore. He simply pillowed his head back onto his folded arms and closed his eyes. "You don't want to do this, that's fine by me. You're the one who brought it up."

He was. And he'd been the one consumed with questions about Derek's behavior all weekend. The only way to get any answers to them was to hear Derek out, whether he liked what he got in response or not.

Adding some fresh lube to his hands, he resumed his massage, concentrating now on the taut flesh of Derek's ass. Contrary to Derek's assertions, his was just as gorgeous as he professed Sam's to be, firm and muscular with more than enough to grab onto when he was pounding into Sam's body. Sam had to force himself to concentrate on the task at hand and not the inviting crease and what lay within.

"Usually, I think I'm pretty damn good at reading you," Sam said quietly. "But I haven't understood a damn thing you've done since you walked into the dry cleaners yesterday."

"Is that why you're so jumpy?"

"If I'm jumpy, it's because I'm trying to figure it out. Like, what do you think I'm so wrong about?"

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

Silence fell between them. Though Sam continued with the massage, he kept a wary eye on Derek, ready for whatever move he might end up trying to make. Not even a muscle twitch. For all intents and purposes, Derek looked so relaxed, he might as well be asleep.

“You’ve said more than once this weekend how I don’t do something,” Derek said. “Like touching you last night at the bar. Or you thinking your friends make me uncomfortable when I said I liked them just fine. You keep making assumptions, and it’s starting to piss me off.”

He stated it like he was making a calm case in court, not like he was actually angry. Sam knew that could just be a front, though. Derek was a pro.

“But they did make you uncomfortable. You don’t like public displays.”

“Maybe not. But when I tried to touch you, you freaked out.”

“I didn’t freak.”

“You accused me of needing to be drunk in order to be able to put my arm around you or touch your hand. That doesn’t sound like an overreaction to you?”

Sam frowned. “No. It sounds like somebody trying to justify behavior you’ve never displayed before. If I’m making assumptions, it’s based on prior history. Where am I wrong?”

“Tell me when we’ve ever gone out with friends. Then, tell me how I’m supposed to act.”

“We’ve never—”

“I rest my case.”

His case. His case for what? Sam’s hands slowed, though they didn’t stop, and he tumbled Derek’s assertions around and around in his head, trying to find an order that meshed with everything he

knew. The only problem with that was he kept coming back to the same statement.

You keep making assumptions.

“Let’s try some direct questions then. Why did you come looking for me yesterday?”

“I told you. I wanted to celebrate. You’re the only one I wanted to celebrate with.” His eyes opened, and though he didn’t otherwise move, he shifted the angle of his head to better look at Sam. “Why didn’t you tell me about the wedding until you had to?”

“And I told *you* that. You would’ve turned me down.”

“That’s an assumption.”

“A logical one, I think. That’s never been our style.”

“All right. I’ll concede that. But relationships change, Sam. If anything’s proof of that, we certainly are. Look at how we started.”

There was truth there, but it all hinged on one crucial word.

“You think we have a relationship?”

The corner of Derek’s mouth lifted. “Of course we do. You think I’ve let anybody else touch my ass since we hooked up? Think again.” He wiggled his hips slightly as if to punctuate his point. “Speaking of my ass, you’ve stopped.”

Derek’s sudden playfulness wiped Sam’s frown away. “I stopped trying to label us as anything months ago,” he said, massaging with new fervor. “I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“It was a good strategy. I don’t know if I would’ve run, but keeping it easy helped me get used to the idea of you being in my life.”

“Gee, nice to know you can get used to me.”

Though he’d meant it as a tease, Derek’s response was sheer solemnity. “You know what I mean. This isn’t just about sex

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

anymore. This is about us. About how I feel when you're around. That's why I came with you this weekend. If we're going to be real parts of each other's lives, that means more than just dinner and fucking whenever we're in the same room. That means meeting the friends, and going out, and all the shit that goes with that." He paused. "Unless you're not interested in anything more."

He'd been interested in nothing else for a very long time, but he'd suppressed all those desires to settle for what he thought he could actually get. Now, Derek held it out there, ready for him to take, and still, Sam couldn't quite let himself believe it. It seemed too good to be true. After all this time of wanting, he could actually have the one thing that had eluded his grasp.

"That means work finding out," he said carefully. "I can't be something more and still be your dirty little secret."

A small line appeared in Derek's brows. "I don't treat you like that, do I?"

"You said it yourself. You avoid me."

"Because just you being there distracts me from actual work. I know I wanted to keep it hushed in the beginning, but I thought things were better now between us."

"They are." He took a deep breath, but couldn't quite let it out yet. "All right then. Yes. I want something more. I want to be able to slap a damn label on this relationship, once and for all."

"How about boyfriend? Does that work for you?"

The word squeezed around his heart and forced the air from his lungs with a relieved burst. "Yeah, that works. That works great."

The smile returned. "Good. That's how I've been thinking of you for a while. It's nice to be able to actually say the word."

It explained so much. The added attention. The affectionate touches. A sense of ownership that in retrospect made perfect

sense. Sam only wished Derek had said something to him sooner. He wouldn't have made such a muddle the night before at the bar, and they might not have had the strained moments that afternoon. Time lost to them forever.

"You do realize I had an entirely different plan by asking for the massage, don't you?" Derek's sudden question broke Sam from the stasis his thoughts had sent him in, and he focused again on the wicked smile of his—he almost grinned himself at the word—boyfriend. "I wasn't planning on turning this into a Dr. Phil show."

"Oh? What were you planning?"

"Something a little more subtle." His strong legs parted farther, exposing the crush of his balls against the bed and the hollow between his ass cheeks. "I figured getting you to fuck me might show you how serious I am about you."

His erection had flagged during their conversation, but the first hint of Derek's invitation was all it took to bring it back with a vengeance. Everything in the room sharpened—the circle of light falling onto the bed, the edges of Derek's tawny back, the gleam in Derek's clever eyes. Knowledge became sharper, too. Cognizance of just where he was—with *Derek*—and who he was with—*my lover, in all the best senses of the word*—and why they were there together—*because he wants us to be together*. Satisfaction spread through Sam like fire on a dusty plain, taking over, consuming everything in its path, until his skin felt like it would combust from the force of it.

"That's my kind of subtlety," he drawled, and finally abandoned the flesh that had been tempting him for so long. He rose and stood at the side of the bed, working at his jeans under Derek's steady gaze, pushing both them and his underwear down

to embrace the cool air. No matter how long it was between fucks, it always felt like an eternity when Derek looked at him with such hungry longing. Sam didn't even dare touch his cock, for fear of losing it a second sooner than he was prepared for.

Grabbing a condom from the half-empty box, he started to climb back onto the bed, only to hesitate at the last minute. "Roll over," he said, nudging at Derek's leg. "And if I hear one complaint about getting lube on the blanket, I swear I'll fuck you upside down, Rossi."

Derek chuckled at the threat, but complied without comment. A patch of skin on his stomach shone from the pre-come that had apparently been leaking the entire time, and Sam bent over to lick it away before settling back between his legs.

"Any particular reason you want me on my back?" Derek lifted his legs, grabbing the front of his knees to spread them and keep them out of Sam's way. "You've been obsessed with my butt since the day we met. I would've thought you'd want to keep your eye on the prize."

His fingers were already slick, so he didn't need to add more lube as he traced the warm seam to Derek's hole. "Maybe I am."

He knew his intent was obvious. He didn't care. He didn't have to care about that anymore. But Derek didn't call him on it. His smile was enough.

"You want both my cock *and* my ass. Got it."

"Not yet." Sam pushed two fingers into the tight passage. "But you will."

Derek grunted at the intrusion, but relaxed to let Sam sink in to the knuckles. The velvety walls yielded promises of the intoxicating pleasure to come, enough that Sam couldn't even

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

pretend to take it slow. He twisted his wrist, stroking in and out, and struggled not to kneel there and hold his breath like some kind of kid about to get his first piece of tail. He was a grown man. He'd fucked more than his share of guys.

But none of them had been Derek. None of them had made the world such an interesting place. None of them turned every moment together a triumph.

Sam caressed the tight sac of Derek's balls, watching them pull farther into his body with every touch. More pre-come leaked from the slit, connecting the tip to Derek's stomach again with a long, clear line of fluid. He could always stop and lean over to lick it away, but if he did, he knew he'd probably blow this opportunity, in favor of blowing Derek. Neither one of them could resist, once Sam's mouth was on him. So no licking. Not until Sam was firmly inside him.

That didn't mean he couldn't collect it with his fingers, though.

He traced the thick vein running along the shaft all the way to the head, then tickled over the satiny skin, carefully avoiding the pre-come as long as possible. Derek's leg slipped when he suddenly released his thigh, grabbing Sam's wrist just as he had earlier. Now, he forced it down, encouraging Sam to wrap his hand around the throbbing length and pull.

"You're an impatient son of a bitch, aren't you?" Sam laughed.

"Just getting tired of being teased, cowboy." They stroked together. "Do it. I've waited long enough."

A bark of laughter erupted from his lips. "You've waited? Oh, just wait, Rossi." He let go and sat back, reaching for the condom.

Derek grinned. "You're so damn easy."

There wasn't an answer to that. They both knew it was true.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

Sam rolled the rubber on in record time, letting it snap at the base on purpose. The sting took the edge off, but only for a moment, only long enough to line up with Derek's hole and push carefully forward, only long enough as he slowly—so slowly, how he went so slow, he had no fucking clue—sank into that tight, hot, amazing ass. Exhaling on the languorous thrust helped stop the room from spinning, but his hands still shook as they grabbed Derek's hips and held on until he was fully sheathed.

"Christ," he muttered. His head fell forward, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut against how damn good it felt, better than he'd fantasized, almost better than hearing Derek admit to wanting more in their relationship. Sweat beaded on his upper lip. When he licked it away without thinking, the groan he heard from below prodded his eyes back open again.

"Come here," Derek growled. He tugged at Sam's arms until he fell forward. The downward momentum drove him even deeper into Derek's ass, a force that rolled through both of them and drew matching shudders. Derek's lips sought Sam's, teeth catching on the soft flesh of the inside for a moment before they finally found their angle and fused together.

Neither of them moved. Sam couldn't. He'd shoot without even blinking if he tried any time soon, and Derek's steel embrace denied him the room to do so easily. Besides, he was more than content to stay exactly as he was, scorching from the inside out, or the outside in, or whatever direction his body decided to behave in.

The heel of Derek's foot dug into the back of Sam's leg. *Move*, it said. *Fuck me*. Just as demanding as the rest of Derek. Just as impossible to ignore.

He rocked slowly at first, pulling out a couple inches before

sinking back in, but that wasn't a rhythm he could maintain for long. He'd waited months to feel Derek around his cock. He wanted to pound into the hard flesh until they were both wasted, unable to move. From the way Derek pulled at him, he wanted it to. So Sam complied. His balls slapped against their sweaty skin with each driving thrust, but that only made it better, hotter, more agonizingly perfect.

Though Sam was the one on top, Derek's longer body enveloped his, crushing him to his chest. They had to fight to keep the kisses going, but Derek didn't seem to mind lifting his head when Sam had to ease the strain on his back to piston harder into his clenching channel. They were too ravenous to consider going without. The moans neither one of them could contain testified to that.

Derek was the one to reach between their bodies to grip his cock and start pulling it. Sam would have done it—wanted to do it—but his strokes were more savage now, tearing into Derek's hole with ever increasing power, faster and faster, harder and harder, until he couldn't carry on kissing if he still wanted to breathe. He compensated by burying his face in Derek's neck and gnawing at the sinewy muscle.

"Fuck," Derek panted. The back of his knuckles scraped over Sam's abs as he yanked at his cock. Seconds later, he groaned, and wet heat coated both of their stomachs.

Sam couldn't withstand the sudden clamping around his shaft. He erupted, slamming one final time into the glorious tightness, and shook as his world came undone.

Then Derek kissed his temple. And it all came back together again.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

He lifted his head. Derek cupped the side of his face and drew him back down for a real kiss, keeping it soft, keeping it sweet, keeping it shattering.

“You know,” Sam murmured when they parted. “I think subtle might have worked, too.”

Derek smiled. “I know.”

CHAPTER 6

The sun bangled the shade trees in drops of gold and green, drawing Sam to the periphery of the reception to gaze out over the rolling vineyard. A Shania Twain wannabe sang from the dais, and the laughter mingled with the music to relax him more than the wine had. It had been a good day. No hitches in the ceremony except for the one hooking Geoff and Abel together, nothing but smiles and good will from all around.

And then there was Derek, smiling at him from the table of Abel's computer friends he'd been seated with for the dinner, lifting his glass to him when Sam made his toast to the happy couple, accepting Sam's offer for a dance without even glancing around to see who might be watching them.

Yeah.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

A good day.

Sam had always believed first dances were supposed to be memorable, maybe a holdover from when he was a teenager and he'd had it drilled into him by his parents for so long. He'd suspected he was gay then, of course, but he'd fought it as long as possible, unwilling to let go of the image he was trying so desperately to attain. But this time with Derek was a blur, and he suspected it would always be a blur, no matter how hard he tried to grapple with the details. Oh, sure, he remembered the surprised look in Derek's eyes, and the fact that they'd had to navigate through what felt like a thousand chairs to get to the tiny dance floor. But even now, he had no idea what the song was that had been playing, or whether he stepped on Derek's feet, or even how they got off the floor when it was over. A small part of him regretted that. A larger part was simply overjoyed they'd had one in the first place.

He felt the presence at his elbow when he lifted his glass to his lips. He didn't need to look back to know it was Derek. He just knew.

"The drive back to the city tomorrow morning is going to be killer," Sam commented. "You sure you don't want to do it tonight?"

"We've got the room. We might as well take advantage of it," came the smooth reply.

"We've also got to get up at four to make it to the office in time. I don't see us doing a whole lot of sleeping."

A slight weight settled in the small of his back. Derek's hand. Through the course of the day, Sam had learned it was his favorite mode of touching when they were in public, and though it might

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

have seemed insignificant to him a few months earlier, it felt monumental now. It came with Derek's breath, warm along his ear when he bent his head to murmur, "I didn't see us sleeping a whole lot anyway."

Though he smiled, Sam kept his eyes forward. "Right. Because you haven't drunk half a case of wine, all on your own."

"It's a celebration. I'm celebrating."

"It was a good ceremony, wasn't it?"

A soft sigh tickled down his neck, followed by a fleeting kiss over his ear. "I wasn't talking about the ceremony."

Sam stood a little taller at that, even though Derek straightened and edged back away. The hand remained, an almost delicate gesture of possession.

"Maybe we'll come down for the Fourth," Sam said. "We're guaranteed not to have court dates then."

He practically heard Derek's grimace. "Do you have any idea how many tourists are going to be here then? We're better off staying in the city. Everybody will be running away."

"So when is a good time to come back?"

"Any time that's not a major holiday."

Laughter burst from the crowd behind them. Sam glanced back to see Geoff half-collapsed against Abel's broad chest, fighting over the singer's microphone.

"Look," Abel said, keeping it beyond Geoff's reach. "He's already trying to be on top."

Sam and Derek chuckled with the rest of the guests.

Finally, Abel wrested it firmly away, leaving Geoff to sway drunkenly at his side, his arm firmly around Abel's waist. "Now that we've got that settled, we want to thank everybody for coming

and sharing this day with us,” Abel said. “You’re all important to us, and we wanted to be able to share it with people we loved, who would understand what a road it took to get here.”

“So sayeth the man who always misses the twenty-nine turn-off,” Geoff quipped.

Abel smiled through the ripple of laughter. “Special thanks to our best men. To Kavi...” He raised his nearly empty wineglass to the tall, dark-skinned man standing alone off to the side. Sam had only met Geoff’s serious co-worker that morning; he’d arrived for the day with little explanation about why he’d not been around all weekend. “For talking Geoff through those nights when I was being a shit and convincing him not to give up on me.”

Kavi bowed his head at the round of applause. The ghost of a smile on his face was the first Sam had seen there all day.

“And to my buddy Sam...” The glass shifted in his direction now, along with the eyes of the guests. “Sam, who showed me a guy could work a desk job and still be interesting, but more importantly, hauled our asses out of jail so today could happen at all.”

“One time!” Sam called out.

“One time is all it takes,” Geoff added.

“To our friends.” Abel lifted the glass to the entire crowd now, waiting for those with their own to mirror his pose. “If the lives you lead are even a fraction of how happy Geoff and I are right now, you’ll be the most sickeningly perky people in the whole Bay Area. Cheers.”

Everyone echoed his toast. Derek touched his glass to Sam’s before smiling and draining its contents.

“I have to hear about the jail story,” he murmured.

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

Sam grinned. "You'll never believe it."

"Maybe, but something tells me, it'll be fun trying."

Their eyes caught. On a whim, Sam stretched and slanted his mouth over Derek's, the kiss sweet and rich as the wine. Derek cupped the back of his head and refused to let him go, deepening the caress into something more, a search Sam wasn't sure he would have made if he hadn't been drinking. Or maybe he would have. Derek wanted them to be a couple, a real couple, with what that entailed, and his protestations about Sam's assumptions hadn't fallen on deaf ears. Maybe all Derek needed was the trust in his partner, foreknowledge of what was too much and what was just right.

"Oy! You there in the back! Get a room!"

At Abel's playful shout, Derek straightened, though he didn't let Sam go. "Got one already, thanks!" he called back, much to the delight of the guests.

Abel rolled his eyes, but Sam caught the wink in his direction before he shifted back to the crowd. "I should probably watch what I say. From the way Sam talks, he's not just a shark in bed."

Though everyone roared at the joke, Sam stiffened in mild alarm. Derek was going to think he spent all his time discussing their private life, when it was just Abel shooting off his mouth. All the work they'd done this weekend would go up in flames if this turned into yet another argument.

Derek slid his arm down to rest on Sam's shoulders. "You heard the man," he said for Sam's ears only. "We're supposed to take this to our room."

When he met Derek's content gaze, Sam relaxed. He needed to stop trying to anticipate every little problem, especially when it

WRANGLERS: VOIR DIRE

wasn't a problem at all.

“Just remember this is my favorite suit before you tear it off, okay?”

Nothing had ever been as satisfying as the smile that spread over Derek's face. “Like I could ever forget.”

VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

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* * *

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absolutely no idea what to do. All he knows is his preoccupation with the other lawyer now includes more than wrangling in the courtroom with him.

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