

The book cover features a composite image. In the foreground, a shirtless man with light brown hair and blue eyes looks directly at the camera with a serious expression. In the background, a dark silhouette of a man in a suit is shown from the side, holding a handgun and aiming it towards the right. The background also includes a night view of a city skyline with several brightly lit skyscrapers, including the Transamerica Pyramid. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by oranges, yellows, and browns.

JAMIE
CRAIG

PAS DE DEUX

A NOVEL

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...*This* was a kiss with enough force to drive Duke back against the door. His shoulder blades hit the wood with a hollow thump, and the doorknob pressed into his hip. He didn't care about the dull pain, though. Not while Scott's mouth demanded his attention. His tongue swooped into Duke's mouth, like he was chasing the faint hint of whiskey on his breath. Scott's hand closed around Duke's shirt, his fingers pulling the material tight across Duke's chest.

The notion to slow Scott down came and went, as fleetingly as it deserved. Duke had extended the first move, and made his interest all too apparent not to accept Scott's initiative, especially when they both clearly wanted this, needed it like they needed to breathe. Stopping the night before had been judicious. Now, they had all the time in the world, the luxury of hours ahead of them to take pleasure in the other without losing sleep.

He gripped Scott's hip, molding their bodies together. Scott could control the kiss as much as he liked; Duke wanted control of the rest of his flesh. With his free hand, he tugged at Scott's shirt, loosening it from the waistband, and slipped his fingers beneath the material as soon as there was room. Muscles twitched at the first touch, but he didn't let that stop him. He wanted them quivering and molten, just like Scott's shoulders had been after the massage. He would do whatever it took to make that happen.

Duke's chest began to burn, and though they broke away at the same time to gasp for breath, they didn't move away from each other. Scott kept him pinned in place, his mouth working over Duke's jaw. Like he wanted to eat Duke whole...

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PAS DE DEUX

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PAS DE DEUX
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CHAPTER 1

Voices held back from speaking were sometimes louder than those shouting in protest. Tension weighed like stone in the small parked Corolla, but Detective Owen Duke focused too intently on the ramshackle warehouse across the street to give the others in the car too much notice. At Duke's side, Finch's rosary clicked between his fingers, but any prayers Finch had for the next few minutes remained mute, transformed into shape only by the scant movement of his lips.

Glass shattered in the alley behind them.

"Shit," someone muttered from the backseat. Duke didn't know if it was Truong or Rucker. He didn't really care. Neither made a move except to twist around and check it out through the rear window.

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Duke watched them in his mirror until they settled in their seats again, then resumed his scrutiny of the warehouse. No questions. No suggestions they go check it out. That was good. They recognized his authority on this assignment. A step in the right direction.

September sun pounded down against the concrete, uncharacteristically brilliant for Oakland this time of year. It highlighted every vivid piece of graffiti, so the reds and blues and oranges bled across the walls like new scars waiting to form. The sidewalks ran dry, though. Nobody bothered with this part of town anymore. Nobody who wanted to be seen, anyway. That was the way Duke liked it.

The rosary slipped from Finch's fingers, and he jerked forward to catch it before it hit the floor. The beads clattered together before Finch had it firmly in his grasp again, and a faint blush stained his wan cheeks when he glanced over at Duke.

"Sorry," he said.

Duke cocked a single brow. "Is it helping?"

Finch pinked even further. His pale blue eyes ducked to stare at the rosary in his hands. "Not really."

A wave of sympathy washed over Duke, though he carefully caught it and tucked it away before he let it take root or the others noticed. "I suggest you pray harder, then." Something flashed at the edge of his vision. He turned his head in time to see one of the few unbroken windows on the ground floor slide shut. "Later. We're on."

All three of them snapped to attention. Leather holsters rustled as they drew their weapons. Duke bit his tongue about drawing too early. He'd rather they had their weapons ready now than struggle to get them out in time once they were inside. Less noise, too.

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He was the first to get out, though the others quickly followed. The heat crawled down the back of his suit collar, coaxing the sweat to the surface of his skin, but he ignored the sticky coolness in favor of measuring his steps as he reached the end of the alley. He glanced up and down the deserted road, then over to the empty-eyed warehouse. The open street offered no cover, but a quick assessment of the windows revealed no obvious surveillance. A short, sharp run, and he was pressed against the side of the building, Finch and the others lining up beside him.

His gaze swept upward. A fire escape that looked like it was held together by rust snaked to the roof. The bottom rung of the first ladder was within reach if he stretched. “Truong, Rucker, go in through the back. Finch is with me.”

Three sets of eyes followed him as he caught the lowest rung and effortlessly pulled himself up. He’d reached the second level platform before he realized none of them had moved.

“Were my instructions not clear enough?”

Though he never raised his voice, the warning in it was clear. He’d spent years perfecting that tone. It was gratifying to see it still worked, he thought grimly as they broke their formation and scrambled to obey. It would have been more gratifying, however, if they had simply done what he’d said in the first place.

Finch had to holster his weapon to make the climb. Duke had his ready, the solid weight against his palm the most comforting sensation he knew, by the time Finch joined him. He didn’t bother with further instructions. If Finch didn’t have it by now, that was his problem. Duke had done everything he could. He wasn’t going to coddle the kid, just because he brought a rosary to an assignment.

The warehouse was five stories tall, but Duke didn’t bother

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going to the roof. The entry point he wanted was on the third floor, a large, skeletal window with slivers of broken glass still embedded in the frame. He climbed in without letting any of his clothing catch on the jagged edges, focusing on his destination rather than the small grunts coming from Finch behind him. Dust and debris coated the floor, but a sweep over its surface said nobody else had been through this way.

Without looking back, he gestured for Finch to follow him. Noise was inevitable, but he kept it to a minimum by stepping lightly through and around the worst of the trash. He strained to pick up other sounds from the bowels of the building, anything at all he could use. A creak. A thud. A door slamming would be perfect.

In the wide hall, he stopped and tilted his head in the direction of the window he'd seen shut earlier. A low bass throbbed through the floor, vibrating into the soles of his feet. It was faint, but unmistakable, and he glanced back to see if Finch had noticed it.

Finch met his eyes and jerked his chin downward, toward the distant music. At Duke's nod, he stepped past and led the way toward the stairs at the end of the corridor, surprisingly quiet in the booming silence.

The dust stirred around their ankles, rising high enough to aggravate their sinuses. Duke held his breath to keep from sneezing, but Finch had either forgotten his training or had less lung capacity. He sneezed as soon as he pushed open the door to the stairwell, automatically letting the door go to cover his nose. Duke caught it before it could slam into place again, and frowned at Finch's devastated flush.

"You better hope nobody's on the stairs," he whispered, barely moving his lips.

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Finch swallowed and nodded. Duke held the door open until he'd passed by again and started the descent to the second floor. Maybe Finch hadn't been the best choice to accompany him. He made a mental note to review their files again once the assignment was over.

Finch got lucky. The deserted stairwell emptied onto what appeared to be an even more deserted second floor, in spite of the music beckoning them closer. None of the overhead lights were on, casting the chasm in shadows that made it harder to see beyond, and rats skittered softly behind the walls. Duke let Finch remain several paces ahead, controlling their speed and direction even when Duke's every instinct told him not to relinquish the lead. He had no choice in this instance. He had done everything he could.

A ringing cell phone muffled from a nearby room. Both men came to a halt.

Seconds ticked by. The phone was cut off by the second ring, but the damage had been done. Finch crept forward first, edging closer to the door, beads of sweat on his brow. They might have been from the stifling heat or his nerves about the situation, but Duke didn't care. He was too focused on forcibly tightening his grip on his weapon to refrain from stopping Finch from going in. He was back-up. This was Finch's operation.

He definitely needed to double-check those files.

Except Finch didn't make the rookie mistake. He stayed out of the door's way and pressed an ear as close to the hinges as he could get, his pale eyes narrow slits as he listened to what was going on inside. Duke couldn't hear anything, but he was certain Finch did. The second the knob started to turn, Finch slammed his shoulder into the door.

Shouts erupted from the room. Finch ducked and dove through

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the narrow entrance. Truong and Rucker exploded from another doorway farther down the hall, racing to cover their teammate. They were smart enough not to waste a second glance at Duke as they followed Finch inside, though the thud that reverberated through the wall didn't bode well for the one of the pair who'd likely just been jumped.

Duke waited. Someone would try making a break for it. Someone *always* made a break for it.

He wasn't surprised when a familiar blond burst from the room. Duke grabbed his shoulder and slammed him face-first into the opposite wall, pinning him there like a bug on a board as he pressed the muzzle of his Sig P226 to the back of the blond's head.

"You're dead, Metcalf."

Metcalf jerked against his hold, eyes sliding sideways as far as they could go to see Duke watching him. "Goddammit!" His face screwed up into a furious scowl, and his meaty fist punched into the wall.

Duke shook his head. "Yes, because hitting the nearest immovable object is so productive." He held Metcalf for a few seconds longer to prove his point, then holstered the weapon. Instead of pulling back, though, he dipped his hand into the larger man's coat pocket and pulled out the cell phone he'd known he would find there.

"I thought it was on vibrate!" Metcalf protested.

"Which doesn't actually make me feel any better about seeing you armed on the streets." Duke dropped it back into his pocket and let him go. The other young cadets filled the doorway and hall behind them, waiting in pensive silence for whatever he would say next. "Needless to say, Finch's team won this particular exercise. Never leave your rear open like that. You never know when

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someone might be off taking a piss when you bust in.”

“But the door was shut,” someone complained from the back.

“And you have Metcalf to thank for alerting us to which room you were in.”

“How do we know Finch was even the one who found us?”

Duke zeroed in on the ruddy face of the lone dissident. Abbott. Almost as bad as Metcalf, though in different ways. Abbott was the one always looking for the angles, ready to cover his own ass at the first sign of trouble. He’d hoped putting them on the same team would force Metcalf to play smarter or risk Abbott’s wrath, but apparently, that strategy hadn’t worked.

“Because I said so,” he replied. More than one set of eyes lowered at his unblinking gaze. Duke maintained the silence for a few seconds longer to drive his point home. “Now, clean up and get out. I expect full reports on everything that happened today in my email by the end of day Friday.”

Turning on his heel to head back to the car, he listened to the group break up and disperse, footsteps no longer quiet as they got to work. The sound system needed to be packed up, and photos taken of where everybody had actually been. The owners leased it to the San Francisco Police Department for training purposes, not demolition. Duke was personally responsible for any unnecessary damage. To date, not one of his cadets had merited extra charges, and he planned on keeping it that way.

Abbott’s low voice cut through everything. “Gee, Finch, suck him off a little bit harder next time, so our asses don’t look so tempting, okay?”

Duke stopped. Slowly, he shifted back to face the cadets, but his icy gaze landed squarely on Abbott. His face felt like stone as he said quietly, “What was that?”

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Nobody moved, not even Abbott. Slowly, Duke advanced, one measured step after another, waiting for someone to have the balls to answer his question. His sexual orientation was not a secret within the department, though he made it a rule not to flaunt it out of respect for others. Finch's sexuality, however, had always been in question, driven mostly by the young man's embarrassment about his louder, more boisterous teammates. The rosary was not for show, Duke had learned early on. Finch had a devout streak a mile wide that made him nervous about the entire issue. The others perceived it as a weakness and exploited it whenever they could. Abbott's comment was, unfortunately, not the first of its kind he had overheard.

Abbott's face was bright red by the time Duke came to a stop in front of him.

"Do I need to repeat my question?" Duke said in the same, low tone.

"No, sir."

"Do you care to repeat yours?"

"No, sir."

"Then I suggest you control the instincts that insist your mouth work without consulting your brain, and funnel that energy into making sure you don't end up dead on the next exercise. You're better off paying attention to teammates who would rather not miss a call from their girlfriends than those who actually know how to successfully complete an assignment without getting their head blown off. Do I make myself clear?"

A muscle twitched in Abbott's square jaw. His ears had gone even redder than his face. "Yes, sir."

This time when he walked away, only silence followed. He saved his small, private smile until he was safely ensconced back

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in the Corolla.

Two messages waited in his voicemail. Both came from the precinct, but it was the call from Captain Sager, requesting an immediate meeting, that got Duke moving. Sager never called when Duke was working with the cadets. He rarely bothered him at all, in fact; Duke had one of the cleanest, fastest records in the entire department. If he wanted a meeting, something had to be wrong.

He still had no idea what it could concern when he knocked on the captain's door. At the command to enter, he pushed the door open, schooling his features to face whatever waited inside.

Captain Finn Sager was the whole reason Duke had become a cop in the first place. At fifty-four, Sager was a department legend. He'd busted a prominent multiple murder case on his very first day in the field, and then spent the next twenty years amassing a record that made Duke salivate. Duke had first seen him at a safety assembly in junior high, talking about citizen responsibility and the necessity for smarts on the street. By the time he'd gone home that day, Duke had decided that was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. He hadn't regretted his choice a single day since.

"Sit down, Duke." Sager clicked his computer mouse, minimizing whatever he'd been working on to reveal the photo of his wife on his motorcycle he used as his wallpaper. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach, smiling as Duke took a seat. "So, the cadets driving you crazy today?"

Duke managed a half smile at Sager's little joke. He was renowned for maintaining his calm, one of the reasons why the instructors at the Academy kept asking him to lead the training exercises. "No more than usual, sir."

"One of these days, you're going to have to let me tag along. I

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haven't watched a training assignment since you were probably at the Academy."

"Just give me enough warning to cherry-pick who I show off."

Sager chuckled. "Something tells me it would be more interesting to see the ones who give you fits."

His thoughts drifted to Abbott's red face. "Hopefully, the ones who give me fits won't be around long enough to consider." He cleared his throat. "May I ask what this meeting is about, sir?"

His smile widened. "Thirty seconds of small talk. That's a new record for you, Duke." Catching the edge of a file with the tip of a finger, he slid it across his tidy desk. "The Academy will have to do without you for a while. I'm adding a case to your load."

Duke frowned and picked up the file. "One more case shouldn't..." His voice faded when he noticed the name on its label. *Mayfield, Tana*. His blood alternated hot and cold, and he fought the urge to tear the folder open and devour its contents. "Excuse me, but this is Saucedo's case, isn't it?"

"It was. Now it's yours."

"Why?" A frisson of alarm shot through him. "Did something happen to Saucedo?"

"He had a small heart attack last night. Nothing life-threatening, but the doctor pulled him from active duty." He sighed. "Now I have to reassign all his cases, just because he's never met a cheeseburger he didn't love."

"But..." He looked back down at the file. On the outside, it seemed completely innocuous. Plain manila folder. Simple white label, with the red stripe along its edge denoting its classification. Nobody would know without opening it that it held the details of one of the most high-profile cases San Francisco had seen in the last year. "I don't know anything about this. Saucedo's been the

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primary investigator ever since they found the body.”

“You will. That’s why I’m giving it to you. I know I can count on you to do the job right.”

It was a tremendous compliment. To have Sager single him out specifically for such an important case validated everything he’d always worked for. Duke couldn’t help a proud bristle as he sat up straighter in his chair. “It shouldn’t be that difficult. Saucedo already has a suspect in custody.”

“Yes, but it’s up to you to make sure we get an arrest. We don’t want a murderer walking free just because he managed to snow a hotshot into representing him.”

“He doesn’t have a public defender?” Duke didn’t know the specific details of the Mayfield case, but everybody in the precinct followed the media drama that came with it. Escaping it was impossible.

“Not as of yesterday.” For the first time since Duke had walked in, Sager fidgeted in his chair. “As of yesterday, he’s got James Scott trying to save his ass.”

James Scott. The name didn’t draw a memory of a man, but of headlines. Lots of them. Scott had no fear of publicity. Unfortunately, he also had both the winning streak and photogenic smile to take advantage of that. He didn’t chase notoriety. Somehow, it always found him.

“I think the operative word in that sentence is *trying*, sir. It’s a losing case, no matter who takes it.”

Sager relaxed, his smile returning. “That’s the spirit. I knew giving you this was a smart move. I know I can count on you to get the job done.”

Warmth, more fueled by Sager’s faith than Duke’s excitement for the new case, flooded through him. “Always, sir.”

CHAPTER 2

Day fifty-eight of the trial ended the same way it began—with the jury still out. James Scott spent the entire day in touch with his co-counsels, but only because they were sending him increasingly anxious text messages. The jury deliberations were supposed to last two days at the most. Three days if the closing had been rocky. But Scott had delivered the closing himself, and it had been far from rocky; in fact, it had been as smooth as butter. And Scott wasn't the only one who thought so. Instead of a quick and breezy two days, the deliberations went on. And on. And on. Four days. Six days. Ten days. It was unprecedented. It was nerve-wracking.

Most of all, it was distracting.

Scott finally had no choice but to turn the volume down on his phone, close his laptop, and leave the office. He was just as

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anxious as anybody else to know the jury's verdict, but Sam Jenkins was not his only client. At that moment, Sam wasn't even his most important client. The final arguments had been made, the final motions filed, the final plea bargains attempted and rejected. Sam Jenkins's fate was in the hands of Lady Justice now. If things didn't go as planned, he would of course find a way to appeal. But in the meantime, Scott had other things on his mind.

The first step out of the towering office building stole Scott's breath. Having grown up in the Midwest, he was accustomed to very specific seasons. His internal clock was telling him that the leaves should be changing color and a cool breeze should be whispering warnings of a wild winter to come. But San Francisco had done nothing but wreak havoc on his internal clock since his arrival, five years earlier, and that late September day was no exception. There wasn't even a bit of a fog off the bay to dampen the heat.

Despite the sweat already gathering at the nape of his neck, Scott bypassed the bus that would take him to the BART station. As much as he would have liked to abandon the entire city, he couldn't quite leave for home. The best he could do was spend an hour in his favorite café before his meeting with one of the partners, John Terrell. Of course, an hour was an impossible luxury these days, but Monica had firm orders to keep Scott's location on a need-to-know basis. Maybe, for once, an hour to himself would be possible.

Candace, his favorite barista, smiled at him as he ducked into the small coffee shop. He returned her smile and nodded before settling at his usual table. He immediately began unpacking his briefcase, loathe to waste even a second of his so-called free time. Usually, he carried files from several cases, but that afternoon,

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there was only one case. Only one very thick file.

“James!”

He kept his head down, steadfastly arranging the documents on his table. He did not have time for random small talk. Anybody who truly needed to speak to him would contact Monica and arrange a meeting.

“James Scott.”

James sighed to himself and glanced up through his lashes. Sergeant Donald Isaakson’s ruddy face smiled back at him. Scott liked Don well enough. It was difficult not to. There was nothing fake about his smile, and the two of them had a certain baseline of respect for each other. Even so, Scott’s heart fell as Don invited himself to sit in the opposite chair. The conversation would no doubt be interesting, but Scott was going to lose an hour of sleep to compensate for the time.

“You working?” Don asked.

He swallowed his annoyance at the question. “Just taking a break from the office.”

“You hear back on the Jenkins case yet?”

“No, not yet. But I’m optimistic about tomorrow.”

“You optimistic about the verdict, too?”

Scott shrugged. “Would you be?”

“Griswold is a good assistant DA, but he’s young. He made a few mistakes.”

His lips twitched. “Are you saying that if I do win, it won’t be on my own merits?”

“I’m saying, he made a few mistakes.”

“Well, a good defense attorney knows when to use those mistakes.”

Don shook his head. “Do you think you deserve to win?”

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"I think I gave my client the best defense anybody could mount. That's all that matters."

"It's not, but I know I can't convince you otherwise."

Candace brought over Scott's coffee and looked over to Don. "Can I get you anything?"

"Water is fine. Thank you."

Scott took a sip and hoped the caffeine would kick in soon. He would probably have to augment it with a shot of espresso before he left. "It is all that matters, Don. We live in a country where everybody is entitled to a sound and thorough defense. That's the cornerstone of our entire legal system."

"What about technicalities?"

It was an old argument. One he had had many times with Don. He didn't take it personally, though he would have liked to save it for another night. Preferably another night when he was drinking beer instead of coffee. "Most of the so-called technicalities come down to Miranda rights and faulty police procedure. You boys stop being so sloppy, and you won't have to worry about technicalities."

Instead of launching into a long, well-known spiel, Don merely smiled. "I don't think you have to worry about that with your next case."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're defending on the Tana Mayfield case, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?"

"The city's hottest defense attorney is suddenly defending somebody like Hector Young—*pro bono* I might add—and you think there's anybody who doesn't know?"

"If you've come to ask me what I was thinking, or try to talk me out of it, or anything else, you can save your breath." There

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literally wasn't anything Don could say that Scott hadn't heard before. There probably wasn't much Don could say that Scott hadn't already said, himself. But his mind was made up and he had given the young man his word.

"No, no, nothing like that. Though I guess I did want confirmation that the rumors are true."

"They're true."

"He hasn't even been formally charged with anything yet. Isn't it a bit early to take the case?"

Scott shrugged. "He's going to need a competent attorney long before he's charged. Not that the public defenders aren't good at what they do, but they're even more overworked than I am. Somebody needs to watch that boy's back."

"And that somebody has to be you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because somebody, somewhere, is out for Hector Young's head."

"How about, somebody, somewhere, is out for justice?"

"Justice won't be served if Hector is just the convenient conviction. Anyway, I thought you said you weren't going to try to talk me out of it?"

"Oh, I'm not." Candace returned with his bottle of water. He smiled appreciatively before taking a deep swallow. "But there's one thing I thought you might want to know."

"What's that?"

"Saucedo isn't on the case anymore."

The news in and of itself didn't bother Scott. It wasn't hugely common for the lead detective to be reassigned, especially with cases that made national headlines, but it wasn't completely

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unheard of, either. “Who is?”

“Owen Duke. Do you know the name?”

Scott sought the corners of his memory, and then was forced to shake his head. “No, I don’t think our paths have ever crossed. Is he new to the department?”

“No. I guess you’ve just been lucky so far.”

“Lucky?” Scott arched his eyebrow. “Is there something I should know about this guy?”

“Yeah.” Don finished his water and stood. “You’re not going to get any technicalities with this guy at the helm.”

“He’s good, then?”

“He’s the best. I fear your luck has just run out.”

Scott flashed his most charming smile. “I make my own luck, Don. You know that.”

“Either way, it’s going to be a hell of a show. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Yeah, have a good evening, Don.”

As soon as the cop stepped out into the street, Scott took out the small, digital voice recorder he always kept in his pocket. “Check out Owen Duke. Everything. His arrest record, his education, his life off the force. I want to know where the guy buys his shoes.”

With that reminder in place, he tucked the recorder in his jacket pocket and turned his attention back to the documents on the table. Now he only had forty-five minutes. Forty, if he didn’t want to jog down the block back to the office building.

On July 25th, twenty-two year-old Tana Marie Mayfield had helped finish up end of year paperwork for the San Francisco Ballet and said good-bye to her colleagues until September, when she would return to start the grueling rehearsal schedule for the

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Nutcracker, a holiday tradition in the Bay Area. Though not a principle dancer, she was a well-liked member of the Corps, and had been specifically chosen to aid in their prestigious school for its five-week summer session. Her tasks were mostly administrative with the occasional demonstration thrown in for the students, but her superiors claimed she had a brilliant future with the Company. People liked her. She'd left them with smiles.

On August 21st, Tana's body had been pulled out of the bay. Autopsy reports said she'd been strangled by someone with enough force to break her slim neck before getting dumped. She still wore the jeans and leotard she'd worn her last day at the Company, though her shoes were gone and there were scratches and bruises on her bare heels. Two toes on her left foot were broken.

Nobody claimed to have seen her in the time she'd gotten aboard a BART train to go home, and the moment an unsuspecting tourist had spotted her body from the Pier. She lived alone in a tiny apartment, had no boyfriend, and her wealthy family resided on the east coast. She might have been completely forgotten about until *Nutcracker* rehearsals had rolled around and she hadn't shown up for her call. At first glance, it was more than a little sad.

Until police went to her apartment and found it ransacked. Then, their random murder took a more ominous tone. The parents showed up, demanding justice, and Detective Saucedo went to town gathering evidence from Tana's apartment. Amidst the chaos, they found a single, partial fingerprint belonging to twenty-four year-old Hector Young, two time loser for breaking and entering.

Hector never stood a chance.

The fingerprint was enough to get a warrant. Hector knew enough to keep his mouth shut when he was brought in for

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questioning, and Saucedo had held him the full forty-eight hours before charging him. Saucedo had simply stopped looking elsewhere for a suspect. He'd even timed it perfectly. Hector had been charged after hours on Wednesday, which meant the police could keep him from getting arraigned until the following Monday. That was a full week in custody without any hope of getting out. Scott noticed the case then. Every instinct he had told him there was something just not right. And Scott had long ago learned to trust his instincts. If somebody competent didn't watch that boy's back, he would be bullied into a confession. He had no doubts about that.

Learning that there was a new detective to the case just confirmed his suspicions that something, somewhere, was not exactly on the up-and-up.

Scott managed to finish two cups of coffee and an espresso before he gathered up the documents and shoved them back in his case. He had a meeting with Hector Young bright and early the next morning. It would be their first since Scott officially took the case. It would also be, to Scott's knowledge, the first time Hector offered any sort of interview. The fact that the younger man was so good at stonewalling hadn't actually helped his case in the eyes of many, many people. Like the refusal to say something potentially self-incriminating was an incriminating act, in and of itself.

Hector Young was still at the front of his mind when he jogged back to the office building. He took a brief detour to the restroom to splash cold water on his face before riding the elevator up to the top floor. He knocked on the door at precisely six o'clock, pleased with himself for his punctuality. One did not keep a man like John Terrell waiting. Scott's time was valuable—each minute was worth thirty dollars—but Terrell's time was even more valuable than that.

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And he didn't invite people to his office for drinks in order to indulge in idle chitchat and office gossip.

"Come."

Scott opened the door to see John already enjoying a whiskey and soda. He was thirty years older than Scott, but due to the gym and the miracles of modern science, he really didn't look older than fifty. He was a bit of a legend in the firm. Not because he made it to partner, but because he was the first man outside of the family who had reached that position. Before John Terrell, the law firm had been known simply as Chesterson & Chesterson.

"Ah, James. It's good to see you. What's your poison?"

"Same as what you're having, sir."

"Good choice. You look a little winded."

Scott swallowed. "No, sir. It's just been a busy day."

"You're still waiting on the Jenkins verdict, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You think this delay is good news or bad news?"

Scott shrugged and accepted the tumbler. "It's difficult to say."

"A case like this...it'll catch you some attention."

Scott smiled. "Only if I win, sir."

"Win or lose, I think you might be the youngest associate in the history of the firm to be considered for partner."

Scott's eyes widened, his drink forgotten. That had always been his goal, of course, but it was the first time he received confirmation that his goal was actually in line with reality. His pulse quickened, but he took a deep breath and willed himself to calm down. He wouldn't impress anybody by being too overeager.

"That's very kind of you to say, sir."

"No, not kindness. Though that is why I wanted to speak to you tonight. I heard that you've accepted Hector Young's case?"

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“For now. The DA timed it too perfectly for them not to be sure they’ve got the right man in custody. If they had something on the kid, they would have already used it. They’re just trying to make him sweat. I doubt this will end in anything except a release.”

“You’re willing to stake your entire career on that?” John asked.

“It’s hardly my entire career. I’ve taken cases like this before.”

“It just doesn’t seem like it’s worth the firm’s time.”

Scott stiffened. “That’s why I’m doing the work *pro bono* and on my own time.”

“I just want you to be careful.” John walked around the side of his desk and clasped Scott on the arm. “I like you, James. I always have. I think I see a little of myself in you.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

The corner of John’s mouth lifted. “That includes the tendency to get myself in a little over my head. Just don’t let yourself get swept away.”

Scott’s frown only deepened. He had no idea what John was talking about. Had the older man finally started to go senile? Or was he offering what seemed like very sage and important advice? Scott didn’t want to discount anything John said, but it seemed like they had their wires crossed. There was absolutely no danger of being overwhelmed by Hector Young’s case. There wasn’t anything the least overwhelming about it. The department had a kid with a record, a partial fingerprint, and a beautiful, but tragic, victim. Letting Hector go now would be bad PR, especially since they had been avoiding investigating other suspects. Stupid and pointless, sure, but not uncommon. And not anything that Scott couldn’t handle.

“I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

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“Good. And James? Don’t beat yourself up too much about the Jenkins case. Nobody could have asked you to do better.”

“Hey, I haven’t lost yet.”

A sharp rap on the door pulled John away. “Mr. Terrell? Your car is waiting downstairs, and you have a seven o’clock reservation at The Fifth Floor.”

“No rest for the wicked, eh?”

Scott smiled. “No, sir.”

“Just keep your head above water,” John warned, as they walked to the office door. “Maybe try to give yourself a break before you work yourself to death.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“That’s what we call famous last words.”

They walked together to John’s private elevator. Scott demurred from joining him, as he had already been away from his laptop and his phone for too long. But as he settled in his chair and woke his computer up, he wondered if maybe John Terrell didn’t have a small point about getting in over his head.

CHAPTER 3

Scott didn't mind the regular trips to various police precincts across the Bay Area. It was always hugely inconvenient, but ultimately, Scott *liked* the precincts. He liked that there was always something going on. He liked that he could stroll into one at six in the morning, and he would be just one of many people there in the middle of a job. He liked to greet familiar faces, and drink the hot, too-bitter coffee, and listen to the phones ring, and know they were working like a well-oiled machine. He had a bit of a reputation around town for being an arrogant, stubborn pain in the ass. That was only because cops didn't intimidate him. That didn't mean he didn't appreciate and respect what they did.

Hector waited for him in one of the interrogation rooms. He had bags under his eyes, and his orange jumpsuit was just a tad too

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big for his bony frame. Other than those small signs of exhaustion, he didn't look the worse for wear. But he definitely looked like a man who had been denied his freedom. There was a certain resignation in his dark eyes. Like he appreciated what Scott was trying to do for him, but he wasn't going to let himself get excited about it.

Scott held out his hand and greeted him with a friendly smile. If nothing else, he wanted Hector to understand they were on the same side. Hector did take his hand, the cuffs glittering on his wrist as they shook.

"I'm sorry about the early hour," Scott started.

Hector shrugged. "What else I got to do?"

"I suppose you're not getting much sleep around here, huh?"

"'Bout as much as I ever did. It's not exactly the Hilton."

No, it wasn't. But if things went the way Scott thought they might, they could sue the city for enough to ensure that Hector could stay at the Hilton anytime he wanted to. "Here's how this is going to work. I've scheduled a two hour block for you. I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer honestly. This is a private room, and anything you tell me will be kept in the strictest confidence."

"I know how it works. Been around this block before. Different ride, maybe, but—"

Someone knocked sharply at the door. Hector's jaw clamped shut as he sagged back into his seat. Scott had only just risen from his chair, when the door opened and a tall, dark-haired man stepped inside.

"Interesting." His penetrating gaze, eyes like obsidian, flickered from Hector, to the file on the table, to Scott. "I wasn't sure you would have actually started yet. Most lawyers I've met

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prefer to keep more professional hours.”

“Then I guess you don’t know any busy lawyers,” Scott returned without missing a beat, his gaze traveling over the man.

Everything about the stranger bespoke confidence, from the way he entered the room to the way he regarded Scott. He did the latter quite openly, studying him with the same curiosity that must have been reflected in Scott’s eyes. He might have classified the stranger as attractive, if they had met elsewhere. Like a bar—no, not a bar. Some men were drinkers. This man was not. In fact, Scott wouldn’t be surprised to learn that he had no vices whatsoever. He also looked pretty damned sharp in his suit.

There was only one person who this could be, but Scott decided to play dumb until a formal introduction was made. “I’m sorry, were you hoping to use this room? I made arrangements to have it until eight.”

“I know. I’d hoped to speak with your client prior to your meeting. But since you seem to be punctual, I’ll wait until you’re done for my turn.”

Scott saw there was no playing dumb with this one. That was fine by him, too. “First, no, you were not going to speak to my client prior to our meeting, because my client will not speak to *anybody* when I’m not present. Second, if you wish to speak to my client, you know the proper channels. It is not fair to cut into his time with his legal counsel.”

The detective didn’t blink. “I didn’t intend a formal interrogation. If I had, rest assured, I would have followed proper procedure for one. But I felt Mr. Young should know who is now handling the investigation. I only meant to speak to him for a moment or two, to introduce myself. As for your lost time, Mr. Scott, I’ll make sure you’re compensated. You requested two

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hours. Two hours is what you'll get."

"Not unless you can bend time around your will," Scott said, feeling mildly petty even as he spoke. "I have a deposition at nine sharp."

"On a Saturday?"

"Whatever it takes to get the job done. Detective Duke, I presume?"

Duke raised a single brow. "Yes." The query about how Scott knew his name never came, though. "My apologies for infringing on your tight schedule. I'm sure we'll see each other again."

With a sharp nod at both Scott and Hector, Duke turned on his heel and left, closing the door silently behind him.

"You know that dude?" Hector asked.

"No, not at all. But I have the feeling I'm going to get to know him quite well. He's the man in charge of making sure you're found guilty of murder."

Hector tracked him as he sat back down. "And you're the one in charge of making sure that don't happen?"

"Absolutely. Within the week, you're going to be out of here." Scott didn't even feel a twinge at the bold promise.

"Big words coming from a man who hasn't even asked me if I did it yet."

That was immaterial to Scott, but he asked anyway. "Did you?"

"Does it matter?"

"For the case? Not particularly. You're entitled to a defense, regardless of whether or not you're guilty. But in order to offer you the best defense possible, I need to know everything."

"I can't afford no best defense. I told you that when you offered. And the way I know it, there's no such thing as free. There's always a catch." He leaned forward suddenly, his cuffs

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clanking against the table. "So what's your angle, Mr. Scott? What's in it for you? Lots of free time on the television? What?"

"Nothing is in it for me. At this point, most of the high-profile cases are going to come my way regardless of whether or not I represent you. But there are certain things about your situation that don't add up to me. When something doesn't add up, I want to know just what the hell is going on." Scott leaned forward as well. "And since I'm here now, you don't have to worry over whether or not you can afford me."

"I'm not worried. You want to work for free, I'm not stopping you. I just don't know too many people who'd try very hard if they weren't getting something back for it." As quickly as he'd sat up, Hector slouched back in his chair again, his hands going to his lap, his gaze never leaving Scott's face. They sat like that for several seconds, neither moving, until he finally added, "No."

Scott nodded. "Good. That's a good place to start. Did you know Ms. Mayfield?"

"How do you mean?"

"Did you know her? Had you ever met her? Were you acquainted with her in any way?"

The longer Hector took to answer the question, the more Scott knew he wouldn't like the answer. "Yeah, I knew her."

"How well did you know her?" Scott prompted. "Were you friends? Were you sleeping together?"

"Well enough to tell you the cops didn't need to plant the print they found." Hector snorted. "For a change."

"And how well is that? Did you visit her home often?" Scott half dreaded Hector's answer. On the one hand, providing a plausible reason for his fingerprint to be in the house was a very good thing. On the other hand, the vast majority of murder victims

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were killed by people close to them. How difficult would it be for Detective Duke to dig up a plausible motive? Especially since *opportunity* was probably already covered? “I need to know everything.”

“Twice. Only went there twice. Last time was the Fourth when I made sure she got home safe after the fireworks, but I didn’t stick around either time for more ’n a couple minutes.” His lashes ducked, and for the first time since Scott had walked in, Hector looked like a vulnerable young man, not an ex-con. “Tana was good people. She was helping me out some. That’s all.”

“All right. When was the last time you saw Ms. Mayfield?”

Unseen, the cuffs clicked together as Hector shifted his hands. “July sometime.”

“*When* in July?”

“Sometime. Near the end there.”

“Hector, I suggest very strongly that you either remember the exact date, or tell me where I can find the exact date. Did you go with her in public? Were you with any of her friends? Did you see a movie that day? I’m going to need something.” Which was true, but not quite the most pressing matter on Scott’s mind. “Where were you the night of July 25th?”

Hector’s head snapped up, his dark eyes blazing. “Not with her, okay? If I had been, she’d be alive right now, ’cause I would’ve stopped that motherfucker flat before he ever laid a finger on her.”

“I believe you, but that doesn’t actually help your case. Where were you?”

“Out. By myself. So, no, there’s nobody to vouch for me. That’s what you’re fishing for, isn’t it?”

“I’m not *fishing* for anything, I’m trying to establish your alibi. A fingerprint by itself is nothing. A fingerprint from a known

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associate, with a criminal past, and no alibi? That's enough to keep a good detective interested."

"So you just gotta be better, right?"

"Oh, I said that was enough to keep him interested. I didn't say it was enough to give him a case." Scott glanced at his watch. He still had an hour. He did need more information from Hector, but he was curious about Duke and just what he had. "Though I think I should have a friendly chat with the detective in question."

"Good luck with that. He looked 'bout as friendly as a pit bull about to get his balls chopped off."

Scott couldn't help but smile at the assessment. Hector wasn't wrong. But far from dissuading him, it only made him more curious. Did they get the meanest SOB on the force to turn up the evidence? He had also been unfailingly polite. Scott was quite good at reading people, and his gut told him that the politeness had not been an act.

"I'm going to arrange for another meeting at this time tomorrow. We're going to cover everything. Every detail of your life. Be prepared for that."

Hector looked less than pleased with the announcement, but jerked his head in what Scott assumed was a nod. "Do you actually believe me, or are you just blowing smoke up my ass to get me to talk to you?"

Scott stood and buttoned his jacket. "Why do you care? Either way, I'm the guy who's going to make sure that you're not on the receiving end of a lethal injection."

The way Hector's face closed after that said the conversation was fundamentally over. "Guess that's all that matters then. Bring some decent coffee when you show tomorrow. It's easier to remember shit if I've got some caffeine in me."

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"I'll see what I can do." Scott studied him for a moment, trying to find some sort of chink in his armor. Hector was clearly distrustful of him, and Scott didn't blame him. Probably nobody had ever helped him in his life. But Hector was going to have to figure out on his own that Scott wasn't the enemy. He wasn't going to waste time coddling Hector.

He didn't have that time to waste.

* * *

Duke hadn't actually expected James Scott to be there. When he'd received notification that Scott had booked time with Hector Young, he'd scoffed at first at the unusual hour the lawyer had chosen for his meeting. Some discreet checking around had revealed that was actually a common occurrence for Scott, but a part of Duke had been reluctant to believe it. Scott was working *pro bono*. This sort of work ethic suggested he was taking the case far more seriously than most camera whores. Duke didn't really want to believe that to be true.

Until he had come face-to-face with the man himself.

Still, he knew when retreat was necessary. Young was guaranteed right to counsel, and Duke, appearances to the contrary, would never infringe upon that. He would, however, wait until Scott was done to go in and meet Young himself. He needed a better impression of the man than the fleeting moments he'd been in the room. That time had been reserved for Scott, and Scott alone.

He sat at a small, wrought iron table in front of the café across the street, waiting for the hours to pass until he could get in to see Young. The sidewalks were virtually empty at this time of the

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morning. The city had not yet awakened to embrace the day. Overhead, the sky was gloomy and low, the marine layer cloaking the peninsula and the bay for several more hours yet before the sun burned it away. Appropriate. He was in a somber, contemplative mood today. The outset of a new case—or at least, new to him—always turned his thoughts inward.

“Is this seat taken?”

The voice startled him from his notepad. Now blocking Duke’s view of the street, James Scott smiled down at him with far more cheer than he thought appropriate for the situation, hazel eyes twinkling to match. His expensive suit hung from his broad shoulders in an obvious custom job, hiding what looked to be a trim, muscular body, and Duke stifled his swell of respect for a man who didn’t let his desk job get in the way of staying fit. Scott likely did it to look good for the cameras that always gravitated his way.

And he was still inexplicably smiling at him.

Closing his notebook, Duke glanced at his watch and frowned. “You still have time left with your client. Has he decided to confess already?”

“My client has nothing to confess.” He didn’t wait for an invitation to sit down. “I’ve decided the rest of the interview could wait until tomorrow morning, and in the meantime, the two of us could get to know each other better.”

Duke stared at him. He had to have misheard. “Excuse me?”

“Like it or not, we’re probably going to be seeing a lot of each other over the next few days. And I don’t know anything about you except your name.”

Apparently, he’d heard correctly, though Scott’s explanation did little to make Duke feel better about it. “I’m not your client,

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Mr. Scott. The only thing you need to know about me is a matter of public record.”

“Oh, I don’t believe that’s the case. For example, the reason for the sudden reassignment is not a matter of public record, but I’m sure it’s fascinating.”

“And not relevant.”

“I disagree. Somebody decided to switch horses midstream; I’d say it’s hugely relevant.”

He couldn’t resist. “Then I suggest you follow proper channels and contact Captain Finn Sager yourself, since he’s the one who decided upon the reassignment. I can bend many things to my will, but my captain’s choices are not some of them.”

Scott smiled. “Is that your way of telling me you didn’t ask to be assigned to this case?”

“That’s my way of telling you, I’m not going to fall for your head games. Save yourself the time and don’t try.”

“Head games? Asking you a straightforward question is just about as far from a head game as one can get. Fine, let’s talk shop.” Scott leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. “Why do you think DA Horan’s stalling the arraignment?”

He didn’t care for this line of questioning either. He’d had the case for less than twenty-four hours, and though he’d spent his every free moment reviewing the notes, he still didn’t consider himself well-versed enough in the details to hazard a well-informed guess like Scott wanted.

“I find it curious that my opinion matters to you at all,” he said. “Since you knew who I was when I walked into your meeting, I think it’s safe to assume you know that I was only just assigned to the case yesterday. So why would you want to know what I think, when I’ve barely had a chance to read through the whole case

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file?”

“Because you were assigned for a reason, and I’m going to find out what that is, even if you won’t tell me. Because twenty-four hours is more than enough time to form an opinion on this case. You must be familiar with all the evidence against my client at this point. There isn’t much, after all.”

“But again, my opinion isn’t relevant.” For as frustrating as he found Scott’s direct approach, Duke had to admit he was warming up to the verbal challenge Scott presented. Few people bothered to do so. The reputation he’d so carefully constructed often intimidated many from even trying. “What matters are the facts, and the fact of the matter is, your client has a history of breaking and entering, he left a fingerprint on the scene, and he more than adequately matches the physical type of the killer. Someone, somewhere, considered that enough to arrest him.”

“Someone, somewhere? Don’t be so coy. Saucedo thought it was enough to arrest him, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he was acting on somebody’s orders.” Scott offered a new smile. This one clearly calculated to be more winning than the one before it. “That’s what I’m curious about. It’s enough to make an arrest, but it’s not really enough to build a case.”

“Yet.”

“Perhaps, but that begs the question of just what you’re going to build the case on.”

“The facts I’ve yet to find.”

“I wouldn’t hang my hopes on the undiscovered facts.” Scott tilted his head. “Where were you before? I’m a little bit surprised we haven’t crossed paths until now.”

Duke wasn’t. He loathed the public limelight as much as Scott seemed to thrive in it. “I’ve been in Homicide for eight years, been

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on the force for twelve. I spend most of my time in the field. Active cases, the occasional cold case. I also work with training exercises for cadets when I have the time.”

“That doesn’t explain why we haven’t crossed paths before. Unless this is your first headliner?”

“I don’t normally care for the high-profile cases. It’s harder to get to the truth when you’ve got reporters jockeying for position and twisting every word to his or her own needs.”

“Thank God we’re not beholden to the court of public opinion, then. They’re not so bad if you know how to deal with them.”

Duke toyed with his empty coffee cup, debating for a moment about getting a refill. “You’ve certainly had enough practice.”

He lifted his shoulder in a half shrug. “The camera loves me. But despite what I know people think of me, I don’t seek them out.”

“I know.” Ignoring Scott’s obvious surprise, Duke rose with his cup in hand. “I’m getting another coffee. Would you like one?”

He glanced at his watch without making a show of it and nodded. “I would. Thank you.”

Duke left him behind. He waited until after he’d ordered another bold drip to match his own before giving in to the impulse to look at the man again. The tinted glass made the specifics unclear, but it still merited a good enough inspection. Scott made no effort to look at the notepad Duke had deliberately left behind, concentrating instead on his own phone held lightly in his hand. His head was bent, his strong profile softened by the dark window, and his full mouth pursed in response to whatever he was reading.

Duke didn’t get this man. He had all the earmarks of a showboat, with only enough skill to keep on coasting through, and yet, there was an obvious intelligence lurking behind every word.

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An honor, too, since he hadn't even dared to look at Duke's notes. Why would he choose to represent an criminal who would likely be sentenced to death before his twenty-fifth birthday?

He carried the two drinks back outside and resumed his seat. "I left room for milk if you'd like some," he said, setting Scott's cup in front of him.

"Thanks." He sipped from the cup, his face reflecting satisfaction at the brew. "I take it black. I was just looking over my schedule and wondering when you would like to interview Hector."

"As soon as possible, though whenever is convenient for you. My schedule is likely a little more flexible than yours is."

"Sometimes, I think if I could just get one more hour in the day, things wouldn't be so bad." His brow furrowed as he studied the phone's screen. From the way he squinted at it, Duke wondered if maybe he didn't need glasses. "I have a two hour block tomorrow night from eight-thirty to ten-thirty. Does that work?"

His brows shot up. "On a Sunday evening? Why are you conducting all Mr. Young's business at such unusual hours?"

"Because I'm handling this case on my own time. Otherwise, I would just have Monica rearrange my schedule as necessary, but I can't shuffle any of my other clients around right now. Besides, I'm not one to keep normal hours anyway. If I did that, I would never get anything done."

"Did you know Mr. Young before he was arrested? Is that why you took his case?"

"No. I met him the same day I offered to represent him."

"So why did you offer?"

"Honestly, detective? I've learned to trust my instincts over the years, and right now, my instincts are telling me there's something

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not quite kosher about the situation. It's easy for the world to dismiss Hector Young. He's got no known family in the area, his juvenile rap sheet is almost impressive, and a conviction on this case would reflect well not only on the department, but on the entire city." Scott inclined his head. "Fair enough. But *I'm* paying attention to what happens to him."

"So...you took this case, details unknown, client unseen, because your gut told you to?" At Scott's grin, he shook his head. "That's insane."

"It wasn't quite that bad. I did know the basic details of the case. But everything leading up to the arrest and after just seemed a little too convenient."

If he hadn't sounded so damn sincere about it, Duke would have suspected a personal angle of some sort. He knew very few lawyers in Scott's circles who were quite that altruistic. But everything about Scott screamed sincerity.

As long as they were going by gut instincts, Duke was inclined to believe him. He just would have thought the man was smart enough not to tie himself to a sinking ship.

"The DA won't be able to stall past Monday," Duke said.

"No, but Hector won't be in jail after that. I'll get bail, and the DA won't be able to do anything about it. He just doesn't have the evidence he needs yet."

The temptation was too great. The corner of Duke's mouth lifted as he said, "Yet. You keep forgetting I haven't had a chance to tackle this case yet."

"I've no doubt that you're an amazing detective, but even you can't find something that's not there."

"Did he give you an alibi?"

Scott's nostrils flared. "No. Not as such."

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He let the smile fully form for a flash of a second. “Then there’s something for me to find.”

Scott’s eyes danced. “It’s definitely going to be interesting. Either way. And you never told me if eight-thirty is good for you.”

“It’s good.” And as he sipped at his coffee, he silently agreed with Scott.

Interesting. Most definitely.

CHAPTER 4

On the same Tuesday Hector Young had been arrested, Saucedo and a small team went through his apartment in search of anything that might link him to Tana Mayfield's murder. They found nothing. No prints, no unexplainable items, nothing on the man's cheap cell phone to indicate Young and Mayfield had ever even crossed paths. According to the notes Duke found in the file, Saucedo had gone back a second time on his own, but the lack of an official report for that visit suggested it had been as fruitless as the first.

Duke wanted his own opinion. He trusted Saucedo's team to have done a thorough search, but he wanted a feel for the man they had arrested. Understand the man, understand the crime. It was simple math. With his first official interrogation of Young still

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twenty-four hours away, he had plenty of time to garner first impressions from the man's living situation. There was even a chance he might discover something useful in his case.

Hector's address was in Visitacion Valley, or Viz Valley as the locals called it. As far as San Francisco neighborhoods went, it rated amongst the worst, its reputation for gang violence scaring away anyone with enough money to live elsewhere. In reality, it wasn't quite that bad—well, except for Sunnydale, which even Duke treated with kid gloves—but in a city where snobbery had a way of running deep, just the appearance of violence was more than enough.

Duke borrowed an older model car from the precinct's garage, a dusty black Hyundai Elantra from the nineties nobody would miss if it got boosted. As he drove through the narrow, winding streets, he replayed his conversation with Scott from that morning over and over in his head, looking for anything incriminating Scott might have let slip. There wasn't anything, of course. The only tidbit that had been in any way encouraging was the fact Young didn't have an alibi. The fact that Young had failed to produce one before now had suggested it to Duke anyway, but he liked it better knowing Young had told Scott the same thing.

It was a chink in Scott's charming armor. Duke would chip away at it as much as he needed to, to get the man to stumble.

He still found the entire notion of representing a stranger based on a gut instinct absolutely incredible. After Scott had left, Duke had spent the rest of his morning pulling as many public records on the man he could find. He had a lot of news stories, true, but he also had a lot of wins to show for it. Regardless of how futile this case seemed to be, Duke respected the man's intelligence a lot more when he was done reading about his most recent

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“headliners,” as Scott had called them.

Beating him by getting a conviction would be a rewarding win. True adversaries always made the job better.

Understand the man, understand the case.

He wondered if it was possible to understand James Scott at all.

Hector’s address was a studio in-law unit at the rear of a surprisingly well-maintained duplex. Duke flashed his badge at the small Asian woman who answered the front door, and thanked her when she directed him around to the side and the studio’s independent entry.

“You’re not the same cop who was here before,” she said.

“No. I’ve taken over the case, ma’am.”

“You going to let Hector out?”

Her query made him pause. “Not in the foreseeable future, no. I’m afraid you won’t be able to rent the apartment just yet.”

Her features screwed up into a frown as she waved a hand in dismissal. “Who cares about the apartment? Hector’s the one I’m worried about. You need to let him out.”

So Hector had more than Scott as a defender. “Well, that decision isn’t entirely up to me, ma’am.”

“It’s your case.”

“Well, yes—”

“So let him go. He didn’t do it.”

“Do you have any information pertaining to the case, ma’am?”

“No, I just know Hector. He’s been trying so hard. He doesn’t need this.”

“Trying so hard?”

Another wave. “You know. No more stealing.”

Duke nodded. Clearly, the landlady didn’t know about the fingerprint they’d found at the victim’s apartment. Saucedo’s notes

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on his questions for the landlady had been sketchy. He made a mental note to re-read them when he got back to his desk.

The studio was surprisingly nice, with a well-swept, bamboo hardwood floor and spotless, though faded, furniture. A knitted afghan was crumpled on a tan futon, like Young had been woken from sleep when he'd been arrested, and the drying rack next to the sink was full of clean dishes. Posters covered most of the walls, their subject matter diverse—some model in a skimpy red swimsuit, Jimi Hendrix, the theatrical poster for *Big Trouble in Little China*. There was even an Ansel Adams in a scuffed frame. Everything was squared neatly in place, nothing haphazard about their arrangement at all.

Tidy. Meticulous. Not what he would have expected from someone whose sloppy mistakes had gotten him in trouble since he was twelve.

Maybe he'd learned from his past crimes. Covered his tracks in the Mayfield case. That would explain why there was so little physical evidence tying him to the victim.

Slowly, Duke paced around the room's periphery, taking his time to pull on a pair of gloves before he started handling anything. Fingerprint dust still covered the surfaces the techs had tested. He saw no reason to re-examine those. Instead, he focused on a beat-up metal desk in the corner, pulling open the top drawer with a spine-crawling screech.

Duke found exactly what one would expect to find in desk drawer. There were a few envelopes—bills from the power company—and a few receipts and movie ticket stubs. Loose change littered the bottom, pennies and nickels sliding to the back of the drawer as he pulled it open. A search of the three drawers on the side of the desk turned up little more than that. Duke knew that

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it wasn't just because the desk had already been swept for evidence—very few things had been brought back from the station.

He quietly shut the drawers and turned to look at the narrow futon. He could tell without taking a step that there was nothing underneath it. No boxes to explore. No stacks of papers. Of course, no murder weapon.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find you here," a familiar voice said from the doorway.

Scott stood there with his hands shoved into his pants pockets, jacket open and more casual than Duke had seen him that morning. His hair was mildly mussed, as if he'd been caught briefly in the wind, but an amused smile didn't mask the careful way he tracked Duke's movements.

"No, you shouldn't."

His mouth pulled into a slightly disappointed frown. "But you don't seem very surprised to see me, either."

"Based on what I've learned about you, if I allowed myself to be surprised at every move you made, I'd spend far too much time thinking about you and not the case."

Scott's frown instantly disappeared. "I don't see the downside of you spending all your free time thinking about me."

The mildly flirtatious tone startled Duke into hesitating. *That*, he hadn't expected. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about it, either. He hadn't thought Scott would use his orientation against him. It wasn't the man's style. It occurred to him, then, that the fact it wasn't suggested Duke was reading too much into a few innocent words.

He deliberately turned away from Scott and resumed his examination of the room. "Of course, you don't. You don't want me focused on putting your client back in jail where he belongs."

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“Well, technically, he’s still in jail. Not for long, though. Find anything interesting?”

“Not yet.” He ran his fingertips along the Jimi Hendrix print, testing for differences in thickness. “Are you here to make sure I don’t?”

“Not at all. I doubt there’s anything in here to find. Saucedo’s been over it twice, and my client isn’t guilty anyway. But Ishi called me and told me the police were poking around here again. I thought I’d come down and say hi.”

“Because you have so much time on your hands?” He moved on to the next poster, though Scott was right. Saucedo would have checked behind these. Duke was only avoiding the inevitable attention Scott commanded by checking them again. “If that’s the case, perhaps we can move the interrogation to tonight.”

“We could, but I have a date in an hour, so you’ll only be frustrated in the end.”

“I don’t get frustrated.”

“Really? What about when you’re in the middle of something intense and it’s abruptly interrupted? That always frustrates me.”

Something about Scott’s tone drew Duke’s focus for a moment, and he swept his gaze down the length of the man’s body. He appeared relaxed, but his body language betrayed a readiness to leap at the slightest provocation. A man who rarely stopped. With too much energy for his own good. “Yes, I imagine it would.”

Scott’s smile widened. “So why are you here alone? You don’t work with a partner?”

“No. I work better alone.”

“Somehow, I’m not the least surprised by that. I’ve got a story for you. Do you want to hear it?”

“If this is an attempt to distract me from doing my job, you’ll

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only be disappointed.”

“Like I could do anything to distract you. Besides, it’s related to your job.” Scott stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him. “There was once this kid who was basically a bright boy, but more or less unexceptional. Orphaned by the time he was eleven, he decided anything was better than being caught in the foster system. So, he fell in with whatever group would take him and was immediately given the job of lookout. He watched for the cops around the corner from where the closest thing to a caretaker he had was selling rock. It wasn’t an easy life, and he didn’t expect to see his eighteenth birthday. Or his fifteenth, for that matter. But he made it. And before his lifestyle really did get him killed, somebody told him, ‘Hey, you know, it doesn’t have to be this way.’ What do you think so far?”

“I think you’ve just described half of the inmates in San Quentin.” He was tempted to stop, because for all his assurances to the contrary, the rolling Midwest cadence to Scott’s voice kept coaxing him to pay attention, like Scott was about to share a secret he trusted only to Duke. In that moment, he actually felt sorry for the lawyers who had to face Scott in front of a jury. No wonder he had so many wins under his belt.

“I think the difference is that nobody told those guys it doesn’t have to be this way. Or if they heard that, they didn’t pay any attention to it. But the kid in my story, he did pay attention. He started showing up at temp offices until somebody gave him his first job. Then he found himself an apartment. A place of his own. He even got himself his first bank account. For the first time in his life, he thought maybe—maybe—he had a shot. And then the person who helped him drag his life back on track disappeared, only to be found in the bay. Tragic, isn’t it?”

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“Really? *That’s* the explanation you’re going to use?” Now he had to stop, because the sheer disbelief at Scott suggesting such a farfetched connection prevented him from doing anything but addressing it. Scott was better than that. He’d proven it time and time again. “Who is ever going to believe that Tana Mayfield of the New Haven Mayfields, beautiful, talented, a dancer in the Corps of one of the most prestigious ballet companies in the country, could ever cross paths with an ex-con with a juvie record that fast-tracked him into the big leagues before he hit the age of twenty-five? That’s not a tragedy, Mr. Scott. That’s a farce.”

“Of the *New Haven* Mayfields? Oh, forgive me, I had no idea we were dealing with such prominence.” Scott casually leaned against the desk and folded his arms. “We’re not in New Haven. And Ms. Mayfield had quite a history of volunteer work, beginning when she was twelve. She participated in programs to help disadvantaged children get books and supplies for school. When she was nineteen she began volunteering in a halfway home for nonviolent criminals. She tutored them in reading and basic math. No doubt she was a talented girl from a comfortable background, but she wasn’t a snob.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that no physical evidence links the two except a fingerprint and a trashed apartment.”

“Right now, there’s more evidence to support my theory than there is to hold Hector in jail. Especially since Hector was in that halfway house when she began volunteering there.”

Duke shook his head. “Your delivery is going to need more work if you plan on convincing a judge and jury of that.” He turned away to hide the ghost of a smile he couldn’t contain. Witnessing Scott’s bravado was going to be the most entertaining part of this case. “But it was a nice try.”

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"I don't need to convince a judge or jury of anything, Duke. Your one piece of physical evidence is explained away by the fact that the victim and Hector were friends, and he visited her house on two occasions. And yes, I have a witness who'll attest to that. I've had a busy day."

His head snapped up at mention of a witness. "Who?"

"Ah, now I've got your attention. Saucedo has not done a very thorough job so far. Or maybe people just didn't like to talk to him. I don't know. But I found several people today who were quite happy to tell me what they knew of Ms. Mayfield."

"You still haven't told me who." Saucedo's list of witnesses hadn't been unusually short. Duke couldn't imagine him missing someone as valuable as this, especially if there was more than one.

Scott took a small notebook out of his pocket. It seemed so incongruous with what Duke knew of Scott that he couldn't help but stare at it. "I have a list of names here." He took out a small digital device. "And about a dozen interviews on this. I'll be more than happy to share them with you...over drinks."

Drinks. For a moment, Duke's brain refused to compute the implication. He was still a tad bewildered that Scott could have an entire list of people with valid information on the case that he didn't. If Saucedo had talked to even one of them, Young wouldn't currently be sitting in a cell.

Drinks. His gaze leapt to Scott's. Scott was holding the list for ransom for...*drinks*? What on earth for? He clearly had the advantage here. He had to know Duke didn't have anything new. Otherwise, he would've resumed his *why is the DA stalling* routine as soon as he'd walked through the door.

"You have a date." A statement of the obvious, but the best he could manage while he struggled to put some order into Scott's

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actions.

Scott straightened, his eyes dancing with victory. "Great. Let's go."

Duke blinked as Scott headed for the door. "What? No, we're not going anywhere."

"Why not? Didn't you just agree to drinks?"

"No, I was reminding you of the fact that you have a date. In an hour. That's what you said." His brows drew together into an immediate frown. "Unless that was an attempt to put me off from pushing for an interrogation tonight. In which case, you should know I *really* don't like being lied to."

"Oh, that. I was going to meet somebody for a late dinner. But I think you and I can find a far more productive use of my time."

He held out his hand. "Give me the list and there's no need to change your plans."

"I'm thinking no. It'll be far more beneficial, for both of us, if we have a few drinks, discuss what's on this tape, and try to figure out just *why* you don't already have this information."

"I can figure it out perfectly well on my own." His snappish tone surprised both of them, and he deliberately took a deep breath and dropped his hand. Scott would not push his buttons. He would not let it happen. Just to be safe, he took another deep breath before speaking again. "How is this in any way beneficial to you? If you already have witnesses, you don't need to curry my favor to help you with your case." There. That made him sound competent and in control again, even if he didn't necessarily feel it.

"Curry your favor? Duke, I've already got this case in the bag. But regardless of that, there's still a murdered girl, a lack of physical evidence, and a detective who is smart enough to figure everything out, if he stops looking at the red herring."

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The last thing he needed was for a cocky lawyer telling him how to do his job. “If the only way you’re going to hand over that list in a timely manner is for me to join you for drinks, then you don’t really give me much of a choice, do you?” He peeled off his gloves, grateful for the mundane distraction. His control walked a knife’s edge already. Damn Scott. He’d rather deal with Abbott and his backstabbing homophobia than Scott right now.

If Scott had any idea how annoyed Duke was, he didn’t show it. In fact, his wide, charming smile returned. “I knew you would see things my way. I would offer to drive, but I have the feeling you don’t want to leave your car around here.”

He also didn’t want to be stuck in a locked car with Scott until he had his emotions back under control. “I’ll follow you.” And keep the meeting as short as possible. He’d get the names and interview them himself.

He’d save trying to understand Scott for later.

CHAPTER 5

Getting Duke to agree to drinks had been an amazing coup and one that, quite frankly, Scott didn't think he would be able to pull off. He knew the witnesses would be his best bet, but Duke was a good detective. He would have sought out the same people Scott did, and probably would have come to the same conclusions on his own. Sooner or later. Though he did not have a luxury of time, and they both knew it.

Convincing Duke to agree was one thing. Scott still wasn't entirely convinced that Duke would actually show up where they had agreed to meet. It would have been easy enough for Duke to change his mind and simply drive home, or back to the department. But he had a really hard time imagining Duke going back on his word, no matter how grudgingly he had given it. Scott wasn't even

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entirely sure why he cared so much. Except that every time he looked at Duke, he found something new to like. Currently, his favorite thing about Duke was his eyes. Which appeared to be a dark brown. Except when he was annoyed. Then they were closer to black. Scott knew he could spend way too much time staring at those black eyes.

Which was very bad, because if there was anybody in the city he needed to maintain a professional distance with, it was Owen Duke.

Scott chose a small wine bar on Cole Street. He was a regular, but not because he regularly conducted business there. In fact, he *never* conducted business at the Isis. It was a very intimate location with a soothing, quiet atmosphere. But men went there on dates. They did not go there with opposing counsel. Scott knew he was making a huge gamble. One that probably would not pay off. But he was poised to become his firm's youngest partner, and he didn't get to that point in his career by being afraid of risks.

He waited in a corner booth that gave him an open view of the front door. He'd briefly debated waiting outside, but that reeked of desperation—or at the very least, insecurity Duke wouldn't show—and he didn't want that. So when the door opened and the object of his attention walked in, tall and commanding in his immaculate dark suit, he didn't bother holding back his smile.

Duke didn't share it as he approached the table. He didn't sit, either.

"I'm here," he said. "Now let's go somewhere more appropriate for our meeting."

Scott blinked, schooling his features to the very picture of innocence. "What's inappropriate about this place? It's quiet, the wine selection can't be beat, and nobody will bother us here."

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“Because they’re all on dates.”

“True, but...” Scott looked around the room. “They all seem to be very respectful dates. I don’t even see any PDAs.”

“That’s not the problem. This”—he gestured between them—“is not a date.”

Scott didn’t miss a beat. It wouldn’t be the first time he had been shot down, after all. “No, but this”—he mimicked Duke’s gesture—“is a meeting between a high profile attorney and the man who just took over a high profile case. People are at least discreet here, if nothing else.”

Duke tightened his mouth, his now-black gaze sweeping over the other patrons again. He’d likely expected some sort of compromise, but Scott wasn’t willing to give it to him. Bending a little wouldn’t do him any harm, especially if it would help him see the ridiculousness of Hector’s incarceration.

His gaze swept back. “Tell me why you picked this place and I’ll stay. Because there are plenty of discreet locations in this city without coming someplace like...this.”

“Because there are two places in this area where I’m known, and where I’m comfortable. At this hour of the night, one is full of lawyers. This is the other one.”

Duke’s nostrils flared. After a moment, he slid into the booth across from Scott. “I’m sorry. I jumped to a wrong conclusion.”

Scott wanted to ask what that conclusion was. Had he really been that annoyed because he thought Scott wanted a date? Or was there something else? After all, Duke knew exactly what kind of bar this was. Perhaps he had been there before.

“It’s not a problem.” He sipped from his glass of water. “Have you been here before? If not, I’ll be happy to offer a few recommendations.”

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“Not for a long time, but that’s all right. I’m just having coffee.”

“You don’t drink at all, do you?”

“Not when I’m on duty, I don’t.”

Scott smiled sheepishly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even really think about that.”

“That’s all right. You’re just more used to drinking during business meetings.” Duke finally relaxed a little in his seat, his hand straying beneath the table to unbutton his jacket. “Besides, alcohol tends to make me tired. I won’t do anybody any good if I fall asleep in the middle of your list.”

Scott filed that bit of information away for future reference. He didn’t know if he would ever get the chance to use it, but it was best to err on the side of caution. He did, however, know that he couldn’t put Duke off forever. He took the notebook out of his pocket and flipped to a page in the back.

“Rex Nieves, property manager. Nicole and Blake Rogers, next door neighbors. Branson Nichols, Greg Smith, and Xavier Gato, her neighbors across the hall. Richard Pennyworth, night security guard at Ms. Mayfield’s building. Ishi and Ken Lee...” Scott looked up. “You’ve met Ishi. Ken is her son. And Chandra Cunningham has been the community outreach coordinator at the Woodson Halfway Home for nonviolent criminals for the past five years.”

Duke frowned at the very first name. “Nieves is on Saucedo’s list. His answers were inconclusive.”

“His answers weren’t as precise as I would hope, but he did tell me that in June of this year, he ran into Ms. Mayfield and Hector while waiting for the elevator. She introduced them, but he doesn’t remember Hector saying much while they chatted about the

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ballet.”

The frown deepened. “You’re giving me prior knowledge of the victim here. What did the others tell you that you think will exonerate Young?”

“Your only piece of physical evidence is the fingerprint in Ms. Mayfield’s apartment. A fingerprint that is easily explained away by the fact that they were friends. Or are you going to arrest every person who visited her home in the past three months?”

“She was robbed. Young’s *modus operandi*.”

“Was she? What’s your proof of that, detective? What’s missing?”

“There’s no way for us to be certain without someone to inventory its contents.”

“In other words, you can’t say she was robbed because you simply don’t know. I’ll tell you one thing, though. Nieves was with her parents after they were allowed to enter the apartment and pack everything up. He told me they never indicated anything they sent her was missing, and that includes a beautiful diamond pendant she received for her twenty-first birthday.”

“Unless he had a personal relationship with her, Nieves is not a reliable witness to everything that was in her apartment, regardless of what her parents may or may not have said.” Though Duke didn’t sound entirely convinced by his own argument. He had a way of tilting his head when his thoughts were clearly working. He shouldn’t have to try so hard if he had facts at his disposal.

“But it’s enough to introduce reasonable doubt and demolishes the one piece of evidence you have. Incidentally, Branson Nichols, her neighbor and somebody with easy access to her apartment for the weeks she was missing, also has a record. Two charges of possession, one attempted robbery, and one B&E.” Scott sighed

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and pushed the recorder across the table to Duke. "This doesn't reek to you?"

"I'm not like you, Mr. Scott. I can't know until I have all the evidence in front of me. It's the only way to make a case stick. But I'll tell you one thing. Nichols has one thing Young doesn't. An alibi." Though he regarded the recorder with obvious curiosity, Duke refrained from picking it up, tracing an invisible line along the table. "Did you talk to Saucedo at all before I got assigned to the case?"

"No. The case was reassigned before I had the chance to speak to him."

"Oh."

"Why?"

Duke waved it off. "I just wondered what he might have said. I haven't had the chance to talk to him yet."

"How...is that possible? Why wasn't he the first person you spoke to?"

"Because he had a heart attack." For all Duke's reluctance to tell him before, now the information came easily, naturally. "I left a message for him today, but he hasn't got back to me yet."

"Oh, I didn't know. Is he in the hospital?"

"Yes. That's why I inherited it."

"That might explain why there's information you don't have. Perhaps he was feeling unwell when he began his investigation."

"Perhaps." Duke's normally hard features softened, though the waitress's arrival pulled him from whatever thoughts consumed him. After she left to fill their order, his gaze fixed on Scott again, his eyes closer to their normal brown. "You seemed to get a lot accomplished today. You must have a lull in clients."

"No, a full slate. But I didn't have a court appearance this

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afternoon, there were a few meetings I could postpone until later in the week, and I delegated the two depositions scheduled for this afternoon. It took a bit of juggling, but I figured it would save me time in the long run.” Scott absently scraped his thumb across the side of his water glass, gathering the perspiration forming there. “Honestly, I needed the distraction. I’m waiting on a verdict and I don’t want to dwell on that.”

“The Jenkins case?”

“Yes.” Scott leaned forward. “What’s your professional opinion? Do you think I’ll get the verdict I’m hoping for?”

“I didn’t follow the trial. I don’t know the details.” Of course, he would say that. Scott shouldn’t have expected anything less. Then he surprised Scott by adding, “But I can tell you half my precinct wants Griswold’s head on a platter. It’s tough when a case you’ve worked your ass off on gets handed to someone who makes the kind of dumb mistakes he does.”

“I can imagine. It’s just...a bit disorienting. I’m usually pretty good at being able to read juries.” Scott shook his head, flashing a smile. “Sorry. I know you didn’t come here to discuss my jury problems.”

“Is that the real reason you took this case? Because you needed the distraction from how long Jenkins is taking?”

“No. At least...I don’t think that’s the reason I took the case. Though, I suppose I’m not usually on the lookout for the hard luck cases.”

“Well...” A hint of a smile played on Duke’s mouth. “It would certainly make more sense than a gut instinct.”

Scott couldn’t help but stare at him. “I wasn’t sure you even knew how to smile.”

“Maybe that’s proof you shouldn’t always jump to such quick

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assumptions.” The waitress arrived with their drinks, but her presence didn’t banish this slight shift in Duke’s mood. He thanked her warmly and sipped at his creamy coffee. Another anomaly Scott hadn’t expected. He would have said Duke would prefer it sharp and black. When he set his cup down, his lips glistened lightly with new moisture before he licked it away. “Did you have any luck finding an alibi for Young today?”

“He said he went for a walk. There’s nothing I can do about that. But we both know it won’t be an issue if there’s no physical evidence linking him to the crime itself. And who says I’m the one who jumps to quick assumptions?”

Duke sighed softly and shook his head. “Contrary to what you might think, I’m not trying to railroad your client. I’m following the leads where they currently exist. If it turns out Young isn’t guilty, I’m not going to sit back and let him rot in a cell.”

“If it turns out?” Scott mocked gently. “Your bias is showing. Remember, the presumption is not guilty. Though, I do believe that you’re not trying to railroad him. You don’t strike me as the sort of guy who is more interested in his reputation than justice.”

“Because I’m not.” Another hint of a smile. Scott thought he could get used to those very easily. “Though I won’t deny working to have the best record in the precinct.”

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that you do. Do you have any outside distractions? Family, secret addictions, things like that?”

“If they’re secret, I’d hardly tell you, now would I?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’d trust me. People say I have an honest face.”

“I’m more interested in actions, not appearances.”

“In that case, I might have a few moves you’d be interested in.”

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Duke cocked a brow. "Please tell me that's not one of the lines you use on actual dates. Though it might explain why you thought this could be one."

Scott feigned surprised innocence. "What made you think I thought this was a date?"

Dark eyes locked on his. "Call it a gut instinct."

Scott couldn't dampen his delighted laugh. "You've got me. I'm an optimistic guy. Perhaps my optimism was a little...unwarranted in this case."

"I would suggest just...poorly timed."

His eyes widened at the implication, and he tried to keep his excitement at bay, but failed. As far as he was concerned, that was practically an invitation to try again. "You're right, my timing could have been better. In fact, I'll promise you now, in the future it *will* be better."

Duke finally looked away, giving Scott a moment to breathe. Duke was probably a master in interrogations. Under those intense eyes, retreat was impossible. He suspected there was little Duke ever missed. Duke would be thorough and focused, unrelenting in his attention.

Heat rushed to his cock. Those characteristics would be a bigger bonus in the bedroom. Or on a table. Or against a wall.

"Could you give me the list of people you spoke to today?" Duke pushed the notepad he'd been writing in over coffee that morning in front of Scott, open to a blank page. "I'd like to compare it to Saucedo's notes."

"I bet you are hell during cross-examination, aren't you? Opposing counsel must wince when they see you on the witness list." Scott pulled another piece of paper from his pocket, tossing it on the table besides the recorder.

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"You had these ready to give to me?" Duke asked in disbelief.

"I knew you would want them. Hell, I wanted you to have them. You can keep the recorder, too. The interviews are very illuminating and not even a little incriminating."

Though Duke slipped them into his pocket without further questions, his inquisitive gaze remained steady on Scott. "Thank you. This makes things easier for me."

"You're welcome. My life will be considerably easier when you realize I'm right." Scott sipped from his drink and glanced at his watch. "Oh, I've kept you out late."

"No, I'm probably going to have a late night. But this is probably a good point to call it quits for now. I can get working on these, and maybe you can salvage the real dinner date you had."

"If not the dinner, then maybe the dessert," Scott said lightly, though he was a little disappointed. He wanted to stick around for a bit longer. See if he could catch another small smile, or be surprised by another little joke. He might have suggested another drink, but Duke was already standing. Unwilling to just watch him leave, Scott added, "I'll walk you to your car."

Duke cast him a curious glance, but didn't argue, leading the way through the subdued bar and out onto the street. The evening had grown cooler, the sky a dusky pink and purple where the setting sun streaked across the horizon.

"Here." Duke's voice pulled Scott's attention away from the sunset to see him offering a business card, caught between his index and middle fingers. "I'm not at my desk very often. This has my cell number in case you need to get hold of me."

Scott plucked it from his fingers, but not before letting his finger casually brush against the back of Duke's hand. It was a ridiculously small moment of contact, and it only served to make

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Scott wish he could have more.

“Thanks. Let me give you my cell, too.” He pulled his business card from one pocket, and a pen from another. He was just writing the first digit when a crack like thunder boomed down the street. And then the world turned upside down.

The pen went flying as Duke shoved him to the ground. His knees and palms scraped against the sidewalk, but that was nothing compared to the sudden weight slammed against his back. Another crack split the air, closer this time. He twisted his head toward it, but Duke’s hand clamped over the back of his neck, forcing his face to the concrete.

“Stay down.”

The words were hard and even, much like the line of Duke’s locked jaw. In a liquid motion, he reached inside his coat and pulled out a gun, the weapon a natural extension of his arm. It swept along several inches before Duke followed it with his body, his weight disappearing from Scott’s back. James rolled toward the building in time to see Duke take off at a dead run down the street.

He remained motionless, too stunned to move. His heart thudded in his ears, and the bitter taste of adrenaline rested on the back of his tongue. He wanted to chase Duke down. He wondered if he should call the police. He thought he might throw up. Scott never got flustered. He liked to think he had every situation under control, even during the chaos of a criminal trial when anything could, and would, happen. But at that moment, he was flustered. Worse than that, he was a little bit scared. Because he didn’t think the shots had been meant for Duke.

He finally forced his watery limbs to cooperate with him and pushed himself to his feet. He had his cell out of his pocket, his thumb hovering over the nine when he saw Duke’s familiar form.

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Alone. Disappointment crashed through him. He didn't know how he had expected Duke to chase down a car on foot, but it never occurred to him that he would be returning empty-handed.

Duke stopped in front of him, shadowed eyes raking down his body. Though he hadn't broken out in a sweat, his forehead shone from his exertion, his breath a little faster than it had been inside.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Nothing hit you, did it?"

Scott didn't feel any pain, but all that meant was that he could be in shock. He looked down, checking for the dark shadow of blood on his clothes, but there was nothing. Everything appeared to be normal. "I'm fine. Just a little...rattled."

"I got a partial on the license plate. I'll run it, but I don't know if it'll come back with anything useful. Any idea on who would take a shot at you?"

"No, but I could have a partial list of enemies to you by the morning," Scott said, only half-joking.

Duke didn't smile. "Has this happened before?"

"Have I been shot at before? No. I have received some threatening letters from disgruntled former clients. But nothing that's ever been a serious threat."

"This was serious." Gripping Scott's arm, Duke forced him to turn around and look at the wall behind them. A single hole at eye level stared back at them. "That first shot missed you by inches. Probably because we were walking, or you bent your head while you were writing down the number, or the driver accelerated, or something like that. Whatever it was, you were lucky."

"It's an occupational hazard," Scott said, sounding far more casual than he felt. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you about those, detective."

"No." His eyes bore into him. "But some occupations shouldn't

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be as hazardous as others.” His head jerked to the side when the Isis’s hostess stepped out onto the sidewalk. “Have you called 9-1-1 yet?” At her wavery yes, he nodded. “Good. Do you have a private room I can keep Mr. Scott until a car arrives? Somewhere we won’t be disturbed.”

“Are you going to lock me up until they arrive to take my statement?” Scott asked wryly.

A muscle twitched in Duke’s cheek as he followed the hostess into the club, his grip still firm on Scott’s arm. “I’m going to keep you safe.”

Scott bit back more sarcasm—it was nothing more than a defense mechanism. He didn’t like being vulnerable at the best of times. He certainly didn’t enjoy the sensation in front of a man like Duke. On the other hand, he could certainly do worse than having a man like Owen Duke watching his back. Especially since he had no idea just who was lurking behind him.

CHAPTER 6

Reviewing evidence always calmed Duke. He liked the routine. He liked the repetition. Puzzle pieces turning around and around to find patterns, to see holes, to create new puzzles to fathom out. It helped give him such a terrific record, because he was willing to take the time to consider a problem from more than a single angle.

Sitting in Scott's darkened apartment, listening to the property manager's interview on borrowed headphones, should have worked.

It didn't.

He lounged in one of the two cream leather chairs, his weapon resting within reach on its wide arm. No lights were on, but the curtains were pulled back from the windows running the length of one wall. During the day, Scott would have an amazing view of the

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bay, though Duke doubted he got much opportunity to enjoy it. Now, it stretched like ink into the night, lights from the city sparkling atop its surface. The original artwork that filled the walls might as well have been blank canvases for what he could see, but Duke was not spending the night to enjoy the scenery.

If somebody tried taking another shot at Scott, Duke would stop them. End of story.

It had been an easy decision. For all his joking with the uniforms who arrived to take their statements, Scott had been wan and jumpy. His usual abundant energy translated into eyes that refused to settle on any one thing, feet that refused to stop moving whether he paced or sat and jiggled a leg. The longer it went on, the more worried about him Duke got. He didn't like seeing Scott's confidence this shaken. It felt unnatural.

Insisting on escorting him home and spending the night to keep a lookout did not. Duke couldn't do much of anything about the following day, but he could make sure Scott relaxed enough to get a good night's sleep to better face it.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not, finding out Scott was gay had changed the way Duke looked at him. Until that point, he'd been angry that Scott was attempting to manipulate him through his sexuality. Isis was a commonly known gay wine bar, built for intimacy. Duke hadn't called him on it when he'd first suggested Isis for drinks because he wanted to appear flexible. But he'd assumed Scott meant to try and get his defenses down by using flirting and sex as weapons. It was still possible that he'd lied about his orientation, but Duke didn't think so. He was an expert at knowing when someone was lying to him, but more than that, Scott was right. He had an honest face. He'd been telling the truth.

But that opened a door Duke hadn't expected. Scott had an

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unmistakable boyish charm, and an appealing intellect that fascinated Duke. Once he knew Scott was gay, his thoughts started to stray, considering the man on levels beyond the case, beyond anything that was suitable for their positions. They were only random moments—catching a glint in his hazel eyes, noticing his strong fingers during his continuous touching of his water glass—but they were enough for him to confess he might not necessarily have turned him down if they had met under different circumstances. Duke didn't date much. Few men understood his dedication to his work. But for Scott, he thought it might have worked out.

Might have. Or possibly in the future. Not now. Not while they were working the same case. The last thing he needed was for Captain Sager to discover a conflict of interest that might damage their case against Hector Young.

Duke thought the volume was low enough, but he didn't hear Scott approach. He didn't even know the other man was up until he was practically standing on top of him. "Do you plan on sleeping tonight?" Scott asked good-naturedly.

He paused the recorder and pulled the headphones down to hang around his neck. "No. Why are you up?"

"I don't know." Scott ran his hand through his hair. "Still feeling a bit...wired. I keep trying to figure out what happened. Who it was. All that."

"You're wasting energy." Though Duke knew he was wasting breath telling him that. He gestured toward the couch, grateful the darkness hid most of Scott's details from view. Instead, he saw the outline of a bare, broad chest and silk pajama bottoms glistening in the stray moonlight filtering through the window. "You can sleep out here if it'll make you feel better."

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Scott's lips twitched. "I don't know if I should be amused, offended, or touched that you're giving me permission to sleep on my own couch."

"I thought that was better than ordering you back to bed by reminding you who has the weapon here."

"Then I guess I'll skip right over amused and offended, and go right to touched." Scott crossed over to the couch and settled in the deep cushions with a sigh. "So would you play sentry for any lawyer that gets shot at?"

"If he was shot on my watch, yes."

"Oh, I thought maybe I was special."

Duke wasn't going to touch that one, not now, not ever. He knew Scott was only kidding around, but he also knew that if he answered honestly, Scott would never let him forget it.

"I like your apartment." The change of subject was safer. "I'm not sure I'd work as many hours as I do if I had your view."

"It's nice, isn't it? I'm subletting it from a guy who used to work at the firm. He moved to DC last year, and he gave me a pretty good deal. Before that, I lived in this tiny little shoebox with a view of a wall. I worked so many hours, anything bigger seemed wasteful."

"Don't you still work that many hours?"

"Yes. But now I have a nice place to entertain guests. And trust me, I would have been stupid to walk away from the deal he offered." The couch creaked as Scott turned on his side. "Do you want a tour? It might be nicer than sitting here in the dark."

"I don't think I should be too distracted." Even though he already was. Scott's new position slashed a jagged silver beam across the lower part of his face and his upper chest, revealing a smile, a defined muscle, a dark nipple. "You get used to the dark

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after you've been on a few dozen midnight stakeouts."

"Yeah, I suppose so." Scott shifted on the couch again. "Maybe you can help me get my mind off things. If you wouldn't object."

"That depends on what it is. You're not going to make me sing a lullaby to put you to sleep, are you?"

"No, but maybe you could set aside a bit of that stoicism and tell me about yourself. I mean, you are staying the night in my apartment, and I'll probably cook you breakfast in the morning. I should know more about you than just your name."

"You don't have to cook me breakfast."

"Yes, I do. That's a house rule. If you stay up all night to guard my life, you get breakfast. Nice deflection, by the way."

Not nice enough, apparently, because Scott still seemed to expect him to just open up and bare his soul. Duke fought not to fidget in his seat as he wracked his brain from some sort of safe response. "I run training exercises for the cadets in addition to my case load. Not now, actually, but I'll go back to it once this case is closed."

"Why? Were you assigned to that or did you volunteer?"

"One of my old teachers approached me about running a specific exercise a few years ago. It turned out so well, they asked me again. I just kept on doing it." He paused, the last exercise replaying in his head. "It's a lot of work, and sometimes it's frustrating, but...it's fun. I like knowing I helped make the cadets better."

"Yeah, I can see why that would be satisfying." Scott paused. "Do you do anything for fun outside of work?"

When the corner of his mouth lifted in a half smile, he wondered if Scott could see it. "I suppose you'd consider the gun range work."

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“Yes, I think that technically counts as work. I’m looking for something that has no relation at all to the department.”

“But it’s fun, and I do it when I’m off-duty,” he argued good-naturedly.

“Okay, let’s say you’re going out on a date with somebody you really like. Where would you take that person?”

“Is it a first date?”

“Yes.”

“Am I trying to impress, or casual?”

“You definitely want a second date.”

He knew he shouldn’t answer. It wasn’t any of Scott’s business. They weren’t friends, this wasn’t a social environment, and his personal life was his own, not anybody else’s. But he liked Scott’s easygoing manner, and the back and forth was—dare he admit it?—fun. So he answered anyway, knowing full well he would probably regret it later.

“Sutro’s at the Cliff House.” His favorite restaurant, not necessarily for the food, but for the panoramic views of the Pacific. It was too expensive for anything but special occasions. The last time he’d gone was for his parents’ fortieth wedding anniversary. “Then we’d walk over to the Camera Obscura to look at Seal Rock and take a walk along the trails.”

“That’s...a really, really good first date. Not that you need my approval or anything.”

“Well, you said to impress. What would you do?”

“The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,” Scott answered promptly. “After that, a cruise around the bay. Unless my date gets seasick, of course. And then a nightcap back here, where I would make my world famous banana fosters and ice cream for dessert.”

The chuckle escaped him before he could stop it. “Somehow,

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I'm not surprised your specialty is a dessert with its own show."

"Well, I've got to do something to make sure they'll come back for more."

"That's not really an issue, is it?"

"I don't know. I haven't invited anybody here without making banana foster for them at least once."

It dawned on Duke—and oddly enough, for the first time that evening—that he had no idea if Scott was in a relationship where Duke's presence overnight might create a problem. He didn't think so. Scott didn't act like he had a boyfriend, and surely he wouldn't have toyed with the notion of them being on a date that night if he did. But what about the mysterious late dinner date? That could have been somebody important to Scott. Somebody who might show up in the morning a little bit put out that another man had spent the night in Scott's living room.

There was only one way to find out. Duke didn't want to be the cause of unnecessary strife, even if the reason for the impromptu sleepover was legit.

"Do I have to worry about your latest banana foster conquest letting himself in with a key? I'd hate to shoot your boyfriend by accident."

Scott chuckled. "No, there's no banana foster conquest with a key. In fact, I haven't had one of those conquests in...far too long. Tonight constitutes the most time I've spent with another person outside of work in at least three months."

"It was still about work, though." Not entirely true, but asserting it made Duke feel better.

"Well, I get that you're still at work right now, but I'm not." Scott rolled off the couch, bouncing to his feet. "So it counts. Do you want something to drink?"

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“Water sounds good.” His throat was dry. He would have preferred coffee, but if someone tried breaking in, the smell would be a giveaway.

“Water? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Duke watched as Scott wandered into the kitchen. The apartment had an open floor plan, and the only thing that separated the two rooms was a long counter. He filled a glass with water from the front of the fridge, and then got a smaller one from the cupboard. The fridge spit out ice instead of water, and Scott poured whiskey over the top.

“What time does your shift begin tomorrow? Will you get the chance to get some rest?”

“I’ll take a nap over lunch, then probably call it an early night after the meeting with Young.” He felt funny being waited on, even if it was just for water, and stood, sliding his weapon back into its holster. He met Scott at the edge of the counter and gratefully took the glass. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Look...I appreciate that you don’t want me to die. But you don’t have to spend your whole night here. Really. Or, if you do, at least take the guest bedroom.”

His mouth twitched. “Sleeping defeats the purpose.”

“I think chances are good that you could sleep through the night and not miss anything.” Scott took a long swallow from his drink, the ice clinking against the glass. Duke couldn’t help but notice the way Scott’s throat worked as swallowed. “It could be that I wasn’t the target at all.”

“I don’t believe that. The shots were too close to be random.” The cool glass numbed his fingertips, helping him focus. There were too many distractions in the apartment. He hadn’t even heard Scott come out of his bedroom. “Maybe I should stake it out in my

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car, though. I don't think my being here is helping you."

"No," Scott said quickly. "No, that's not necessary at all. Trust me, as long as you're here, there's a chance I'll get some sleep. If you leave, I'll just get out my laptop and work all night."

Duke nodded in resignation. "All right. I'll stay." He jerked his chin toward the whiskey. "Maybe you should pour yourself another. It'll help you relax enough to sleep."

"I plan to. It's a shame I can't talk you into having any." Scott refilled his glass with the deep amber liquid. "This is the sort of drink that's meant to be shared."

This time, Duke watched more carefully as Scott drank, unable to resist appreciating how sensual it was. Strong muscles rippled, from the man's firm jaw to the toned neck. Stray moonlight created new and interesting shadows as well, cloaking Scott in as much mystery as it did temptation. The sudden urge to press his mouth to the dipping hollow of Scott's throat and feel it for himself drove him a step away from the counter.

You're on duty. Stop staring. Think about work.

"Did you ever work on the list of possible subjects for the drive-by?" Yeah, that was much safer.

Scott tapped his temple. "It's all up here. But I'll send it on over in the morning." He walked around the end of the counter and stopped at Duke's side, the half-finished drink still in his hand. He was standing much too close. "Unless you're going to take a special interest and investigate yourself?"

His throat was dry again. Damned water wasn't doing a bit of good. "That might be considered a conflict of interest."

"Unfortunately. I would feel much safer in your hands...the investigation, that is."

"That's only because you know me."

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“Not as well as I’d like.” Scott held up his hand as Duke opened his mouth. “I know, conflict of interest. Major, undeniable conflict of interest. But I’ve had a long day and...” He took a half-step closer. Duke knew he should take a half-step back. “It’s hard to remember that.”

“That’s just the adrenaline talking, James.” The name slipped out. He hadn’t even been aware that was how he’d started thinking of the other man, but it fit on his tongue like it was made for it. “I’ll make sure the investigation is as thorough as possible. You have my word on it.”

“I know you will...Owen.” Scott smiled a little as he said Duke’s given name, and a small drop of whiskey clung to his bottom lip. Almost as soon as Duke noticed it, Scott licked it away. He seemed to move again, and Duke realized the other man was definitely invading his space. That close, he could see the hint of green in Scott’s eyes, and smell the faint alcohol on his breath. “It’s about time we’re on a first name basis.”

Duke snorted softly. “About time? We’ve known each other less than twenty-four hours.”

“I guess it just feels like longer.”

He allowed a smile. A small one. Maybe it would be enough for Scott. “You’re right. You’ve had a really long day.”

“Yeah, maybe I should try to sleep again.” Scott set his glass down, and made as if to turn around, but paused and took Duke’s arm instead. Just above the elbow. Duke was so surprised by the contact that it didn’t occur to him to pull away from Scott’s grasp. “Thank you for tonight. I mean, not being here, but the part where you saved me from getting shot full of holes.”

“You’re welcome.” Heat seeped through his shirt from Scott’s warm fingers, prickling along his arm to his shoulder and nape.

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“Though whether you realize it or not, it was partially selfish on my part. Look at all the work you did for me today.”

“Only because that work is going to pay off for me in the long run.” He flashed his first real smile since the shooting and released Duke’s arm. “I can promise you that much. See you in the morning.”

Five small brands remained on Duke’s skin after Scott retreated. His nose was full of the scent of whiskey and Scott’s cologne, and he had to blink more than once to realize Scott was now even farther away. “In the morning,” he repeated. “I get breakfast, right?”

“Breakfast, coffee, and maybe even a show.”

Before Duke could ask what that meant, Scott had slipped back into his bedroom, swallowed by the dark shadows in the doorway.

CHAPTER 7

By his fourth cup of coffee, Duke couldn't even taste it anymore. He'd been sucking it down since showing up at the precinct three hours earlier. Breakfast had been filling, but Duke had deliberately eaten quickly, anxious to get out as soon as possible. The night had been quiet. Too quiet. The most noise came from Duke's thoughts, which had ranged everywhere from the shooting, to Scott's silk pajama bottoms, to Nieves's claims, and back to Scott again.

Everything kept coming back to James Scott. Coming into work had been a godsend.

The first thing he did was call the cops who'd taken their statements the night before. As he'd asked, they'd run the partial plate but come up with a list too large to really work with. He

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thanked them for their help, then got off and ran the partial himself. They might not want to trudge through a hundred names, but Duke had no such qualms. He printed out the list and got Winnie, the admin, to collate it for him.

His second item of business was comparing Scott's list of interrogations the day before with the names in Saucedo's file. Of the ten names Scott had, Saucedo only had seven. Chandra Cunningham, Young's outreach coordinator and supposedly the woman who could link him with Tana, was nowhere to be seen.

She got his second call of the day.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to call." She had the husky voice of a pack-a-day smoker, and spoke like someone who couldn't fit enough hours in the day. "Hector's lawyer said you're the new cop on his case."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, what do you want to know? I'm not sure I can tell you anything different than what I told the first guy, though."

Duke frowned. "You spoke to Detective Saucedo?"

"Is that his name? Damn, that's right. I joked about how his name fit his personality."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, you know. Saucy. Flirty." Chandra laughed. "He's a chatter, that one. What happened to him? He hit on someone who isn't as understanding as I am?"

An image of Saucedo at the last police function, standing in the corner with a tall beer, laughing with a group of the guys, rose in his mind's eye. Duke would never have characterized him as flirtatious, but then again, he'd never seen Saucedo around women much.

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid he's had a minor medical emergency,

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so I'm taking over the case for him." Giving away the vague explanation didn't bother Duke. He was more worried about why there was no indication anywhere in the Mayfield file that Saucedo had spoken with Chandra at all. "I'd just like to go over a few questions again, if you don't mind."

"Well, if it'll help Hector, sure."

"When did you first speak with Detective Saucedo?"

She made a clicking sound with her tongue while she contemplated her answer. "Um, a week ago? Well, almost a week. Monday. It was the same day Hector got arrested. The same day I called you guys. He was here just a couple hours later."

So Chandra Cunningham had called them first. There should have been a record of that in the file, too, but he'd been through it enough times by now to know there wasn't.

"And why did you call, ma'am?"

"Because someone had to explain how ridiculous it was to arrest Hector, that's why. He adored Tana. He would never have done anything to hurt her."

"They had a working relationship?"

"They were friends. How many different ways do I have to tell you people, there's no way he's the one you're looking for? She helped turn his life around. He wouldn't repay that by tossing her in the bay."

Duke scribbled his notes as fast as she could speak. "How long did they know each other?"

"Eleven months. Hector came into the center after Halloween last year. I never got the specifics, but as far as I can tell, he saw some bad stuff go down with some buddies of his that night. Something that scared him enough to look for us. He and Tana hit it off right away. She's the one who talked him into looking for

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real work. She even tried loaning him the money for the deposit on his apartment when he moved out of here, but he refused to take it. He said he couldn't start being his own man if he couldn't take care of business himself. Now tell me that sounds like a ruthless killer to you."

Chandra Cunningham was convincing enough to have Duke debating calling Scott as soon as he hung up the phone. No wonder he'd been so cocky the night before. If the other nine people he'd spoken to were even half as cogent as Cunningham, seeing Hector behind bars must have seemed absolutely ludicrous.

An email from Scott distracted him, though, and he spent forty-five minutes pulling DMV records on the list of names he'd sent him and comparing those to the collated list from the partial plate. No matches.

Without a clear lead from Scott's possible enemies, Duke returned to the list of missing interviews from the file. Nicole Rogers, the wife of the couple living next door to Tana Mayfield. A call to her got voice mail, and he left a message with his cell number, asking for Mrs. Rogers to call him at her earliest convenience.

That left Richard Pennyworth, the night security guard from Tana's building. Duke called building management to request a meeting and found out he was scheduled to work that night. He made a note to stop by and talk to Mr. Pennyworth after Young's interrogation.

Nothing he discovered swayed him to consider Young guilty. Frankly, Duke had absolutely no idea why the man had been charged. More troubling than that, though, was the question of why Saucedo hadn't bothered to file any of his notes from the Chandra Cunningham interview. He might not have spoken to the other two

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at all—though how he could have missed speaking to the night security guard, Duke had no idea—but even one missing interview, especially one as important as Cunningham’s, was too many.

Calling the hospital got him the brush-off again.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the nurse said. “I have orders. Mr. Saucedo is not to be disturbed without specific clearance from his doctor.”

“I thought it was just a minor heart attack.”

“I can’t discuss a patient’s condition unless you’re part of the immediate family, sir. I’m sorry.”

Duke knew stonewalling when he heard it. He disconnected as politely as he could and gathered up his notes. This mountain clearly had to go to Mohammed.

He made it all the way to the parking lot before he heard running footsteps behind him. Winnie huffed closer, her apple cheeks even redder from the exertion, and thrust a pink message into his hand.

“The DA called. He wants to talk to you about the Mayfield case. He said it was urgent.”

Her normally careful writing was a near incomprehensible slash across the scrap of paper. DA Horan must have barked at her pretty good about how important it was, though Duke couldn’t really blame her for getting ruffled. Bruce Horan wasn’t the nicest guy on the block, with a superiority complex that made anyone without a title or an advanced degree fairly invisible. He was a hell of a lawyer and politician, though, which was how he’d risen to such a prominent position in the city, even when few people would cop to actually liking the man.

Duke wondered for a moment what Scott’s feelings on Horan were, then dismissed it as inconsequential. Scott would probably call Horan a pompous asshole. Duke probably had more dealings

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with the man than Scott had.

Thanking Winnie, he slipped his earpiece on as he finished the trek to his car. He didn't need to read the number on the message. He had Horan on speed dial.

"Detective Owen Duke, returning Mr. Horan's call," he told the efficient secretary who answered. He navigated through the parking structure as he waited, flashing his pass over the pad at the exit. Horan came on the line as the bar slowly lifted to allow Duke to pass.

"Scott arranged a meeting with the judge on the Mayfield murder before tomorrow," Horan said without preamble.

"I know."

"You know? *How* do you know? I only found out twenty minutes ago."

Duke pulled out onto the sluggish lunchtime traffic. "He hinted that he might yesterday in our meeting." It was pointless to pretend they hadn't met. The drive-by made it public record that they'd been together. If Horan didn't already know, he would soon.

"You could have warned me about it, Duke."

"I've had a busy morning. I didn't even think about it." Which he hadn't. Too many other things took precedence.

Horan growled in frustration. "Well, think about it now. I wish I knew the clerk's ass he kissed to make that happen so I could turn a few screws of my own. But I want everything you've rounded up on the Mayfield case since you took it over."

His jaw clenched at Horan's callous condescension, but he still managed, "I'm in the process of conducting my own interviews. I'm scheduled to meet with Young later today."

"You think you can get a confession out of him?"

"I highly doubt that."

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“Then cancel it. You have more important things to do than wasting two hours listening to a murderer stonewall you.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Horan, I’m not entirely sure you should waste any more resources pursuing Young’s conviction.” There were too many holes for Duke’s liking. It looked like Saucedo had gone for the obvious choice without really caring about the facts.

Silence filled the line. Duke coasted to a red light and adjusted his phone where it slipped from its holder.

“I thought your captain told you how important this case was, Detective Duke.” Horan’s voice had gone cold and hard. Those few seconds of quiet had given him time to harness his temper. “Telling me in the twilight hour that you’re not willing to give this your utmost attention—”

“That’s not—”

“I am not letting a murderer walk free because you’re unwilling to do as you’re instructed. Captain Sager assured me you were the man for the job. That we could count on you to put this son of a bitch back in jail where he belongs. Don’t tell me he was wrong.”

He couldn’t believe he was actually having this conversation. He didn’t like Horan, no, but he’d helped him get more than his share of convictions. They had always had a respectful, if cold, relationship, based on sterling records. Now, Horan was treating him like a homicide newbie, like he’d never handled a murder investigation before and had no idea what he was doing.

“This case has my full attention, sir. I want to see justice done as much as you do.”

“Then I suggest you keep one fact straight. Hector Young killed Tana Mayfield. Your predecessor spent a lot of time putting a case together, enough to make an arrest, remember? Young is

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going to be tried for this murder, he will be found guilty, and he will spend the rest of his life in jail until the time comes for his lethal injection. Do I make myself clear?"

Duke didn't have a chance to respond. Horan hung up on him before he could.

He resisted the urge to yank out the earpiece. Horan was blind if he thought Young was the answer to this case, and he was a moron if he thought for a second that Scott wasn't going to tear him apart in court. Duke almost hoped Scott left him in shreds. He deserved it for his smug, self-absorbed arrogance. Hell, Duke would cheer from the back of the courtroom when it happened.

A car honking jerked his attention back to the road and his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. He straightened out the car's path and took a deep breath.

Horan wasn't worth the wasted energy. Duke would give him the evidence as it stood. What Horan did with it was not his problem.

He wasn't much more relaxed by the time he reached the hospital, but with something definitive to accomplish, it was easy to compartmentalize his frustration with the DA and focus on his confusion about Saucedo. Until this case, he'd always held Saucedo in high regard. The man's outward appearance might occasionally appear a bit slovenly, but it and his congenial nature hid a sharp mind. Most suspects never knew what hit them when Saucedo showed up for an arrest. He slithered past their defenses by being everybody's buddy. The possibility that it had all been a sham left Duke more than a little anxious.

He flashed his badge at the senior citizen volunteer at the front desk and strode determinedly toward the bank of elevators to take him to the fourth floor. In and out, that was the plan. Get his

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answers. The less time he spent in the hospital, the happier he was going to be. Over the years, he'd grown accustomed to having to question witnesses and victims in their hospital beds, but that didn't mean he liked it. He would never like it. Part of the reason he'd always wanted to be a cop was so he could keep people from ever having to experience hospitals.

The fourth floor was bright and cheery, souring Duke's mood even further. The only valid explanation he could come up with for Saucedo's negligence was that part of the file had been mislaid. It didn't happen very often, but, occasionally, notes got put into the wrong case, or they got slipped into a dead file by accident. If Saucedo claimed to have done the missing interviews, Duke would give Winnie a call and have her pull all the reassigned cases. If not...

He'd cross that bridge when he got to it.

He didn't bother the nurse sitting at the central station, but instead headed straight for Saucedo's room. The door was shut, and he knocked once before pushing it open. The first bed was freshly made, and when he stepped around the dividing curtain, fully expecting to see Saucedo, he came up short.

The second bed was empty as well. Dirty linens were left in the visitor's chair, with fresh sheets sitting on top of the thin mattress.

Duke went back to the door and double-checked the number. Four-twenty. This was it. With no choice now but to ask for help, he returned to the nurses' station and waited for her to finish with a phone call before speaking.

"I'm Detective Owen Duke," he said, flashing his badge again. "I'm looking for Detective Saucedo from room four-twenty. Has he been taken for tests?"

The nurse shook her head. She was a pretty thing, with

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caramel-colored skin and flashing black eyes, who didn't look old enough to have finished high school, let alone have her nursing credentials. The name tag over her ample breast read *Nurse Iniguez, LPN*. "Mr. Saucedo was discharged this morning. He's already gone home."

"Discharged? When I called earlier, nobody mentioned that."

She shrugged in obvious apology. "I'm sorry, sir." Her eyes brightened. "Wait, did you say your name was Duke?" At his nod, she pushed her chair back to disappear beneath the counter. "Before he left, Mr. Saucedo gave me something." Her head popped back up, black hair swinging around her shoulders. In her hand was a white, legal size envelope. "He told me to only give it to you."

With a frown, Duke took it from her, turning it over to examine the exterior. Nothing was written across the front. The flap was sealed shut. "Thank you," he said automatically.

She flashed a brilliant smile. "I'm just glad you came in. Saved me the postage. Mr. Saucedo told me what precinct to mail it to, in case you didn't show."

Duke murmured another thank you and headed toward the elevators again, this time measurably slower. Saucedo had anticipated his arrival, even though they hadn't spoken since his attack. Perhaps these were the missing case notes. He could have had them at home and realized they were missing from the file. This was his way of making sure Duke got them.

He waited until he was back in his car before slitting it open. When he pulled out the missing files, he almost smiled in satisfaction. Until he saw the sticky note attached to the front page.

You were never supposed to see these.—Saucedo.

CHAPTER 8

Scott knew he should be relieved that the judge had listened to him. Hector Young's arraignment would be a farce, the charges dropped, the man free to go. Even Terrell had called him to say he was pleased with the result of Scott's work. And why shouldn't he be? Hector Young's case would provide the sort of publicity to the firm that they simply couldn't buy. A young man nearly losing his life due to a corrupt police force, until James Scott rode in like a knight on his white steed, ready to fight the good fight until justice was served. Scott had already received several comments congratulating him on his wise move—as though it had been premeditated. Scott had hoped for this sort of happy ending, but he had never counted on it. Not quite.

But instead of thinking about Hector's second chance, or

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Scott's inevitable corner office, his mind kept drifting to Owen Duke. He had called early in the afternoon to update him on the drive-by, but that was it. There was no discussion of their conversation the night before. No casual mention of how much Duke had enjoyed breakfast. No acknowledgement that for a brief moment, it had seemed like they were going to kiss. And no hint that maybe in a few days, when things had died down, they could see each other in a more social context.

The more Scott tried to push Duke out of his head, the more Duke seemed to burrow in. There was a sprinkle of cinnamon on his latte, which led to a brief reflection on how Duke had smelled vaguely of cinnamon. Later, he paused to muse on how Duke's eyes were almost the color of cinnamon sticks. A few times, his mind drifted to Duke's description of his perfect date. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be on the receiving end of all Duke's energy—Scott had no doubt that Duke would approach relationships the same way he approached his job. With a devoted, single-minded intensity.

If he had to guess, he would say that Duke had been interested in him as well. But Duke would probably be quick to say there would always be a conflict of interest, as long as he was a detective and Scott was an active defense attorney. Normally, that wouldn't even begin to dissuade Scott from pursuing somebody he wanted, but he had the feeling Duke wouldn't be worn down. It probably wouldn't hurt to call him one more time. Maybe after Duke had the case wrapped up, and the real murderer arrested.

The buzzing of the phone pulled Scott from his thoughts. Even though it was Sunday, Monica had been a godsend, agreeing to come in and help him keep Hector's case moving. "You have a call from Hector Young," she announced.

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Scott frowned. "Transfer him over."

He barely had a chance to utter a greeting before Hector's voice spilled over the speaker. "They said I did it. They keep saying I did it. That it had to be me. They keep saying it was me, but I never did nothing. I didn't..."

"Wait. Wait. Slow down, Hector. One thing at a time." Scott spoke soothingly, though his spine had stiffened. There was an edge of pure panic in Hector's tone that he had never heard there before. "What happened?"

"I'm being...I'm being charged...they said to call you because I'm being charged..."

"What do you mean, you're being charged? You've already been charged, but listen, Hector, that's not—"

"No. Johnny died. They said I did it."

Scott swallowed. "Who is Johnny?"

"Johnny Fender. My cellmate. He was killed. They said it was me."

Scott's lips thinned. He honestly could not say that he was surprised. Somebody clearly wanted Hector Young to stay in jail. But who? And why? Somebody who obviously had a good amount of power and authority. Enough to get one man killed in order to frame an innocent man. The rot of corruption easily reached the very top of the chain. Anybody could be involved. There was only one man in this mess that Scott could conceivably trust.

"Do not say anything to anybody. I'm going to be there as soon as I can. In the meantime, clam up. Don't even answer if they offer you a glass of water."

"Okay. Okay. I didn't do it."

"That's good. But don't even say that. Don't say a word. Understand?"

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“I understand.”

Scott hung up the phone without further instructions and barked for Monica. She arrived almost instantly, her Palm Pilot in hand, ready for whatever orders Scott wanted to give.

“Clear my schedule for the foreseeable future.” Scott stood and shrugged on his jacket. “Clear it of everything. I’ve got lead on two cases right now. Call Roberts and tell him he’s the lead now, and he should file whatever motions he can to delay the court dates.”

“What about the depositions?”

“Reschedule them if possible. Otherwise, let Shelley know that she’s taking them over.”

“They’re going to want to know why.”

Scott snapped his briefcase closed. “There’s been an emergency.”

“Is something wrong with Mr. Young?”

“You could say that. He’s going to be charged with first-degree murder.”

“But I thought...”

“New victim. New case. New opportunity to get him stuck behind bars.”

Monica frowned. “What’s going on here?”

“That’s what I intend to find out.” He fished Duke’s card out of his jacket pocket and turned it over to study the numbers. “Just do your best to give everybody the head’s up. I’ll sort out the mess later. And don’t forward anybody to my phone unless the word comes in on the Jenkins case.”

“Okay. James?”

“Yeah?”

“What if he did it?”

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Scott shook his head. "That's not the question you need to ask. I think the answer is a hell of a lot more scary if you ask what if he didn't do it."

Monica bit her bottom lip. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. What if Terrell wants to speak to you?"

"Take a message," Scott threw over his shoulder.

He had decided to drive that morning instead of taking the bus, and now he was grateful for that impulsive decision. He felt each second scraping across his skin and down his back as he worked his way across the city to the precinct where Hector was being held. He drove with one hand on the wheel and used the other to dial Duke's number several times. Each attempt was exactly the same. The phone rang six times and then kicked over to Duke's voicemail. Why was he away from his cell? When would he be back? Scott only left one message, though he heard Duke's curt outgoing message at least eight.

His phone rang as he pulled onto the precinct's street. He answered it on the first ring, both relieved and annoyed when Duke's voice came over the line.

"Where are you, James?"

"I'm about two minutes from your desk. Where are you?"

"I'm there now. Don't come in yet. Park as far from the front door as you can, and I'll meet you there."

Before Scott could protest, the line went dead.

Scott's first instinct was to ignore Duke's instructions. He hadn't traveled across the city just to have a little chat with the good detective. He had a client who needed him, and a mess to sort out before any other innocent people died. But if he alienated Duke, he would be working on the case completely alone. He didn't really know much of what was going on, but he knew he

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didn't want that.

He found a free spot in the back corner of the lot, still clutching the phone in his hand hard enough for the corners to dig into his palm. Did Duke have some sort of explanation? Or was he going to announce that he thought Hector truly was guilty? Scott didn't think he was in the mood to hear that right then.

As he turned off the engine, a rap came on the passenger side window. Night was already falling over the city, but the sharp planes of Duke's face were clearly visible through the glass, etched by the yellow streetlamps. Scott unlocked the door, shifting in his seat as an unsmiling Duke got in.

"We can't talk inside," he said without preamble. "I'm being watched."

"By who?"

"I just spent two hours with my captain, defending my investigation on Young. Nobody's happy about your little visit to the judge today. So to answer your question, pretty much everybody at this point."

"But that didn't last long, now did it?" Scott nearly growled with frustration. "Can we both agree that there's definitely something rotten in the state of Denmark?"

"Yes." He shook his head. "I didn't even know about the new charges until after Sager let me go. And when I went back to talk to him about it, he told me someone else was assigned to the Fender case."

Scott wasn't surprised. He almost wished he had it in him to be surprised at news like this. "So...you find evidence that would exonerate Hector, they find a way to distract you for a few hours, and when you emerge from the office, you find that you're no longer on the case, and Hector is still going to be charged with

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murder one. I guess the question now is why the hell somebody wants that kid in jail so damned bad.”

“I don’t know if we’ll have an easy time finding out the answer to that.”

Scott looked up, studying Duke’s profile. It revealed nothing of what he was thinking. “We?”

“The Mayfield case is still open, and still mine. I’m not done just because everybody is trying to get Young behind bars.” He met Scott’s gaze, strong, steady. “Unless you think there isn’t a connection between the two murders.”

“You know, if it’s a frame-up, you’re going to be investigating Saucedo, and probably getting IA involved. You sure you want to go that far?”

“I’m not convinced Saucedo’s entirely in the wrong. He wouldn’t have given me the missing interviews, otherwise.” Duke paused, a muscle twitching in his cheek before he added, “According to the note he sent me, I was never supposed to know about them.”

“Saucedo tampered with evidence in a murder investigation,” Scott said softly. “It doesn’t matter if he had a change of heart. Internal Affairs will be all over him if you pursue this.”

“There is no ‘if’ here, James. I don’t have answers, and I’m not stopping until I get them. You’re not trying to talk me out of this, are you?”

“No, I’m not. But you and I both know what’s at stake for you. You’ll be running up against a lot of resistance, and if this goes high enough, putting your whole career at risk.” Despite himself, Scott offered a half-smile. “I guess I should have known that wouldn’t stop you from finding the truth.”

“That’s what matters here.” He rubbed at his eyes with his

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thumb and middle finger, ending with a pinch to the bridge of his nose. It was a weary gesture, making Scott wonder if he'd slept at all since leaving the apartment that morning. When he sighed, he dropped his hand heavily back onto his lap. "If I can't believe the system is going to work, then I can't do my job."

Scott reached over without thinking, his hand resting on Duke's shoulder in a familiar, friendly way. "The system does work. Sometimes, it just needs a little help. That's all. Who is in charge of the investigation? Anybody you know or trust?"

"TJ Torney. He's only been in the department for six months or so." Duke snorted. "Sager said it was such an open-and-shut case, even Torney couldn't mess it up."

"Okay." Scott squeezed Duke's shoulder gently, then forced himself to break the contact. "See what you can find on him. If...if Sager is at all responsible for the cover-up or the frame-up, he might not make the same mistake a third time of picking somebody he doesn't have completely under his thumb."

"That's what I'm afraid of." He turned unexpectedly, his face suddenly tight and fierce. "You have to take extra precautions. If this is as big as it looks like, yesterday's attack might not be one of a kind."

"Wait. You think that is related to *this*?"

"You said it yourself. Someone wants Young behind bars. Before I got the added evidence to help clear him today, the best way for that to happen was to get you off the case."

Scott blinked. "Yes, I suppose killing me would have succeeded in getting me off the case. What extra precautions do you suggest?"

"You need to get out of your apartment, for starters. Do you have friends or family you can stay with for a while?"

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“Why wouldn’t my apartment be safe? Nobody is going to get past security, and nobody is going to scale up the side of the wall.”

Duke lifted a brow. “Considering how high this frame-up could potentially reach, are you willing to risk your life that your building’s security is enough to keep them out?”

“If it’s that high, what’s to stop them from tracking me down at work? And I certainly don’t want to drag any friends or family into this mess.”

“Then hire a bodyguard for the time being.”

“What about you? I mean...are you going to hire one?”

In spite of the somber mood in the car, the corner of Duke’s mouth lifted. “If I can’t protect myself, then I really am in the wrong line of work.”

“I don’t know anybody short of Superman who can protect himself from a bullet in the back,” Scott said grimly. “I’ll get a security detail. Though it’s going to put a real crimp in my social life.”

“I know it’s inconvenient. You have my word I’ll do everything I can to figure this out. I just don’t want to see you end up a casualty in this, too.”

“Well...I appreciate that. And I appreciate that you didn’t tell me to quit for my own safety. Or maybe you just know when to save your breath. I’ve got to get in there to see Hector. Can we meet tonight?”

“We should,” Duke conceded. “I need to get some sleep, though, even if it’s only a couple hours. I’m not going to be any good to anyone if I don’t.”

“Why don’t we meet at my place? That way, if we talk too long, you can just crash in my guest room.”

Duke regarded him for several moments before nodding.

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"Maybe we should just count on that. It'll make me feel better, knowing you're safe tonight, too."

"Only if you promise me that you will not stay up all night again. I'm not going to have you walking around like a zombie because of me."

"I'm not even sure I could keep that promise if I made it." Duke held out his hand in an obvious gesture for Scott to shake it. "I'm sorry I didn't trust you more from the start."

Scott didn't hesitate to take Duke's hand. "No hard feelings. The important thing is you trust me now. That we trust each other."

Duke's grip was warm and strong, in spite of his alleged fatigue. Perhaps his exhaustion manifested instead in the extra seconds it took Duke to pull away, but Scott decided to deliberately believe Duke lingered to savor the touch.

"I have a list of all the potential matches on the vehicle in the drive-by last night," Duke said when he finally broke the contact. "You can look it over and see if any of the names seem familiar."

"Do you think it'll be worth our time? I mean, if it was somebody...if it was a professional somebody hired to stop me from representing Hector, we're not going to find a match."

"That's why I'm giving it to you tonight. You can look it over after I crash. Unless you do all your legal work at godforsaken hours of the day." A smile struggled to take hold on Duke's face, but ultimately failed, leaving his eyes even bleaker. "People get caught because they make mistakes. At this point, we can't afford to leave a single detail to chance. I need to find who's responsible, James. No matter what."

"Well, we're on the same page there," Scott said. "I'll see you tonight, then. Just come by whenever you like."

Duke nodded, and then slipped out of the car. Scott watched

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through the window, unable to look away from the curious slump of his shoulders. He hadn't needed to remind Duke of everything that was at stake for him—those facts were clearly already weighing on him. But Scott couldn't worry about Detective Duke. Now Hector needed his full attention. And every ounce of intelligence, every bit of dedication, that Scott possessed.

CHAPTER 9

Scott's alarm was set to go off in exactly four hours. He didn't even have time to go to the gym before heading to his office. His plan was to shower, get dressed, pick up some coffee and a bagel on the way, and be in his office no later than six. He couldn't do much for Hector at that early hour, but he could work on clearing his workload so he could devote more time to Hector's case. Normally, he would not have any trouble falling asleep.

But normally, Owen Duke wasn't sleeping in his guest room.

For the second night in a row, one of the most gorgeous, intelligent, intriguing men he had ever met was sitting in his apartment, and Scott could do absolutely nothing about it. When he closed his eyes, he saw Duke. Naked. In his bed. Both of them agreeing to leave the world outside and take a few hours for

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themselves. It was a pleasant fantasy, but it would never be anything else except that. It was best not to dwell on it at all, but Scott couldn't think of anything else.

With a sigh of disgust, Scott kicked the sheet from his legs and reached for his pajama bottoms. He wished he could believe that he was only focusing on Duke to distract himself from Hector Young. The poor young man had been terrified. He disguised it well, but there was no missing the fear in his eyes, the tension in his shoulders, the lines around his mouth. He was being held in solitary confinement, and there was a certain despair behind every word. Scott had heard it before. It was the sound of a beaten man. He never said as much, but Scott knew that Hector had already resigned himself to a guilty conviction, a short life in jail, and the lethal injection.

Scott wasn't quite so pessimistic, but nothing he said could convince Hector that he still had a chance. A good chance. Especially since they had Duke on their side.

Duke. His thoughts always circled back to the taciturn detective—like a bird returning to roost. A drink would probably help. Or at least it would give him something to focus on that wasn't Hector or Duke. It was hard to believe that just forty-eight hours earlier, he could fall asleep within seconds of hitting the bed.

Scott stepped out of his bedroom and stopped short. Duke wasn't safely ensconced in the guest bedroom at all. He was sitting in the same chair Scott had found him in the night before.

"I thought you said you would get some sleep," Scott said lightly.

"I tried." His voice came from the shadows, luring Scott closer. The outline firmed and became something new, something different from the night before. No stiff shirt and holster this time.

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Duke wore a T-shirt stretched tissue-thin over his sculpted upper body, his long legs mostly visible within a pair of cut-off sweats. In his hand was a tumbler of the whiskey Scott was going to pour for himself. "I failed."

"You're not the only one." Scott perched on the arm of the sofa, leaning toward Duke. "I'd ask what's on your mind, but I'm pretty sure I can guess."

"I can't even focus on the details of the case. I'm too tired to stop my brain from getting off track." He swirled the whiskey around in the glass, stray light from the open window catching the amber fluid and scattering glints across the Duke's skin. "I even thought getting drunk would help, but I can't bring myself to drink it."

"Getting drunk usually isn't the right solution, anyway. At least, in my case, nothing good has ever come of it." Scott nodded at the untouched glass. "May I?"

Duke held it out, dropping his hand back onto the arm after Scott took the drink. "I was hoping it would put me to sleep like it usually does."

Scott took a long swallow, closing his eyes in appreciation as the whiskey burned the back of his tongue. The burn spread through his chest, sending fire to his stomach and smoke to his brain. But it wouldn't be enough to get him to sleep. Not while Duke was brooding in his living room.

"When your brain goes off track from the details of the case, where does it go? If you don't mind me asking."

"Right now? To Sager." Dark lashes lifted, darker eyes locking on Scott. "He's the reason I became a cop in the first place."

A weight settled in Scott's stomach, like a stone coming to rest at the bottom of a lake. "Oh. Duke...there's no real evidence that

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Sager is behind this. He could be like you. Just...acting on orders.”

“If he was anything like me, he wouldn’t be trying to bury the truth,” Duke lashed out. “I acted on orders blindly. He’s seen all the evidence, so whatever choice he’s made, he’s doing it with the full knowledge that he’s sending an innocent man to a death sentence. I don’t care if someone else is pulling his strings. The man I thought he would never let this happen.”

For the first time in Scott’s life, he was at a loss for words. He couldn’t offer any comforting words. He couldn’t offer any justifications or rationales. He couldn’t walk away and leave Duke alone in the dark, with only his thoughts to keep him company.

“You’re right,” Scott finally agreed. “He’s nothing like you. Is there anything...I think we should try to find something to take your mind off everything.”

Duke laughed, or at least Scott thought it was a laugh. It scoured the air between them, dry and harsh like a desert wind. “Good luck with that. I’m stuck between wondering where I went wrong, and wishing the son of a bitch who tried to kill you yesterday would walk through the door so I could shoot him. I don’t know what else there even is.”

Without thinking, he reached over and covered Duke’s fingers with his own. His skin was cold, but it began to warm against Scott’s. “Don’t do that, Owen. You didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t take responsibility for this clusterfuck, when you’re one of the few who are actually blameless.”

“Until Young’s back on the street, none of us are blameless.” His hand twitched beneath Scott’s, but he didn’t pull it away. Instead, he turned it a fraction to give his fingertips room to caress the inside of Scott’s wrist. “If you didn’t think that, too, at least a little bit, you’d be asleep right now.”

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At first, Scott thought the small caress had to be a mistake. Except, Duke didn't stop. An ant could skitter across his skin with more pressure, but it was still enough to make Scott's entire arm tingle. Duke wasn't even looking at the point where they touched, but Scott could barely force himself to glance away.

"Maybe. Maybe I should have gotten him out of that cell before things progressed so far. Maybe I would have been justified in pulling a few strings and getting him released first thing. There were things I could have done that might have saved at least one life. But there are still things I can do to save Hector's."

"We, you mean."

"Yes, still things we can do." His finger twitched, moving against Duke's skin in the same pattern. Too deliberate to be a mistake. "Not to sound immodest, but I think the two of us could make a pretty formidable team."

Duke's gaze softened, some of the tension around his mouth disappearing. "And not to sound rude, but modest is never a word I'd associate with you."

"Are you calling me arrogant?"

"Confident."

Scott smiled. "Confident? If I were confident, I wouldn't need to work up my nerve just to touch your hand."

"Yet, you did."

"Only after I worked up a lot of nerve. Of course, the fact that you haven't stopped me has only helped my confidence level."

"You said it yourself." Duke turned his hand completely around, entwining their fingers. "If we're a team, we're now on the same side. The fact that you chose now to do it just means you finally figured out your timing."

"I usually have pretty good timing."

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Scott set his glass aside and stood without releasing Duke's hand. Their legs touched and Duke parted his knees, giving Scott room to stand between his thighs. His throat felt tight, and a cloud of butterflies seemed to be lodged permanently in his chest. Scott bent toward him as Duke tilted his head back, and there were absolutely no obstacles between them. No reason why he shouldn't press his lips to Duke's.

The kiss betrayed Scott's nerves. It must have, because there was nothing forceful, nothing hard about it. His tongue gently traced Duke's bottom lip, asking for permission to continue.

Duke exhaled softly, his mouth quivering. Quivering. *Duke.* The hand in Scott's trembled, too, for long seconds while he tried to process the fact that this hard man, one of the most intrepid men he had ever met, now seemed as wracked by insecurity as Scott was. He might have laid the vague invitation out for Scott to try, but he wasn't necessarily as prepared to accept it, which in and of itself was something else to marvel over.

But then his lips parted, and Duke took another breath, stealing the touch of tongue to tip of tongue. The hand that held Scott's tightened. A moan escaped. It rattled Scott to realize it came from Duke's throat and not his own.

Scott didn't know who taught Duke how to kiss, but he thought he would like to shake that man's hand. Once Duke became accustomed to the shape and pressure of Scott's lips, he wasn't happy to simply follow Scott's lead. They fell into a pattern of give and take, each kiss nearly spinning out of control until one of them reeled it back. Scott's legs felt weak, and he wanted to hit his knees and spend the rest of the night tasting Duke's mouth.

But there was a better place for that sort of thing than the middle of his living room.

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“Owen...” It took some effort, but Scott straightened and gently pulled on Duke’s hand in a silent invitation.

When Duke rose, the evidence of his arousal tented the front of his shorts, and for a moment, Scott considered a change of plans, especially when Duke caught the back of his neck and pressed their fronts together. He held Scott still, dipping his head to skim warm lips along his jaw.

“This wasn’t why I agreed to spend the night,” Duke murmured. “But I’m glad I did.”

“This isn’t exactly why I invited you to spend the night here,” Scott responded, though he couldn’t quite be sure that was the truth. Especially since so many of his stray thoughts had been directed toward Duke, and Duke’s body against his, and Duke’s mouth, and the light scent of Duke’s cologne.

Normally, it wouldn’t take any more than a handful of seconds to get from his couch to his bed, but this was not a normal situation. For one thing, his cock was so hard that it made walking uncomfortable. For another thing, they could barely take two steps before they were seeking each other’s mouths again. Scott’s head was buzzing, like he had downed an entire bottle of whiskey.

They stopped again at the doorway, Duke cupping Scott’s ass when Scott held him against the jamb to steal another kiss. This one was slower, deeper, matching the long rolls of Duke’s hips as he rubbed their erections together. The silk tortured Scott’s oversensitive shaft, almost as much as Duke did, and his bare arms stippled in gooseflesh, hunger replacing his earlier exhaustion. The hints of how well their bodies already fit together were enough to make his head spin.

Especially when Duke slipped his fingers beneath the waistband to stroke his heated flesh.

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Scott moaned, his hand shooting out to push the bedroom door open. It crashed against the wall, but that didn't distract either one of them from the kiss. Scott cupped Duke's ass, his fingers digging into the firm flesh while Duke's nails scraped across Scott's throbbing cock. He took a small step backward, into the bedroom, and Duke followed. They remained locked together, tongues entwined, hands seeking more heated skin, until the edge of the bed hit his legs.

He didn't know how they managed to land on their sides. Duke might have pushed him. He might have pulled. The end result was the same, and everything Scott had been fantasizing about since first saying good night to the man earlier.

Duke broke away from his mouth, his breath ragged, the hand he dragged up Scott's side shaking. "See, it's confidence that made you pick your room instead of mine. I rest my case."

"And it's what you find most attractive about me," Scott murmured, dragging his lips along the line of Duke's jaw.

Duke bent his head, burying his face more in Scott's neck to give him better room to taste. "I would have called it infuriating."

"What else do you find infuriating?" Scott pushed his hand down the front of Duke's shorts, seeking out his heavy balls. "What about this?"

The muffled grunt vibrated through him, adding to the throb already taking over his body. "I'd call that typical Scott nerve." His warm tongue traced along the tight sinew, ending with a small bite at the curve of his shoulder. "Whatever else you say, you're fearless. And *that's* what I find most attractive."

Fearless. Scott didn't feel particularly fearless around Duke. For one thing, he was thrilled that Duke had admitted he was attracted to him—even though Duke was currently sucking on his

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neck. For another thing, he wouldn't have been so tentative with any other man. Without releasing Duke's balls, he rolled Duke to his back, pressing him to the bed. Their eyes caught for a moment, and something hot zapped down Scott's spine. He had never seen eyes like Duke's. They were warm, like melting chocolate.

"We should continue this conversation later. You can tell me the other things you find attractive about me."

Duke lifted a brow. "And give you an even bigger head? I don't think so."

Scott flashed a quick smile before returning to the task at hand—covering as much of Duke as he could with his mouth. He pushed the tight T-shirt up as he moved down Duke's body, dragging his lips over his chest. His skin was warm and he smelled unbelievable. Like something spicy-sweet and delicious. With a soft groan, he traced Duke's nipple with his tongue. He was already imagining what Duke's cock would taste like—already aching to know—but he didn't want to act too fast.

"James..." His name was more of a breath than an uttered word, not nearly as strong as the hand that smoothed over Scott's shoulder. "As good—fuck!" He swore when Scott nibbled at the hard tip of his dark nipple, his fingers digging in almost painfully as if that would help him bear the pleasure. "Wait. Just...wait."

Scott lifted his head. "What am I waiting for?"

"I can't think when you do that."

"Well, that's sort of the point, Owen."

"Exactly. I don't want you doing this because my head's in a bad place. I want to be able to enjoy it."

Scott frowned. "You're...not enjoying this?"

"No, I am, I'm just..." He sighed, dropping his head heavily onto the pillow and scrubbing at his face. "Damn it. I'm not

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explaining this well.”

“No...no...it’s okay. I think I understand.” He did understand, but he couldn’t resist kissing Duke’s throat. And once he did that, he had to kiss the skin just below his ear. “Tell me what you do want.”

Duke’s arms came around him at the first contact of Scott’s mouth to his skin again, crushing their bodies together. He groaned at the continued kisses, and in spite of his protestation, turned his head just like he had before to give Scott all the room he needed or could ever want.

“It helps that you’re just here,” Duke said quietly. “To know...I don’t have to fight this on my own.”

The words were like a fist closing around his chest. He could keep kissing Duke until the other man simply gave in and allowed Scott to do everything else on the long—and growing—list of things Scott longed to do with Duke. But now that didn’t seem like a good idea. Much to Scott’s disappointment, sex was not the answer to this particular problem.

Scott rolled off Duke’s body, but he couldn’t quite give up the soft kisses against Duke’s throat. He also didn’t allow an inch between them. “That’s not the only reason you let me kiss you, is it?” he asked lightly.

“No.” The muscles twitched at the corner of Duke’s mouth, fighting back a smile. “You owe me for not trying to kiss me last night.”

“Why didn’t you try to kiss me last night?”

“Because I had a job to do.” Duke surprised him by running a hand down to his ass and giving it a quick squeeze. “You wouldn’t have wanted me distracted from that more than I already was, would you?”

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“God...” Just thinking of everything that happened since the night before exhausted Scott. He rested his head on Duke’s shoulder, unable to support the weight anymore. “I hope you don’t think I’m going to be too much of a distraction now.”

“No, I don’t see that happening anytime soon.” Something brushed across his temple. A moment later, he realized it had been Duke’s lips. “Do you mind if I stay in here tonight?”

“Are you kidding? I have no intention of even letting you move.”

“Good.” It actually sounded like Duke was relieved, though how he could doubt Scott’s desire to keep him in his bed, Scott had no idea. With a sigh, Duke tightened his arm around Scott’s back and drew him even closer. “I’m glad you couldn’t sleep.”

Scott couldn’t quite believe it, but it seemed like Duke had no intention of releasing him for the rest of the night. Which was only going to be another three and a half hours. Was Duke always like this? Not that cuddling was a problem for Scott. He hated sleeping in an empty bed.

“I’m glad I found you before you had a completely sleepless night.”

“Are you going to be able to sleep like this?” His voice was distinctly softer. “You need to rest, too.”

“I’m fine.” As soon as Scott spoke, Hector’s face drifted into the front of his mind. Scott focused on Duke’s breathing, and the warmth of Duke’s skin against his cheek, until Duke was the only person he thought about at all. “Are you?”

“I’m great. I like your bed.” His body was completely still except for the slowing rise and fall of his chest, and the infinitesimal strokes of his fingertips at the small of Scott’s back. “I like you, too, James.”

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Scott smiled a little. He hoped that Duke wouldn't regret all of it the next morning. He did not want to hear that it was all a mistake brought on by too much stress and too little sleep. Of course, Scott didn't quite know what to do even if Duke didn't insist it was all a mistake. But that was another thing he shouldn't dwell on.

"Feeling's mutual," Scott murmured, pleased by the way his lips brushed against Duke's skin.

CHAPTER 10

When Scott woke up alone, he was sure that meant Duke was already long gone. Not only was he left in bed without so much as a good-bye, he also had the worst hard-on of his adult life. He stroked himself absently, debating whether or not he had the time to get himself off, or if he should just shower and start his day. It didn't help that his pillow still smelled distinctly of the other man. Or that the sheet was still warm where Duke had slept. He probably hadn't even been gone for long. He could have stuck around for a bit. Or maybe woke Scott up before he left.

The thought brought a smile to his face, and he put Duke's pillow over his face, inhaling deeply to catch the faint scent. He replayed most of the previous night, watching events unfold like it was a movie he had once seen. Except, this time, Duke had him

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pinned to the bed. And Duke was using his mouth in delightfully obscene ways. His perfectly shaped mouth that, quite frankly, Scott had not spent enough time with.

He moved his wrist faster, his fingers catching the pre-come gathering at the slit and spreading it over the head. This would be much better with lotion, he knew. Hell, he didn't even want lotion. He wanted Duke's hot mouth, descending on his shaft, his lips dry, his tongue wet, his throat relaxed and warm when it constricted around his length. Scott could so easily imagine the top of Duke's head, black hair reflecting the early morning light, dark eyes looking up through his insanely long lashes.

Scott didn't know just when Duke had completely burrowed under his skin, but he was firmly in place now. There really wasn't anything to do about it except enjoy it. And he was. Scott enjoyed the smell of his sweat and shampoo, the deep sound of his voice, the texture of his throat. The more he thought about those things, the more he enjoyed them.

He gripped the base of his cock with one hand and focused on the head with his other hand, spreading the pre-come, and awakening every single nerve ending beneath the skin. The fantasy behind his closed eyes changed. He was holding Duke's head in place, cupping his hollowed cheeks, stroking him with the tips of his fingers while he buried his cock in Duke's throat again and again.

The pillow muffled his shout of release, but not by much. He caught his come in his closed fist, and collapsed against the mattress. Relief washed through him, but Scott knew it was just barely enough to get the edge off. In fact...

The distinct sound of pans knocking against pans reached Scott through the pillow, and he froze. Duke wasn't gone? Duke was in

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his kitchen? He wasn't even sure if he wanted it to be Duke. At that moment, he might have had better luck facing some crazy killer.

He tossed the pillow aside, plucked tissues from a box beside the bed to clean himself up, and tucked himself back in his pants. There was only way to find out. He had to go investigate.

"Good morning." Duke's voice greeted him as soon as he opened the door, accompanied by the distinct smell of brewing coffee. "I'm glad you're up. I wasn't looking forward to eating all this myself."

All this looked to be toast, with every half-full jar of jam Scott had ever bought on impulse spread out on the counter, bacon, scrambled eggs, and a platter of cheese and freshly shredded lettuce. Duke took out two plates and placed a tortilla on each, pausing as Scott approached.

"I was thinking breakfast burritos, but if you'd rather have everything separate..."

"Breakfast burritos are fine." Scott could only watch as Duke started to assemble one. "I thought..." *You'd be gone.* "That you just lived on coffee."

"Sometimes it feels like it." He nodded toward a half-full cup near his hand, a small smile on his mouth. "That's my second today."

Duke was drinking from Scott's favorite mug, but it didn't even warrant a twinge of annoyance. He got another down from the cupboard and filled it to the brim. "I guess I'm not surprised, since you probably only got three hours of sleep."

"It was good sleep, though. I owe you for that."

"I aim to please."

Scott accepted the plate with the freshly made burrito, still not

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entirely sure what to make of it. Had Duke heard him in the bedroom? The pillow should have muffled everything, but he wasn't exactly behaving like the object of his fantasies was in the kitchen. Cooking him breakfast. Being pleasant and cordial.

"This smells delicious. I'm surprised you found all this in my fridge."

"You probably need to go grocery shopping soon, though. I used almost everything I found." His smile deepened. There might even have been a twinkle in his eye, though Scott was all too aware that could have been a trick of the lighting. Or his own wishful thinking. "The only thing you won't need is more jam."

Scott grinned sheepishly. "I keep forgetting I have jam. Then when I go shopping, I think about how nice it would taste on some toast and I buy another jar. While spacing on the bread, of course."

"Somehow, your sweet tooth doesn't surprise me."

"Have you found my stash of cookies?"

"Yes, but I stayed away from them in case you thought I considered cookies an acceptable breakfast." He finished rolling his burrito and grabbed a piece of toast before carrying his plate and coffee over to the table. "What's your schedule like today? Anything you need me for?"

"I'm going to go speak with Hector. He was pretty shell-shocked yesterday, and I do want to make it a point to touch bases with him daily. Then it's back to the office for a couple of things that absolutely can't be pushed to another associate." Scott took a bite of his burrito and chewed thoughtfully. It was good. Good enough that he was already thinking of ways to make sure Duke was there the next morning as well. "And a little bird told me I should be prepared to go to court today for the verdict on the Jenkins case."

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"I hope that goes the way you want."

Scott smiled, strangely touched by Duke's sincerity. "What are you doing tonight? If it does go my way, I'm going to want a drink. If it doesn't go my way, I'm going to need a drink. Either way, some company would be nice."

"I need to start tearing the Mayfield case apart, piece by piece, which means I'm going to be re-interviewing everybody I can today and burying myself in the evidence room. I'm not sure where that's going to take me." He seemed genuinely apologetic, his smile now gone. "Are you going to call about getting some kind of security? In case I can't be around tonight."

"Yes, I'll do that today," Scott promised, keeping the disappointment out of his voice. He knew he couldn't, and shouldn't, plan on Duke spending another night, but that didn't change the fact that he very much wanted Duke to. "Call me with an update...if you aren't around tonight."

Duke toyed with his toast, silence filling the space between them as they ate. When he cleared his throat, Scott nearly jumped out of his skin. "Considering our mutual interest in Young's case, I think we should plan on daily meetings. To catch each other up, to devise strategy, that kind of thing. And considering the potential threats involved, it would be better if we do those in person. Someplace...safe."

Scott studied his face for a beat, searching for any hint of Duke's meaning. Was he, like Scott, looking for excuses to spend more time together? Or was he really, truly only interested in exchanging information about the case?

"As safe as my place, or somewhere safer?"

"We should mix it up. Your place. A restaurant outside the city, maybe in the East Bay. A mall. Places like that."

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"It almost sounds like you're asking me out on a date," Scott said lightly. More lightly than he actually felt.

Duke turned his attention back to his food. "No, when I ask you out on a date, you'll know it."

When. Not if, but *when*. Scott could definitely live with that. "Then let's go somewhere to get some dinner tonight. We can pick up a burger somewhere."

Duke nodded. "Why don't you call me when you're done for the day? On my cell. We'll figure out where to eat based on where I am."

"Sounds like a good plan to me." Scott popped the last bite of his burrito in his mouth and stood. "I've got to shower and get dressed. You're welcome to..." Scott almost said *join me*, but decided not to press his luck. "Use the shower in the guest bathroom."

"Thanks." He didn't make any move to stand, though, reaching for his coffee and leaning back in the chair like it was his place and not Scott's. His warm eyes met Scott's, and a hint of his smile returned. "I didn't specifically say so before, but thanks for last night, too. I probably wouldn't have slept at all if you hadn't come out."

"Believe me when I say that I'm happy to help out any time you need me."

"Yeah." His gaze flickered once to Scott's groin before returning to his face. "I heard."

Scott actually felt his neck and face redden. He briefly considered pointing out that he thought Duke was gone, but that would only explain why he got caught. Of course, Duke was a grown man, and perhaps he didn't need an explanation of how annoying a good case of blue balls could be. Either way, Scott

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found himself too flustered for too long to make any sort of retort. So, he did what any reasonable person would do.

He fled to the bathroom.

* * *

Scott did not get to the precinct as early as he would have liked, but he did manage to clear a full two-hour block. An amount of time so luxurious, it was practically indulgent. Morrison, one of his co-counsels, hinted that Scott should be prepared to go in to court after lunch. He didn't know if Morrison had a man on the inside, or if he just possessed an uncanny gut instinct for these sorts of things, but the man was rarely wrong.

When Scott arrived, Hector did not look any better than he had the day before. In fact, he seemed worse. Scott would bet that he hadn't slept a wink. He had probably been refusing his food, too. There were bags under his red-rimmed eyes, and there was no arrogance masking his fear. No posturing. He was just a young man caught up in a situation so far beyond his control, he probably had good reason to think he would never be in charge of his own life again. His very short life, if Scott and Duke didn't figure out who was behind the clusterfuck.

"How are you holding up?" Scott greeted.

A thin shoulder rose and fell. "I'm up. That's about all I can say."

Scott sat down across from him and switched his digital recorder on. "I know this is going to sound dumb, but you've got to make sure you take care of yourself while you're in here."

Hector scowled. "Oh, right, I'll just get my secretary to schedule my fucking spa treatment between all the meetings I gotta

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take. No problem.”

“Ha ha. But I’m serious. You’ve got to sleep. People who are under stress and tired make mistakes. They say the wrong thing to the wrong people. Their memories can be suspect. And there’s a reason that solitary is used as a punishment.”

“If I could sleep, don’t you think I would? It’s all I got to do in here.” He snorted and slumped in his chair. “Doesn’t help I got people pulling me outta my cell before the sun’s got time to shine, neither.”

“People?” Scott frowned. “Who?”

“You. The cops. The DA. Anybody who wants a piece of me.”

“DA Horan was here? When? Was he here this morning?”

“Been here every day since they brought me in. Don’t worry. I don’t tell him nothing. I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

In the space of four hours, Scott had been stunned into silence twice. That was after a lifetime of never being at a loss for words. “He’s been here every day since you were arrested for Ms. Mayfield’s murder?”

Hector squirmed uncomfortably, his gaze settling on the edge of the table he kept picking at. “Yeah. He wants me to make some kind of deal with him. But even if I had what he thinks I’ve got, if Tana’d asked me to keep something safe for her, I wouldn’t go back on it for some scumsucker like him.”

“He’s been trying to make a deal with you?” Scott’s question was low, each word measured. “What has he said to you? I need to know every single word.”

“Every word? You know how much that man talks? Shit...” Scrubbing at his face, Hector stared up at the ceiling for seconds Scott felt in every fiber of his being. Even Hector’s loud exhalation was too much to bear. All he wanted was an answer. “Horan thinks

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I've got something. Something Tana would've given me. He says, if I give it to him, he can make all the charges go away."

"What? What does he think you have?" Scott's heart was pounding so hard in his ears, he could barely hear his own question. "Pictures? Names? Is this a live-boy-dead-girl scenario? What?"

"I don't know!" The explosion drove Hector back up, his thin body snapping. "He's been on me and on me, and he keeps saying I know what he's talking about, but I fucking don't. All I know is Tana's dead, and now Johnny's dead, and what's the goddamn point of trying to make it straight when nothing I say or do even makes a difference?"

"It makes a difference." Scott debated for a moment, and then switched the recorder off. "If Tana had given you anything, where would you have kept it? Your apartment? Or somewhere safer?"

"I got nowhere safe."

"Then where would Tana keep something safe? And don't tell me you don't know. We don't have the luxury of that right now."

"You mean, *I* don't have the luxury. You, you get to walk out of here. You don't have that asshole Horan breathing down your neck." He ran his hand over his head, bowing forward for a moment. "I didn't think Tana had to worry about shit like that. She wasn't like that. She was good. Decent. She shouldn't have had to worry about nothing being safe. She had that nice place to live, and she had her fancy dancing. She was gonna be big, you know. Any day now, they were going to give her a big part. It was all she would talk about."

Scott could almost feel his patience dissipating, fading into the ether. He could have told Hector that nobody was really good. Everybody made mistakes, made poor decisions, acted rashly.

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Everybody had it in them to be afraid, or greedy, or just plain arrogant. Except for maybe Owen Duke. But he reined himself in. Shouting at Hector, or maligning the memory of his murdered friend, wouldn't help his situation.

"Her big part." Scott licked his lips thoughtfully. "Dancing. She must have kept that world pretty separate from you and the halfway house, right?"

The shift in topic surprised Hector, drawing a frown. "No, not really. She talked about it all the time. She got me and Ms. Cunningham tickets once. Tana loved dancing more than anything."

"Did she talk about it with other people at the halfway house? Did she ever get tickets for anybody else there?"

"Not that I know of." His frown deepened. "Most of the guys at Woodson, they don't try as hard as I do. Tana always told me I was better than them."

Would a search warrant be possible for the opera house? Maybe not yet. Especially since he couldn't tell a judge exactly what he was searching *for*. But Duke could certainly follow up with every person Tana Mayfield ever encountered while she studied, practiced, and performed.

"I'm going to go figure out just what Horan wants. If he shows up here again, say that you're not going to speak to *anybody* without consulting with your lawyer. In fact, from now on, that's your mantra. You don't speak to anybody about anything without phoning me. I don't care if they're just asking what you want for lunch."

"What about this deal he keeps offering me? Can he really do that?"

"Sure, he can. He can offer whatever he wants. But if he gets

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what he wants from you, he probably will be just as happy to let you rot in jail. And if I get to it first, it won't matter what the trade is. Let him talk until he is blue in the face if that makes him happy, but don't respond. Don't even acknowledge him, except to say that you want to call me."

"Okay." Hector deflated, back to the beaten self Scott had walked in on. "Whatever you say, Mr. Scott."

"Hey. You're going to get out of here. I told you that when I first took your case, and I still believe it. My record speaks for itself." Scott stood up, straightening his jacket. "I don't lose. Don't forget it."

"Sometimes, I think you're the only who believes that."

Scott knocked on the door, signaling to the guard that he was ready to leave. It occurred to him that Hector might need him to stay, if only for morale purposes. But there were bigger things to worry about. Much bigger things. He had the feeling Duke would hit the roof when he heard about Horan's visits.

"Well, then, you better start believing it, too."

CHAPTER 11

Woodson Halfway House was located in South San Francisco, on a winding road with a surprisingly good view of the Bay. Twenty years ago, it would've been considered dangerous, with its bad roof and slight lean. Now, the state was probably just glad they had somebody like Chandra Cunningham to shift some of their responsibility to, without having to worry too much about the potential repercussions.

Duke pulled up in front of the rambling three-story house and set the parking brake, grabbing his sunglasses before getting out of the car. A few other vehicles were parked in the spacious drive, all but one newer and flashier than his. That wasn't unusual. Most of these halfway houses ended up being hotels for career criminals, giving them space to congregate and organize amongst themselves.

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Woodson was cleaner than most, but that didn't mean it wasn't still a breeding ground for ongoing criminal activity. It was amazing Young had found the wherewithal to try and break free.

Or maybe not so amazing, considering his devotion to Tana Mayfield. Duke suspected he'd probably been in love with the young woman. Men had changed their lives for less.

He took his time going up to the front door, drinking in as many details as he could. In spite of the house's dilapidation, the front yard was carefully tended, with flowerbeds barked out to counter the lack of regular moisture, and shrubbery that was only just looking like they needed to be trimmed back. A stone path wound through the beds, firmly embedded in the ground to prevent tripping, with a small sign that read, "Here lies the last dog that pooped in my yard."

He almost smiled until he remembered where he was. With this house's occupants, that might not necessarily be a joke.

The front door stood wide open, crooking a bent finger at Duke to beckon him inside. He had called ahead to let Ms. Cunningham know he was stopping by for a more formal interview, but the open door invitation took him a little by surprise. His careful footsteps echoed against the tiled foyer. Floorboards overhead creaked to let him know he wasn't completely alone, but other than that and the distant rumble of bass coming through speakers, the place seemed deserted.

Immediately to the right of the entrance was a large, empty living room, the couches, all different shapes and sizes, ringing the center of the room. It looked like a meeting area, maybe for the group sessions the cons were usually ordered to go through. All steps toward rehabilitation, supposedly. The fact that not a single person was in the room did not necessarily bode well for how

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seriously people took the therapy. Or it could mean exactly the opposite and the room was reserved for group sessions alone. Either way, it seemed a waste of space.

Duke ventured deeper into the house, looking for someplace Ms. Cunningham might consider an office. Two more rooms might have worked, but they were just as deserted as the first he'd found. He was about to call out and hope someone answered him when something clattered from the rear of the house, and Chandra Cunningham's distinctive raspy voice erupted in cursing.

He followed the sound and emerged into a wide, bright kitchen, sunshine glaring off the pale linoleum floor to nearly blind him, even with his sunglasses on. The swearing came from behind a breakfast bar, and he stepped closer in time to see a dark head pop up, followed by the svelte form of a forty-something woman. Her hands were full of broken pottery, the curve of a cup handle visible before she dropped the pieces into a sink. Coffee had spilled on the counter and run over the side onto the floor. Duke grabbed an available towel and pressed it to the edge, stopping any more from dripping.

Chandra Cunningham jumped when she turned back and saw him there, though she only seemed off-balance for a moment. "You've got to be Detective Duke," she said, bending down again. "You're early."

"The front door was open."

"That's because it's hotter than Hades in here, and that's the only way to cool this place down." She stood again with a second load of broken pottery. "I didn't think you'd want to bake for this."

He waited patiently as she finished cleaning up, only relinquishing the towel to her command after the floor was clear. "If this is a bad time—"

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“No, no, this is as good a time as any.” She tossed the towel into the sink with the other remnants. “But you’ll have to do without some iced coffee. Sorry about that.”

He gave her a small smile. “That’s perfectly fine. I don’t usually get snacks while I’m interviewing people.”

She grimaced. He’d been right about the smoking. Tiny lines radiated from her lips, one of the few imperfections in her otherwise attractive face. Her dark eyes radiated intelligence, her toffee-colored skin flawless. “Is that what we’re calling this? An interview?”

“That’s what I call it, yes.” He glanced around. “Is there somewhere comfortable we can sit without interruption?”

She gestured to the long dining room table that took up the opposite side of the room. “Have a seat. Nobody comes back here in the middle of the day except for me.”

He waited until they were both comfortable before pulling out his notepad. “Have you seen the news?”

“About Hector?” Chandra sighed. “Yeah. That poor kid is never going to get a break, is he?”

“Well, that’s for us to try and find out.”

“Are you on that case, too?”

Duke shook his head. “I’m still investigating Tana Mayfield’s murder. I’ve exonerated Young from suspicion, but that just means somebody else out there did it.”

“Any ideas?”

“Nothing I can discuss at this time.”

A frown drew her thin brows together. “So what’re you here for? You don’t need to talk to me about Hector.”

He uncapped his pen and poised to write. “I’d like to talk about Tana, actually. Her responsibilities here, people she might have

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come into contact with, that sort of thing.”

“She came into contact with just about everybody at some point or another. She helped out with some of the admin stuff, hung around to talk to anyone who might want to listen, helped coordinate sessions. That sort of thing.”

“How did she come to work here?”

“She just showed up one day, wanting to help. I told her to fill out an application, got her resume, checked her record.” Chandra smiled. “You’d be surprised how many girlfriends show up, thinking they can come to work here and help their guys skip through. It’s hard enough trying to maintain some kind of order without them making things worse.”

Duke thought Chandra Cunningham, for as shrewd as she appeared, was more than a little blind to what was obviously going on under her nose. Maybe out of necessity. She could focus on the ones she knew she could help, and just pray the others did their misdeeds off the property.

“Was there anybody else Tana took a special interest in, other than Hector Young? Or anyone who took a special interest in her?”

“You’ve seen her pictures, detective. She was a beautiful girl, and I’ve got a house full of men who got locked away from pretty girls like that for years. Of course, the others noticed her. But if they didn’t show her any respect, she knew exactly how to cut them down. She might have looked delicate, but she had a backbone of steel. I doubt there was nothing she couldn’t do if she set her mind to it.”

“That must have pissed some of the men off.”

Chandra shrugged. “Maybe. But Hector wouldn’t have let anybody touch her.”

“Is anybody else around that might have known Tana? I’d like

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to talk to as many acquaintances as possible.”

She leveled him a frank stare. “You can try, but you don’t really think they’re going to say anything to you, do you? You’re a cop. You’re not exactly at the top of their Christmas card lists.”

“Well, maybe you could talk to them for me.”

She still seemed doubtful. “If they knew anything, they would have already said something.”

“Not if they were covering something up.”

“And you think that’ll encourage them to answer *my* questions?”

“Can you please try?”

With a roll of her eyes, she rose from her chair. “I’m not making any promises, you know. Now that Hector isn’t in trouble for it, they won’t see why it matters.”

“It matters because a girl is dead, Ms. Cunningham.”

Chandra paused in the doorway. “You know that, and I know that, detective, but to these men here? She’s gone. Life goes on. They’re not exactly known for caring about the past.” She sighed. “I’ll be right back.”

The house felt even emptier when she’d left, prompting Duke to stand and prowl around the expansive space. What he really wanted to do was follow her upstairs, but she had a point about how cooperative the men would be. Even if he just said he was gathering background information, they were far more likely to say they knew nothing than to volunteer something useful.

Still, he liked the possibility of someone from Woodson being the killer. By Chandra’s own admission, these were men with violent pasts. Men who might have resented the pretty little rich girl showing up to do her good deed for the day. Men who might have been thwarted from further advances by a protective Hector.

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Yeah. He liked the idea a lot.

The only thing the theory didn't explain was why someone seemed so determined to set Hector up. They'd gotten to Saucedo, though he'd found a way around it to get the necessary information to Duke, and they'd gotten to Johnny Fender. Duke knew in his head, if not his heart, that Sager had to be involved somehow, as well. Scott's theory that Sager might be a pawn could be possible, but the man Duke knew and respected was too smart for that. Nobody used Sager unless he wanted to be used.

Now, two people were dead, and a third would be joining them unless Scott was able to work some magic. Based on what he'd seen of the man so far, Duke thought he just might do it, too.

Sliding glass doors separated the kitchen from the back yard. At some point, someone had given up on grass and laid a concrete patio over the whole thing, with a single orange tree in a far corner and a couple pots of wilting flowers scattered near the house. A long picnic table with a covered barbecue next to it sat in the shade provided by the tall fence, but it wasn't unoccupied. A large man was hunched over something unseen, his faded workshirt straining across his back.

Duke eased outside, though not as quietly as he would have liked. The soles of his shoes clicked with his first step, startling the man at the table into glancing back. Thick brows drew into an even thicker line, though he didn't look away as Duke approached.

"He just doesn't know when to give up, does he?" the man growled. A tattoo snaked its way down the front of his throat, undulating as he spoke. Someone at some point had taken a knife to his face, too. Old scars mottled his cheeks. "Fuck off."

Duke went around the opposite side of the table and sat down. The remains of a portable DVD player spread out between them,

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but he deliberately ignored the screwdriver the man still held loosely in one hand.

"I'm just interested in asking you a few questions." Duke kept his tone neutral, refusing to back down from the man's implied threats.

"That's what he always says." They held gazes until the other man finally snorted and shook his head, focusing again on his project. "It's not our fucking fault he doesn't like the answers he gets."

He. Duke could wager guesses as to who this *he* might be, but he didn't want to be wrong. Or maybe, on the chance it was Sager, he didn't want to be right.

"You want me to pass along a message to him for you, then?" he played along.

The man rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like Mr. Bigshot DA gives a rat's ass what an ex-con thinks of him."

Disappointment mingled with relief. Horan, then. Probably came down to question some of Hector's associates in an attempt to get a stronger link to Tana. That didn't help Duke very much, but at least it wasn't Sager. That counted for something.

"It's called doing his job."

"Yeah, you just keep on shoveling it. Pile it deep enough, and you won't be able to see it for the pile of shit it is."

Duke reached inside his jacket for his notepad. "Listen, Mr.—"

"Oh, hell no!" At first sight of the pad, the man bolted upright, dropping the screwdriver onto the table. "Don't even think about putting me on the record. DA's got his rats. He doesn't need me in his fucking cage, too."

He raced off without looking back, abandoning his project in his desire to get out of Duke's presence. Duke couldn't blame the

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man, but his last words left him unsettled. The DA had contacts within Woodson? It wasn't uncommon, but then why hadn't he used any of them in his bid to get Young charged with Tana's murder? And why was this particular man so obviously rattled? His assertions implied Horan, or at least his men, came by often enough to be recognized. Asking questions. Getting answers he didn't like.

He was still lost in thought when a shadow fell across the table.

"Did you say something to Vinnie?" Chandra demanded.

"That depends." Duke rose and slid his notepad back into his pocket. "Who's Vinnie?"

She ignored the question and jabbed a thin finger back at the house. "He just ran out, like a bat out of hell. I want to know what you said to him."

"He didn't give me much of a chance to say anything. He pegged me for a cop and left." Which was close enough to the truth to make Duke comfortable with it.

Her frown didn't ease, though some of the tension in her shoulders lessened. "Well, maybe you should go anyway. I'm not getting anything new from the guys who are here. I'll have better luck if you're not around."

Duke didn't agree, but he knew when to let the line relax. "Call me if they say anything, or if you remember anything remotely interesting." He handed her one of his business cards. "Day or night, it doesn't matter."

She flipped the card back and forth between her fingers, stepping aside to give him room to walk past. He heard the faint tapping all the way until he walked out the front door.

Back in his car, he pulled out his phone and stuck his earpiece in. He scrolled for Scott's office number. They needed to talk

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about how things were developing.

“I’m sorry, detective, you just missed him.” Scott’s secretary, Monica, sounded genuinely contrite. “He’s on his way to court.”

That meant the decision had come in on the Jenkins case, just like Scott had suspected. Duke thanked her and disconnected. He’d head into the city and intercept James at the courthouse. They could go grab something to eat after all.

The courtroom was absolutely packed. Sammy Jenkins had been charged with the double homicide of his mother and her boyfriend after a five month investigation that culminated with a dramatic stand-off at the victims’ home, Sammy crying and protesting his innocence even as he hugged a semi-automatic rifle to his chest. It had seemed scripted for television, and been broadcast on every local station and cable news channel. Sammy had threatened to kill himself before finally surrendering to the police after six very tense hours. If he had been trying for sympathy, the attempt had failed. After that, just about every person in the country believed him to be guilty.

Except maybe James Scott. Of course, it wasn’t necessary to believe a man innocent in order to defend him. And Duke knew Scott took the job too seriously to slack off, even if his client was as guilty as Lucifer himself. Duke had demurred when asked his opinion because he did not have all the information on the case—he hadn’t even followed the trial that closely. But he did know that the investigating detectives, as well as the DA’s office, thought they had this one in the bag.

Scott sat beside his client at the front of the courtroom. Jenkins wore an expensive suit he had obviously not bought himself, with his hair carefully combed. He looked younger than his twenty-three years. Duke did know that the young man had tested on the

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low side of average for intelligence, and he had the look of a man who didn't quite understand what was happening around him. The court had ruled him competent to stand trial, though. There had been a hard fight over that. One that had lasted for weeks and delayed the trial. As soon as Horan won that battle, he decided to up the charges to two counts of first-degree murder.

Duke chose a spot in the rear of the room. There were no cameras, but there were plenty of reporters and producers, ready to email and text the verdict as soon as it came through. Despite being stuck in the center of a three-ring circus—and despite the stakes—Scott looked perfectly calm. Calm, but not relaxed. There was no easy smile on his face, and his shoulders were tense, his spine ramrod straight.

“Mr. Foreperson, has the jury reached the verdict.”

A tall, slightly stooped, balding man stood. His head reflected the golden light above him, and his eyes were huge behind a pair of spectacles. All eyes in the room were locked on him.

“We have, your honor.”

“Would the defendant please rise?”

Jenkins, Scott, and his two co-counsels stood. The tension in the room was thick. So thick that even Duke had to struggle to take a breath. He had been in the middle of more than a few ugly trials, but he had never been in a courtroom that felt like this. And now, it felt like the whole world might be watching.

“What say you?”

“We, the jury, find the defendant, Samuel Dylan Jenkins, guilty of two counts of murder in the first degree.”

Duke's eyes widened. Scott didn't move. He didn't even twitch.

“So say one, so say you all?”

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“Yes, your honor.”

Jenkins turned big eyes to Scott and there was such a deep look of confusion and despair that even Duke felt something twitch in his chest. Duke didn't think James had the answer for the younger man's unspoken question.

As the judge said his final words, Duke rose silently from his seat and slipped out the door. Already, the press was going crazy, eager to get at anybody close to the bench. Scott would have his hands full for a few minutes. Duke didn't want to distract him from what would likely be some tense questions.

Instead, he flashed his badge at security and navigated through the courthouse corridors to the secure conference rooms attorneys used during the trial. He didn't know which one Scott was going to use, but the benches in the hall gave him a good view of the court's back exit, the one Scott would use to leave the building. No grandstanding on the front steps today. Scott would probably want to get back to his office to prepare for the appeal process as soon as possible.

As the minutes ticked by, Duke realized he could just leave. In fact, he probably should leave. At the moment, Hector Young would be the last thing on Scott's mind. And it wasn't like they couldn't talk about what Chandra had told him later. Like the next day, when things would be less hectic. Plus, he was wasting time while he waited for Scott to emerge. There were still plenty of people to interview, plenty of leads to follow. Leaving and calling Scott later would be the logical thing to do.

Duke acknowledged that fact, but he didn't move. Not even when the thirty-minute mark passed. It was almost a full forty-five minutes before he caught sight of Scott's familiar golden brown hair.

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He made a beeline for Duke, but there wasn't even a hint of pleasure at the sight of him. "What are you doing here?"

For a moment, words failed him. He'd never heard that tone come from Scott, not directed at him, at least. He stalled by standing, pulling himself to his full height. Meeting Scott's cool gaze helped him find his voice.

"We had plans."

Scott's gaze was still hard, still trained on Duke like he wasn't exactly sure what Duke wanted from him. "I'm not really hungry right now."

"Nothing says we have to eat. Didn't you say something about a drink?"

Scott blinked, and now his eyes softened. Slightly. "Yeah, I did, but...look, I'm just not...I'm not in the mood right now."

The two attorneys who had sat with Scott hovered in the background, prompting Duke to take a step closer. On a whim, he rested his hand on Scott's shoulder and squeezed, hoping he would take it as reassurance.

"I'm sorry about the verdict, James," he said, pitching his voice lower. "For what it's worth, you gave him the best chance he had."

He waited for a beat, then gently shrugged Duke's hand away. "No, if I had, he wouldn't be cooling his heels in jail right now and terrified out of his fucking mind."

The urge to grab Scott again almost overtook him, but Duke reined it in at the last moment. He didn't back away, though. He wasn't going to give Scott the satisfaction. "So what are you going to do?"

Scott turned long enough to nod at his colleagues. They both frowned at him, but went on their way without pressing for an explanation. "I am probably going to have that drink. But I think it

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would be best if I had it alone.”

“No.” The refusal surprised even Duke. “I don’t think that’s wise.”

“You don’t think that’s *wise*? Who asked you?”

“Nobody. But someone very smart said to me recently, nothing good has ever come from getting drunk. I’m returning the favor.”

Scott exhaled, his nostrils flaring. “Fine. That’s fine. I just want to get the hell out of here.” He brushed past Duke with what was almost a shoulder check.

A smart man might have let Scott go. He was upset. Angry. Clearly desired to be left alone. The day before, Duke just might have let him leave, too. He had nothing invested in the Jenkins case. It didn’t matter to him whether the young man got off or not. This had absolutely no bearing on Duke whatsoever.

Except it mattered to James. And a lot had transpired in the past twenty-four hours, including a concerned Scott offering comfort in the middle of the night.

If it mattered to James, it mattered to Owen.

His heels clicked against the floor as he took long strides to meet up with Scott. He reached the door first, and held it open, cocking a single brow at James when their eyes met.

“You wanted to leave, didn’t you?”

“Why do I have the feeling that even if I got away from you, you’d trail me?”

“Because you’re smart enough to know I don’t give up just because something’s proving difficult. Or someone, as the case may be.”

Scott only shook his head and brushed past Duke. He walked with purpose until he reached the parking lot, then his steps faltered. Like he wasn’t quite sure where he was or what he wanted

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to do.

“So...do you want to go somewhere in particular?” Scott looked over his shoulder. “Or are you just going to shadow me?”

He hadn’t thought that far ahead, which surprised him. He’d been more concerned in sticking to James. But he heard himself saying, “Let’s go back to your place,” and knew that made the most sense. For both of them.

Scott turned back to the lot with a shrug. One that Duke hoped meant agreement. Duke fell into step beside him. It’d be easy enough to pick up his car later that night or the next morning. If Scott thought it was odd that Duke intended to ride with him, he didn’t say anything. He barely even acknowledged Duke until they were both in his car.

“I don’t know where it all went wrong. That’s the real shitty part of this. I can’t look to one day in court. I can’t point at one witness or one wrong question.” Scott started the car. “I thought things had gone perfectly.”

Duke wasn’t the type to offer platitudes. He preferred action, facts. He could spit out statistics about crime versus conviction rates in the Bay Area, or discuss police methodology, but when it came time to offer condolences or support, he invariably found himself at a loss. He wasn’t entirely sure how to help Scott. He just knew he had to try.

“So don’t focus on what happened. Focus on what you can yet still do. There’s an appeal process for a reason. If you truly believe this man didn’t do it, I know you’ll find a way to help him.”

“I know he didn’t do it,” Scott muttered before snorting softly. He shot Duke a wry, bitter smile and added, “As much as anybody can know anything. I had a gut feeling about this one, too. Before I even met Sammy.”

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“Were there ever any other viable suspects?”

“Yes, I thought so. Though obviously the DA’s office and the Grand Jury disagreed. I might step down and let Shelley take over the appeal.”

“Don’t.” He refused to look away when Scott glanced at him again. “I could look over your evidence for you. Don’t give up until you don’t have a choice anymore.”

Scott didn’t respond immediately. He was either completely focused on the task of navigating away from the courthouse, or he was so lost in his own thoughts that he hadn’t even heard Duke’s offer.

“No. The evidence...the evidence was fine. Maybe the alibi wasn’t airtight, but it was still solid enough. Maybe it was the jury?” Scott slammed his hand against the steering wheel with obvious frustration. “I thought I had a good one seated, but maybe I should have taken more time with the selection. Or maybe this one was fixed, too.”

“You can’t go around assuming everything’s fixed.”

“What do you think? It’s possible to be only a little bit corrupt?” Scott dug through his pocket, then pulled out a recorder nearly identical to the one he had already given Duke. “Listen to this and tell me I don’t have reason to suspect a fix.”

He took the recorder, but didn’t play it yet, more than a little worried at the harsh tone of Scott’s voice. “If we stop believing the system works, what’s the point in doing our jobs?”

“I don’t have any issue with the system. It’s the men who have no compunction about manipulating and degrading the system to get what they want that I’m worried about. And what’s a few more bodies to them? What’s a little blood to grease the wheels, right?”

This wasn’t about Jenkins anymore. Duke didn’t know why he

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knew that, but his instincts refused to be ignored. He glanced down at the recorder in his hand, turning it over and over before hitting play. Scott's voice filled the car, followed by Young's, and Duke listened in mute fascination to the very brief exchange.

"It makes a difference," Scott on the recorder said. Then, the machine fell silent, only the electric hum of dead space emanating from the tiny speaker.

"It isn't men you're angry with," Duke said. "I'm willing to bet it's just one. Horan."

"Horan. Whoever is aiding and abetting him. I don't believe he's working alone. He can't be." Scott braked to a stop at a red light, his fingers drumming an absentminded, but frantic, rhythm. "I think I'm angry with everybody right now."

Without focus, Scott was in no place to talk about the case or what Duke had learned. That left trying to make small talk, which was not Duke's strong suit. Still, he knew he had to try and offered a small smile. "I hope I'm not included with that everybody. Because this is going to be a very long night, if that's the case."

Scott looked over, and the dark shadow seemed to be lifting from his eyes. "No. It probably should since you won't let me sulk and brood in peace."

"Turnabout is fair play." He held the recorder out for Scott to take back. "Besides, you don't wear the frown as well as you do the smile."

"So you're saying you like my smile?"

"Is that going to bring it back?"

"Maybe if I hear the words."

"I like a lot of things about you. Your smile's just part of a long list."

The statement had the desired effect. Both corners of Scott's

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mouth lifted. It wasn't a wide smile. It wasn't even close to Scott's usual charming smile. But it was better than the frown that marred his features, like a thin crack through the face of a mirror.

"That did help. A little."

"What else would help? Other than stringing Horan up and setting him loose in San Quentin."

"You can start by promising me that he's not going to get away with all this shit." Scott sighed and shook his head. "Not that you really have the ability to make a promise like that. Are you...do you need to leave tonight?"

He should. The knowledge that Horan was after Young for something that Tana supposedly would have had, combined with the fact that he and his men had been nosing around Woodson, was more than enough to give them a new spot in which to dig, a far more dangerous spot considering how much power the DA actually wielded. Scott would likely welcome the distraction of work if he suggested he come along, too. He didn't want Young to be in jail any longer than necessary, especially after the results of the Jenkins case.

But from the sound of Scott's voice, he knew that wasn't what Scott actually needed. Perhaps it wasn't what Duke needed, either.

"I'd rather stay with you," he said. "May I?"

"Of course. Especially since I expected you to inform me of your intention to stay, anyway." He made a quick left, which put him on the one-way street leading to his apartment building. "I just...fuck. I just wish I was in a better mood tonight. Everything's just been a fucking...disaster."

"Not everything." This was unfamiliar territory for Duke, though traversing it felt like his only option, both out of necessity and desire. "If none of this had happened, we might not have

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crossed paths.”

Scott cocked his head, considering that for a few moments. “I suppose breakfast wasn’t a disaster this morning. Kissing you certainly wasn’t a disaster.”

“And tonight won’t be either. That, I *can* promise.”

CHAPTER 12

Walking into Scott's place was starting to feel all too familiar. But as he crossed the threshold, Duke realized he hadn't really thought this through all the way. He wasn't entirely sure what to do next, now that he'd actually gotten Scott home.

"Should we order some food in?" he asked. "I wiped out your kitchen this morning, remember?"

"Yeah, good idea." He dropped his briefcase on the floor without a second glance and pulled a stack of tri-folded, glossy menus from the table beside the door. "I have these. You can pick something. Anything you like. I'm not really that hungry."

Duke was, surprisingly enough, though he felt a little guilty about not getting something specifically to target Scott's desires. He flipped through the menus, not to see what looked good to him,

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but to scan which ones had had the most wear. Those would be the ones Scott used most often.

“This one.” He held out the menu for a Thai place around the corner. Several entrees had penciled marks next to them. “I don’t think I’ve had Thai before. It sounds interesting.”

Scott took the menu from him, glanced over it, and nodded. “I was actually thinking about that earlier today. Wondering if you enjoyed Thai food. Do you want me to order for you?”

“Yes, please.”

He gave Scott space to pull out his cell and make the call by moving farther into the living room and slipping off his jacket. Draping it carefully over the back of a chair, he then set to removing his holster. He wanted Scott to be comfortable. Hell, *he* wanted to be comfortable. For a few hours, he wanted to forget about everything his weapon represented.

Duke had apparently chosen well, because the conversation was extremely brief and to the point. They not only recognized Scott, but they obviously knew Scott’s regular order and his address.

“It’ll be here in about thirty minutes,” Scott said as he pocketed his phone. “And if you don’t like it, we can order something else in.”

“If I don’t like it, I’ll just get you to make some of your banana foster.”

“I’m feeling so distracted right now, I’m not sure if I should be handling an open flame. Or be anywhere near an open flame, for that matter.” He collapsed to the nearest chair and loosened his tie. “You ever make banana foster?”

“No. I guess I’m out of luck then.”

Thirty minutes. It wasn’t enough time to really accomplish

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anything, but he could still take advantage of the window it gave him to help Scott relax, to help himself forget. And what he wanted most in that moment was to erase the distance between them.

He moved behind the chair and rested his hands on Scott's shoulders. Carefully, he began to knead the tight muscles, seeking out the knots he knew were there. "You don't mind if I do this, do you?" he asked, just to be certain.

Scott caught his breath, then released it in a prolonged moan. "No. God, no. This feels amazing." His head dropped forward. "You might have missed your calling."

Duke smiled. Emboldened by Scott's response, he pushed his thumbs into the tight knobs at the top of his spine, rubbing in small circles until he was rewarded with another moan.

"I've thought about touching you all day," he confessed. "It was hard to leave this morning."

"I'm actually glad you had the strength to go. Because I was certainly in no position to send you on your way. Which, of course, you heard."

Memories of the sounds James had made in the next room flushed heat through Duke's body. He was very glad he stood behind the chair. His sudden erection would have been more than a little embarrassing, but he'd been aroused that morning as well, knowing James was jerking off in bed, most likely because of him.

"Does it make it better if I admit to doing the same thing in the shower after you left?"

Scott moaned again. "I suppose that depends on your definition of better. Actually...I think regardless of your definition, that information makes everything better." He reached up to touch the back of Duke's hand with a light caress. "In my shower?"

At the tender contact, goose bumps crawled up his arm,

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disappearing beneath his cuff. “You told me to use the guest shower.” His voice was starting to go hoarse. “I didn’t want to abuse your hospitality.”

“I think in this case, I probably would have forgiven whatever liberties you took.” Scott sighed, a light shudder going through his body as Duke found one particularly large knot just below his shoulder. “Seriously, where did you learn how to do this?”

He contented himself on focusing on James for a couple minutes, kneading at the tension in his muscles until it relinquished its control. Seeing him slumping forward was worth every second of concentration it took. The only thing better would be seeing him sprawled naked on a bed.

“The first serious relationship I had was with a guy who thought he was going to be the next Wayne Gretzky. Except he spent more time getting banged up on the ice than anything else. I spent most of the little bit of time we actually saw each other, giving him massages.”

“It sounds like you were a very dutiful boyfriend,” Scott muttered. “So did he ever make it? Would I recognize his name?”

“No, he got to play for some minor league team on the east coast. I haven’t heard from him in years.” The short hairs on the back of Scott’s neck were too tempting to ignore. Smoothing his hands down to Scott’s biceps, Duke bent over and skimmed his lips along the man’s nape, his mouth prickling at the texture. “Don’t think I was so dutiful. Think more along the lines of willing to do whatever it took to get my hands on him.”

“I’d take hands-on over dutiful any day of the week.” The words seemed to come at great effort as Scott’s breath caught in his throat. There were goose bumps where Duke had just touched, and he couldn’t resist brushing his mouth across the same patch of

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skin. His fingers tightened on Scott's biceps, and heat soaked through the shirt. Heat that made Duke wish the shirt wasn't there at all.

"Maybe you just need a professional masseuse on retainer." Though the thought of somebody else doing this to James had Duke seeing red.

"I've never heard of a professional masseuse that uses this sort of technique." He arched back slightly, as if trying to force more contact with Duke's mouth. "Not a reputable one."

Duke straightened, settling his hands back on Scott's shoulders. Food would be arriving any time. He couldn't push things too fast too soon. They had all night, after all. And if it drove James a little crazy not having Duke's mouth on him, well, that was even better.

"Did you find out anything today?" Scott looked over his shoulder with heavy eyes. "Is that why you came to meet me at court?"

"It was productive." That was as much as he wanted to concede. Talk about the cases would wind up Scott even further. "But I came because I wanted to see you." He jerked his chin toward the kitchen. "Do you want me to get you one of those drinks you wanted?"

"I would love one, but I should warn you." He caught Duke's hand and brought it to his mouth, pressing his lips against the pulse point. "If you keep spoiling me like this, you're never going to get rid of me."

Duke chuckled. "I couldn't get rid of you when I wasn't spoiling you." He caressed Scott's cheek for a scant moment, absorbing heat, memorizing texture, before pulling away. "Relax. I'll be right back."

He hurried to pour two whiskeys without making it look like he

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didn't want to be away from Scott, even if that was the truth. The tenor of this whole night was changing in ways he hadn't anticipated when he'd first pulled up to the courthouse. At least Scott wasn't brooding on the judgment, though. The one thing Duke had learned tonight was he hated seeing him like that.

When he brought back the drinks, he perched on the edge of the coffee table to face Scott, rather than be blocked from view behind him. "Are your shoulders better? Do you need me to continue the massage?"

"Absolutely." Scott sipped from his glass and his eyes closed with contentment. Duke could almost see the remaining tension draining from Scott's muscles—or maybe it was drowning under the excellent whiskey. When he opened his eyes again, they were focused without being overly bright. The earlier angry light had dulled. "But not until after we eat and I can coax you back into the bedroom."

"You don't have to coax. A simple invitation is all I need."

"Then let the record show that you have a standing invitation."

A sharp knock on the door blocked Duke's response.

Scott jumped to his feet, whiskey still in hand. Duke couldn't quite believe that thirty minutes had already passed, but then, he lost track of time when he had his hands on Scott. Duke followed him to the door, reaching for his wallet, prepared to insist that he would pay for his own, but Scott didn't give him the chance. He pushed two bills in the delivery boy's hand and accepted two large white bags in return.

"Does this count as our first date?" Scott asked, as he shut the door.

Duke blocked him in, succumbing to the urge to close the distance again. Scott didn't fight it, simply looking up at him and

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waiting.

“Since you paid, and we’re at your place, I think that counts.” He bent closer, breathing in the scent of Scott’s aftershave, the food, and the heady alcohol until his mouth watered. “But I reserve the right to arrange my own first date when we have the time and opportunity.”

“You can arrange any date that you like, but I don’t think it would count as a first one, technically. Or is that just me being a nitpicky lawyer?”

“That’s you being nitpicky.”

His last word was almost lost with the seal of his mouth over Scott’s, the kiss he knew they both wanted—needed—far more important than bantering about details. He kept it slow and careful, tickling along the seam of Scott’s lips for the moment before he opened up to Duke and invited him in. His grip on the door tightened, the simple caress dizzying. When he broke away to gulp for breath, his head still spun.

“I’ve wanted to do that all day, too.”

Scott dropped the bags of food like they were nothing and cupped the back of Duke’s neck, turning him to face the room. “Funny. I’ve wanted to do this since last night.”

This was a kiss with enough force to drive Duke back against the door. His shoulder blades hit the wood with a hollow thump, and the doorknob pressed into his hip. He didn’t care about the dull pain, though. Not while Scott’s mouth demanded his attention. His tongue swooped into Duke’s mouth, like he was chasing the faint hint of whiskey on his breath. Scott’s hand closed around Duke’s shirt, his fingers pulling the material tight across Duke’s chest.

The notion to slow Scott down came and went, as fleetingly as it deserved. Duke had extended the first move, and made his

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interest all too apparent not to accept Scott's initiative, especially when they both clearly wanted this, needed it like they needed to breathe. Stopping the night before had been judicious. Now, they had all the time in the world, the luxury of hours ahead of them to take pleasure in the other without losing sleep.

He gripped Scott's hip, molding their bodies together. Scott could control the kiss as much as he liked; Duke wanted control of the rest of his flesh. With his free hand, he tugged at Scott's shirt, loosening it from the waistband, and slipped his fingers beneath the material as soon as there was room. Muscles twitched at the first touch, but he didn't let that stop him. He wanted them quivering and molten, just like Scott's shoulders had been after the massage. He would do whatever it took to make that happen.

Duke's chest began to burn, and though they broke away at the same time to gasp for breath, they didn't move away from each other. Scott kept him pinned in place, his mouth working over Duke's jaw. Like he wanted to eat Duke whole. Duke pushed more of Scott's shirt out of the way and slid his palms around the man's ribs, up his sides, and down his back. He couldn't get enough of the smooth texture, or the sensitive, trembling muscles.

"I want to take you to the bedroom now," Scott said against his throat.

Duke nodded. He probably couldn't have spoken if he tried. Voices required breath. Words, coherent thought. His only need rested in this man's skin and the desire to consume as much as be consumed.

Scott linked his fingers with Duke's and took a step back. It became obvious to Duke that Scott had no intention of breaking the contact in any way, even if that meant stumbling over and around the furniture blocking their path to the bedroom. Scott

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didn't seem the least perturbed by the obstacles. His attention was completely locked on Duke, and he didn't miss a beat as he sought out Duke's mouth again.

They stopped more than once along the way, but once they passed into the more dimly lit bedroom, Duke abandoned any pretense at niceties and grabbed Scott's tie. Coiling it around his fingers, he shoved Scott into the wall and pinned him there, extricating his other hand to fumble with Scott's belt.

"If you don't have condoms and lube, now is the time to tell me," he warned. "Because I don't want to have to stop once we start."

"Didn't you know I was a Boy Scout?" Scott slid his gaze downward to where Duke held his tie, a smile curving his already swollen mouth. "You like to play a bit rough?"

Duke followed his gaze and chuckled. "Just excited. And used to being on top." He relaxed his hand, though didn't let go of the tie. "I have no idea what you're used to, or what you're expecting will happen. I probably shouldn't have done that."

"No, no, don't apologize." Scott palmed Duke's ass, pulling him closer to grind his erection against Duke's thigh. "I quite like that side of you. And as for who tops, I'm easy either way. Whatever you want."

Right then, he just wanted James.

His fingers finally managed to open the belt, followed swiftly by the pants. The first touch of the wet tip made his breath hitch, and he crushed their mouths together again, ravenous for more kisses. He refused himself the freedom to explore, choosing instead to swirl the pre-come around and around the velvety head, but the strictness paid off in other ways, as Scott whimpered and groaned at the incessant caresses.

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Scott's hands were just as busy, but instead of driving Duke crazy with light touches, he was driving Duke crazy by avoiding any contact with skin at all. He pulled Duke's belt free first, the leather slithering against the material of his pants as it inched through the loops. After he tossed it away, Duke expected to feel searching fingers at his fly, then dipping into his pants to seek out his flushed skin. Except Scott moved his hands up Duke's body, seeking the tie that still dangled from his neck. He gave the knot a hard tug just as Duke wrapped his fingers around the head of Scott's cock. It was difficult to tell who moaned first before their mouths crashed together again.

The back of his knees trembled like a teenager's on his first real date. All the pent-up adrenaline of the past few days demanded some sort of instant release, taking over his limbs when his hands and mouth weren't moving fast enough. *This is James*, his thoughts kept whispering. James of the laughing eyes. James of the quick tongue. James of whiskey-tinged nights and warm hands and deep-seated honor that made Duke want to shout with joy at finding.

Most importantly, this was James of the driving hunger for Owen, the man who saw past the suit and the rules and the control and liked what he saw beneath. Duke burned as much from that knowledge as he did those wild, wicked kisses.

The room moved around them, though Duke wasn't aware of taking any steps. His feet seemed detached from the rest of his body—the only part of him that wasn't entirely focused on the pressure of Scott's mouth and fingers. Scott pushed Duke's shirt down his arms, struggling with the material until it was completely free. Seconds later, Duke felt the bed against the side of his leg. Proof that they had, in fact, been walking.

"So you're gonna fuck me?" Scott gasped.

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“Eventually.”

He uncurled the tie he still held to yank it over Scott’s head, slipping deeper into his pants to cup his tight balls. The fleeting touch distracted both of them while Duke worked to rid them of more clothes—his shoes, Scott’s shirt, both sets of pants. When they stood there in only underwear, he finally retracted his hand. He needed both to push James back onto the bed and cover that long muscled body with his own.

His hips jerked when Scott grabbed his ass and ground their hips together again. “I didn’t massage you long enough. You have too much muscle control left.”

“There are other ways to take care of that.” The motion of their bodies pulled the material away from his cock. The tip dragged across Duke’s stomach, wetting his skin with fresh pre-come.

Though he tingled at the delectable proof of Scott’s arousal, Duke held still, caught in his pleasure of the moment. “Is there anything you don’t jump into with both guns blazing?”

“I guess if it’s something worth doing...” Scott’s tongue darted out, sampling the skin at the base of Duke’s throat. “Then it’s worth jumping in with both guns blazing.”

His eyes fluttered shut. Blindly, he reached between their bodies and caught Scott’s cock, ignoring any attempt at subtlety or finesse as he fisted the shaft. He had every intention of burying himself inside Scott’s body, but the possibility of getting to feel the same, of the long, throbbing length in his hand easing its way into his ass, had his nerves jumping. He rarely felt the desire to bottom for any man. James was proving the exception to every rule he’d ever made for himself.

“What about you?” Scott managed to speak without actually breaking contact. Each word was punctuated with a small lick and

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the scrape of Scott's teeth. "Do you always jump in with both guns blazing?"

He shuddered at a small bite at the curve of his shoulder. The only way to mask it was to pull firmly at Scott's cock. "I didn't realize I had."

"You've got me pinned to the bed and we haven't even had our first date. Not that I'm complaining."

"You're the one who dropped the food. I thought I was just following your lead."

"Really? I never thought of you as a follower. More as somebody who likes to take charge of a situation."

With a chuckle, Duke propped himself on his knuckles, taking away the direct contact of Scott's mouth in favor of meeting his gaze. He didn't take his hand from the man's cock, though. That was his for the duration of the night, whether Scott liked it or not. "That was before I met you. Sometimes, you make me feel like I'm running to catch up."

"I'm glad you caught up with me here." Scott pushed his hand down the back of Duke's underwear, his fingertips tracing the crease of his ass. Despite his earlier desire to feel Scott's cock inside of him, he was shocked by the way his groin tightened at the barest hint of contact.

The words, *So am I*, stalled on his tongue, incapable of forming without the breath to support them. He met Scott's eyes, wondering for a fleeting moment what he might see in Duke's, before the need to taste him again overwhelmed everything else, driving his head down to lick along the long column of Scott's neck. Salt and sweat combined to detonate his taste buds. The few remaining barriers between them were too many now, and he descended inch by inch, relinquishing his hold on Scott's shaft to

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finally push the underwear out of his way.

Scott arched beneath him, gasping as Duke pushed the material off his legs. Naked, Scott looked even better than Duke had imagined. Everything about Scott made Duke want to lick him. He wanted to taste every inch of Scott's skin. He wanted the smell the musk of his sweat and arousal, and let the short curls at the base of his cock brush against his mouth. He wanted to trace around Scott's belly button. After a moment of consideration, he dragged his tongue along the seam of Scott's thigh. He immediately spread his legs wider, offering more of his sensitive skin to Duke's touch.

Duke smoothed his palms over the inside of Scott's thighs, bracing against the tight sinew as he bent farther and sampled the softer skin behind the drawn-up sac. The hairs tickled against his tongue, but better was the way Scott pushed back, a hint of how eagerly he'd respond when it was Duke's cock so near his opening instead of his mouth. Duke licked again, this time skating over his balls. He ended at the root of the shaft and turned his head to catch it lightly between his teeth.

Scott moaned, threading his fingers through Duke's hair. His hand flexed, lightly pulling on Duke's scalp. Duke increased the pressure on Scott's shaft until he cried out, then relaxed his jaw and instantly soothed the indentations with his tongue.

"Owen...I think...you're going to...make me crazy."

He'd hoped only to show Scott what he did to him, but if such a little gesture drove him that much closer to the edge, Duke had little problem with that. He mouthed a path up the length of his cock, alternating between lips and tongue along the way. Muscles tensed beneath his hands as Scott writhed against the contact, but that simply forced Duke to tighten his hold, slowing down even farther to prolong the sensations.

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“Fuck...fuck...” Scott gripped Duke’s shoulder and tried to pull him up, but he refused to budge. He wouldn’t even move an inch. Which only made Scott writhe more. Duke sensed his rising frustration, but he didn’t care. Not while his shaft throbbed against Duke’s mouth, and pre-come dripped down the length, painting his thin, pale skin. “At least let me feel your entire mouth.”

Duke pulled back, hovering over the tip so the breath from his words hit the glistening skin directly. “Everything in its time.”

“In its time? What sort of scale are you working on here?”

“Mine.” He traced around the ridge with the tip of his tongue. “I could always stop.”

“No. No, don’t stop.” Scott slid his hand down the side of Duke’s head and caressed the side of his face. “Please don’t do that.”

A line of clear fluid connected the head to Scott’s stomach. Duke shifted forward to catch it, following it to its completion to suck hard at the slick skin of the abdominal muscle. Scott’s hips snapped, temporarily unseating Duke’s grip. He pushed Scott back down, but their slightly shifted position gave him the perfect angle to nibble downward between Scott’s cock and belly, the shaft gliding across Duke’s roughened cheek all the way.

Scott tolerated the repetition of that simple act for several moments, his hips shifting each time Duke caressed his shaft with his cheek, his jaw, even the corner of his mouth. He loved the sight of Scott’s body, but he closed his eyes in bliss, enjoying the heat and texture against his skin. Not just enjoying it. Savoring it. Locking it away in his memory to be recalled on a night when he didn’t have Scott in touching distance.

That was why he didn’t see Scott move, and didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late, and he was flipped over on his

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back. His eyes flew open as Scott's weight settled on his body.

His first instinct was to buck Scott off. The heat around his hips and the gleam in Scott's eyes had him reining it in. "What happened to me not stopping?"

"Don't think of it as stopping." Scott pulled Duke's length free from his briefs, stroking him once with a tight fist. "Think of it as taking a small break."

He didn't think for a second Scott had changed his mind about who was fucking who, but the strength in his hand calmed Duke's desire to get back on top right away. The last thing he wanted was for James to be left out, though. Reaching for Scott's cock, he angled it downward and molded their lengths together, fitting his fingers over Scott's so they could stroke together.

Scott shuddered, his muscles trembling as their palms traveled from the tip to the base and back again. Scott dragged his free hand down Duke's chest, his fingers seeking out one nipple. It was already hard. Everything about Duke felt hard. His heart even beat a hard rhythm in his ears. Duke sucked his breath between his teeth when Scott pinched one nipple, increasing the pressure until pleasure flared through his entire body.

"How do you want it?" Scott asked thickly. "Do you want me to ride you?"

He hadn't considered it, but now, the image of Scott's golden body rising above him seared Duke's thoughts. "Yes," he said without pause. "I want to watch you."

The corner of Scott's mouth lifted. "I was hoping you would say that. Let me get you ready for that."

He let go of their cocks to lean for the nightstand, yanking open the top drawer and pulling out the lube and an open box of condoms. Duke was transfixed as Scott scooted back, climbing off

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his legs to strip his underwear off the rest of the way. He missed the heat, and the weight, and almost grabbed to yank him back, but the promise of what was to come kept him motionless, even refraining from touching himself.

Scott tore the condom open and rolled it swiftly down Duke's shaft. When he reached for the lube, though, Duke caught his wrist.

"Let me slick you."

Scott smiled and silently held the bottle out. Duke took it and sat up, pressing his chest to Scott's. After pouring the lube onto two fingers, he tossed the bottle aside and slipped his hand between Scott's ass, seeking out his entrance. He spread the lube across the tight ring, teasing Scott with the promise of his fingers. He expected Scott to push backward and impale himself, but he remained motionless. Waiting. Even after Duke slipped the tip of his index finger into Scott's tight channel, he held himself with a patience that Duke hadn't expected.

He could barely breathe as he pushed his finger inside, the muscles clenching around the intrusion before he pulled out again. It felt like he should say something, do something, break the spell that seemed to have settled over both of them, but whatever it was escaped him. Scott had changed all his old rules. Hell, he'd thrown them away without a modicum of respect or care. What should have pissed Duke off now intrigued him, keeping him mesmerized with the man straddling his legs as he carefully added a second finger.

"God...I can't wait to feel your cock," Scott rasped, his head dropping back as Duke pushed his fingers deeper. "I can't wait for you to fuck me."

Duke couldn't either. A part of him wanted to pull his fingers

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free and replace them with his length. But he also wanted this to be good for both of them. He wanted to slip into Scott's body without any resistance. He wanted Scott to ride him without hesitation. He rested his brow against Scott's shoulder and took a deep breath, catching the faint, heady smell of fresh sweat on Scott's skin.

He held like that, fingers moving in and out of Scott's body, tongue darting out to taste the salt tempting him with its proximity, for what felt like an eternity. His heart thumped wildly in his chest. It wanted to get the show on the road, too. Nothing would force his hand, though. Nothing would ruin what he suspected was going to be amazing for both of them.

When he finally pulled his fingers free, Duke caught the back of Scott's neck with his other hand and held him still, while he kissed a hot trail up his throat, over his jaw, to that alluring mouth. He sealed them together, moaning when Scott wrapped his arms so tightly around his back his ribs cracked.

"Now." The single hoarse word didn't even sound like him. "Need you now, James."

"I think that's the best thing you've ever said to me."

Duke was prepared to fall to his back, but Scott held him upright with one arm while he used his other hand to guide Duke's shaft into his slick hole. The head pushed against Scott's flesh, thicker than his entrance. They were locked together like that for a long beat, and Duke wondered if either of them would ever move. Then Scott eased back, forcing Duke's thick crown into his channel. Duke moaned as Scott clenched around him, his body already electrified by the promise of being completely sheathed.

He had been wrong. Time stopped now, not earlier. The sound that came from his throat stretched longer and longer, incapable of ceasing until the torment of waiting for Scott to stop moving

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ended. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he wondered if he should have taken longer with James, if he should have been more careful, more attentive in preparing him for this. But Scott wouldn't have guided him in if he hadn't been ready. He wouldn't be shaking in his arms now, his breath like fire against Duke's neck, if he didn't want this just as badly.

They both sighed when the firm flesh of Scott's ass met Duke's hard thighs. Duke ran his free hand up and down Scott's back, and turned his head to kiss the soft skin behind his ear.

"You feel so good," he breathed.

"So do you." Scott turned his head quickly, catching Duke's mouth in a hard kiss as his muscles tightened around Duke. "Better than I imagined." Scott kissed him again. "And I have a good imagination."

So did Duke, and he hadn't even dreamed of anything feeling as good as Scott did. The heat scorched him. Burned him everywhere they touched. He felt every breath, every beat of Scott's heart, every flutter of his muscles. But all those sensations disappeared—were completely overwhelmed—as soon as Scott started moving.

He held on more tightly than he would have anticipated needing to. Even sitting down, his legs shook, tremors that worsened with each rise and fall of Scott's body. He squeezed around Duke's cock every time he was fully seated, while his velvety walls seemed to cling to him when he pulled away. Through it all, Scott never abandoned his mouth, swallowing him down as if he had no intention of ever letting him go.

Both of Duke's hands went to Scott's ass, his fingers digging into each cheek. It was more of an attempt to brace himself, because he had no hope of controlling Scott. None. The other man

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would move—or wouldn't move—at his own pace. It was the price Duke had to pay for letting Scott ride him, but he wouldn't switch positions for anything. Especially when Scott started to move faster, his cock sliding against Duke's stomach.

He was not a vocal lover. Now, with Scott refusing to yield an ounce of extra breath with his fervent kisses, he had lost any hope of ever finding his voice again. All he was capable of were the long, drawn-out groans that reverberated through both of their bodies, the occasional grunt when Scott squeezed around his cock, the random growl when the pleasure sliced through him at new and raw angles. Sweat coated their skin, dripping from his hair to tickle at his lip, but then James would lick it away and devour his mouth all over again, seemingly invigorated by each taste.

“Owen...”

It sounded more like a moan than an actual word. It didn't have the shape of the word, and Scott's mouth was still mostly attached to his, but Duke understood.

He fell backward—or maybe he was pushed. Duke didn't know, and it didn't matter. Especially since Scott didn't miss a beat. His body still moved in the same slow, maddening, intoxicating, perfect rhythm. But now he was sliding down Duke at a new angle, gripping his length with a new strength.

His fingers itched to touch even more than he already was. Though letting go of Scott's ass was agony, he did so to slither a way between their bodies and find the man's trapped cock. Pre-come coated both of them. He would have loved to wipe it across his palm and eat it away, but that would mean abandoning Scott's mouth and he wasn't quite ready for that. Next time. Because there would be a next time. And a time after that, and if his cock hadn't fallen off yet at that point, a time after that again.

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For now, he fisted the hot shaft and pulled in the same tempo Scott chose.

Two could play this game of exquisite torture.

Everything about Scott tightened. His walls clamped down around Duke's length. His back went rigid. The muscles in his abdomen trembled each time Duke scraped his knuckles across Scott's stomach. He even whimpered, a sound that Duke caught with his mouth and echoed as the pressure around his cock increased. The tension didn't drain from him, but he did move a little faster, the friction sending a fresh flurry of sparks down his spine.

He wouldn't last. Not at this rate. He was more than a little surprised he'd lasted this long already. But damned if he was going to come first, not with Scott teetering on the edge of his orgasm. He wanted to feel that hot come splash across his hands and stomach. He wanted to smell it, to taste it, to hear Scott come undone around him.

So he tightened his grip. Pulled faster, harder, let his nails scrape across skin whenever he could. And started meeting each slam of Scott's hips with a driving thrust of his own.

Scott broke away from his mouth for what felt like the first time of the night. His eyes flashed, his face flushed, his brows dotted with sweat. Duke almost protested the loss of contact, but he couldn't speak. Not when Scott sat up completely, his golden body rising above Duke's, and slammed down on Duke's length. He didn't loosen his grip, and his fingers flexed instinctually. Scott's back arched, and he choked out a shout as his cock jerked in Duke's hand, long strings of come erupting from him.

The first splatter across his skin triggered his release. Duke drove upward one final time, his entire body stiffening, and

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slammed his head back into the pillow. He shot once, twice, too many times to count as Scott's passage squeezed around him with the same swift shivers that wracked the rest of his body.

"James..." He tugged at Scott, relieved when he fell forward without hesitation. He sought out his mouth. Already, he missed the taste of him.

Scott sighed into the kiss, following Duke's lead without trying to take control. Scott's frame shook with the occasional aftershock, and Duke didn't know if he'd ever stop trembling.

"God, Owen...I felt like I was waiting forever for this." He kissed the corner of Duke's mouth. "It was worth it."

"Yes, it was." It was worth even more. Duke thought he would sacrifice almost anything to ensure he got it again. "I can't...I don't..." He chuckled, burying his face in Scott's neck. He couldn't even speak, apparently.

"When I can move...if I ever can...I'll go get your dinner. Not going to let you out of bed."

"Not even for a shower?"

"In the morning."

He nipped at the sweaty skin. "I could make it worth your while."

Scott rolled to his side without untangling himself from Duke. "When you say it like that, I think I can be convinced."

Duke bent to skim another kiss across Scott's swollen lips, its unexpected tenderness feeling more right than anything else all day. "It'll be my pleasure."

CHAPTER 13

James Scott had never been more exhausted. He felt it all the way down to his bones. It was a pleasant sort of exhaustion. The kind that made his limbs heavy, and his mind cloudy. Except, instead of drifting in a sweet fog, his brain was working overtime. Thinking about Hector and Sammy Jenkins. About the man who connected them both. A voice in the back of his mind told him he was grasping at straws. Just because he lost a single case didn't mean there was a massive conspiracy. It meant the jury had weighed the evidence and found in the state's favor. It was bound to happen sometime, even when he had done his best work.

It didn't mean District Attorney Horan was so thoroughly corrupt that even cases he didn't try personally were tainted with the rot.

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But it did mean that every single case Horan's office had prosecuted in the past six years would be thrown out. If Horan was indeed guilty of something—as he seemed to be. That was a reality Scott wasn't sure he could face.

"Haven't I worn you out yet?" Duke's voice was low and harsh. Like he had a slightly sore throat.

"Physically? Yes. Very much so. But mentally..."

The mattress shifted beneath him. Duke's arm came to rest, warm and heavy, over his waist. "Tackle the Jenkins problem tomorrow at work. You're supposed to be relaxing right now."

"It's not just that. It's Hector, too. And I'm stressed enough that if I let my guard down, I'll have about a thousand other things shouting for my attention."

"There's a difference now, though. You don't have to shoulder all this yourself. I'm not walking away from the case."

Scott almost cracked a joke about neither of them walking anywhere for awhile, but it died in his mouth. He wasn't in a very jocular mood. "I know that. You never told me what you were up to earlier today."

"No, I didn't. I didn't want to stress you out even more."

"Well, now you pretty much have to tell me. Otherwise, I'll stay up all night trying to figure out what could possibly stress me more."

Duke's arm tightened, pulling Scott closer, and his mouth skimmed across Scott's bare shoulder. "I went to Woodson to interview Chandra Cunningham about Tana Mayfield. She didn't really give me a whole lot more to work with, but I talked to one of the men there, too. Or tried to, anyway. He pegged me for a cop and bolted, but not before letting me know Horan and his men are regular visitors out there."

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“What the hell is Horan doing going there?”

“Asking questions. Recruiting rats. I thought for a while there that maybe Horan tried recruiting Young, and Young balked. That that’s why he’s playing hardball with Young. But if Tana’s involved, that can’t be it. Or at least, that can’t be all of it.”

“No, it’s not all of it. You heard the tape. Horan thinks Hector is holding something. He claims he has no idea what that something is, though, and I believe him.”

“Yeah. I do, too. He sounded pretty vehement.” Silence lapsed for a moment, filled only with the random brush of Duke’s mouth across his skin, the occasional slide of his fingertips across Scott’s side. “What if Horan tried recruiting Tana? She could have been gathering evidence for him just as easily as any of the men.”

“I don’t know. That doesn’t feel right to me. Tana would only be able to gather evidence against the people she interacted with while she was there. Horan wouldn’t be interested in the people at the halfway house, right? He’d have bigger fish to fry. Fish that Tana wouldn’t be in contact with.”

“Considering how new some of the cars I saw were, I’m not so sure there isn’t at least a couple big fish in that pond.”

“Horan isn’t threatening Hector’s life just because he wanted to catch some fence or a dealer at the halfway house. There are easier ways to do that.”

“Did you get a chance to look for any possible connections between Tana and Horan before you got called into court?”

“No. Do you think we’d find any besides Hector and Woodson?”

“We won’t know until we try. And that’s clearly your link. We can’t afford to turn our back on it.”

“It’s part of the link, no doubt. But I think there’s something

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more pressing than that. We've got to figure out what Horan thinks Hector is holding, and we've got to figure out where it actually is."

"And how do you propose finding that out without knowing what the link between them is?" His arm tightened again. "Look. I know you're worried about Hector. I know you want him out of there. But sometimes, charging at the problem is not necessarily the best way to solve it."

"I don't need to know exactly how Tana Mayfield and DA Horan met to know that she was clearly in possession of something he needs. Something that wasn't in her apartment at the time of her death." Scott exhaled. "Have you spoken to anybody at her dance studio?"

"Not yet. I got done at Woodson and headed straight for you."

"I think you should do that tomorrow." Scott glanced over to the clock. "Well, technically, today. I think we might need a fuller picture of Tana Mayfield."

"What are you going to do?"

"For Hector? I...I honestly don't know. I have a friend in the DA's office who is always willing to meet for a drink. I could pick his brain, see what he knows."

"Did you get around to calling someone about security today?"

"No. Sorry. I planned to do it over the lunch I never had the chance to take. But you're not going to let anything happen to me, right?"

The bed shifted again, Duke's warm weight disappearing. A moment later, the lamp on the nightstand came on, revealing Duke's frown. "If Horan is the one behind all this, you can't take your safety this lightly, James. I'll be there when I can, but we both have jobs to do."

Duke was not only very serious, he was right. Scott knew he

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couldn't take the situation lightly, and he shouldn't have been so cavalier about arranging for security. Unfortunately, something about the shape of Duke's frown made Scott want to kiss it. How had he only known this man for three days? How was that even possible?

"You're right. I know you are." Scott offered a reassuring smile. "I'll see to it first thing in the morning."

But Duke didn't seem placated. "Will you let me arrange something?"

"You don't trust me to do it?"

"I don't trust Horan and how far he can reach. I've been training some very talented cadets this year. I'd like to assign one to tail you. Just to keep an eye out from a distance. It doesn't have to replace what you do. In fact, it's probably better if we have both layers of protection."

Scott grinned. "You're not using this as an excuse to spy on me, are you?"

The frown smoothed. "You're not giving me a reason to spy on you, are you?"

"Before I can answer that, I need to know just how jealous you tend to be."

"I don't get jealous. It's a waste of time." His mouth twitched. "I get even."

The urge to kiss him returned, but with more strength. "I guess that means I better be on my best behavior. I don't mind at all if you want to assign a cadet to tail me."

Duke finally seemed to relax, and twisted again for the light to blanket them in darkness. "I'll give them explicit instructions not to interfere with your routine unless they absolutely have to." His weight returned, enveloping Scott more effectively than the dark.

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Kisses rained across his shoulder, climbing upward to his neck. "Occasionally, they even listen to me."

"I don't mind the occasional interruption to my routine. For example, I don't usually have guests over on weeknights."

"I think these might qualify as extenuating circumstances."

"You've got a point there." He could tell by the puff of breath on his ear how close Duke's mouth was to his. Without giving it a second thought, he turned his head and caught the other man's mouth. Every time he kissed Duke, it was a delightful surprise. He wondered if he would eventually grow tired of it. Or if he would have the chance to grow tired of it. "You going to be my guest tomorrow night, too?"

Duke cupped the back of his neck, working gently at the muscles. "I wouldn't presume. But it would be easier to protect you if I'm in the same place."

Scott skimmed his palm down Duke's side and came to a rest at his hip. "I'll call you tomorrow when I'm done with my meeting. Hopefully, there will be something to celebrate."

"You can call me even if you don't have a reason to celebrate, you know. We don't...this doesn't have to be something that just happens because of our coinciding cases."

"That's good." Scott pulled him closer. He liked the way they fit together, and the warmth of Duke's leg as he draped it over Scott's. "But I just meant that I hope tomorrow I have reason to be in a better mood. Which is probably far too optimistic."

"If you're not in a good mood, I'll fix it with another massage." His soft chuckle vibrated through Scott's cheek. "I've just given you the excuse you're going to use to get one, haven't I?"

"Absolutely. No matter how well things go tomorrow, I'm going to act like I'm in a rotten mood. You've already got me

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hooked on your massages.”

A kiss brushed across his temple. “I’m glad you let me come home with you tonight. I’m not sure how happy I would’ve been if you’d found a way to shake me.”

“I don’t think I could find a way to shake you. Even if I wanted to. Which I don’t, by the way.”

He felt Duke’s smile, and the warmth of his mouth, and his cock began to stir again. The alarm would go off in a few hours, but he knew he wasn’t sleeping any time soon. And Scott was a man who knew how to make the most of any situation. He rolled Duke to his back and claimed his mouth, losing himself in Duke’s enthusiastic response.

CHAPTER 14

Discovering Horan's interest in Young, and more specifically, whatever he thought Tana had given him, gave Duke renewed focus. Scott might be obsessed with finding out what the item was, but Duke was convinced the only way to discover it was to find whatever link tied the DA and the dancer together. Of course, walking up to Horan and asking point-blank was out of the question. That would garner undue notice. Duke had to be far more subtle about it, though at least he had his investigation to hide behind as reason to go digging around in Tana's history.

He would have loved to go back to Woodson, but after the events of yesterday, he knew it was too soon. Horan might catch wind of it, and there really was no specific reason for him to follow up there. He could, however, call Chandra Cunningham and get a

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list of her current residents to cross-reference with all recent cases to go through the DA's office, which turned out to be the first thing checked off his to do list that morning. She took his email address and promised to get the information to him by that afternoon, though she seemed less than thrilled with the continued prying.

It was almost nine by that point, and others were trickling into the precinct. Duke caught Captain Sager's eye when he walked in, but other than a cursory nod, Sager made no attempt to initiate contact. One of the other detectives glanced curiously at Duke when Sager continued walking. Duke buried his attention in his computer. Let the others notice he wasn't quite the golden child at the moment. He didn't care about their speculation. At least, not that much.

Thinking of Sager made him think about Saucedo. He'd made sure Duke found out about the missing interviews; that might mean he had access to other information that could save Duke a lot of legwork. Had Saucedo known about the possible link to Horan? Did Sager? It was possible Saucedo had just known the whole case was hinky, and not known specifics. He wouldn't know until he asked.

A quick request got him Saucedo's personal information. He debated between calling and stopping in unannounced. A call would give Saucedo a heads-up. He might run then. But stopping in and not finding him home would waste precious time. Saucedo lived in Redwood City. If he wasn't there, that was two hours lost, driving down there and back.

Duke picked up the phone. He was willing to take the risk that a man who felt guilty enough to share the missing interviews would be honorable enough to stick around for a few more questions.

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The phone rang six times, then clicked over to voicemail. Duke disconnected and redialed, listening to the same six rings, the same recorded message. This time, he left a terse message with his cell number instead of the precinct's. He was discomfited when he hung up the second time. Why was a man just released from the hospital not home? A call to Saucedo's cell provided the same result. Duke left a message there, too, just in case.

His email pinged at him, distracting him for a moment to check it out on the off-chance Chandra had come through fast for him. She hadn't. The message was just a note from the academy, asking for the clarification on some of the last set of training results he'd sent in. The email reminded him that he needed to make arrangements for Scott like he'd promised, and he opened his cadet file, flipping through it until he found the application he wanted.

This phone call was answered on the first ring.

"Mr. Finch. This is Detective Duke."

Finch's sharp intake of breath was quickly covered. "Detective. Hi. I didn't..." He stopped and took another breath. "Hi."

Unbidden, Duke smiled. "Relax, Finch. You're not in trouble."

"Oh, no, I didn't think, well, okay, I thought it, but..." His voice trailed off. Any other cadet, and Duke would have prolonged the agony. He liked this one too much—and needed him, frankly—to fuck around with his head.

"Are you available for a meeting this morning? I'd like to discuss the possibility of a short-term assignment for you."

"What? Are you kidding? What kind of assignment? Wait. This isn't because of what happened with Abbott, is it?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. I need someone I can rely on for some simple surveillance. I can't promise you credit for it, though."

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“Why?”

Duke ignored the question. “Can you make the meeting?”

Thank God, the kid could take a hint. “Yes, sir. Just tell me when and where.”

Duke gave him the address of a diner near the Civic Center. “I’ll see you there at ten-thirty.”

“Yes, sir.” He paused. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate the faith you have in me.”

“You haven’t heard the assignment yet.” But he disconnected feeling better than when he’d dialed. Finch had the makings of a good cop if he learned a little more self-control. This would be good training for him, and, hopefully, he wouldn’t have to do anything more stressful than jog a little faster to try and keep up with Scott when James went into hyperdrive.

Ninety minutes gave him plenty of time to start looking into Tana’s associations with the San Francisco Ballet. The War Memorial Opera House, one of the most beautiful buildings in the city in his opinion, was located across from City Hall. He didn’t know for sure if the company conducted business there off-season, or if anybody would even be around at this time of the morning, but the school was located right across the street. He could get into one, if not the other.

Parking at the Civic Center turned out to be relatively easy, and Duke walked quickly along McAllister, ignoring the rear of City Hall looming to his left, as he headed for the ballet building. The weather was cooler today, the sky still gloomy, but in spite of the serious nature of his morning, his spirits were high. He’d woken up with James nestled firmly in his arms, which, in and of itself, was reason to be a good mood. He couldn’t remember the last partner he’d had who didn’t complain about being smothered while they

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slept. Scott seemed to not only not care about Duke's predilection for physical contact in bed, but actually enjoyed it, burrowing deeper into his body whenever he possibly could.

The whole night had been both surprising and not. They'd finally acted on their attraction—which was the part that Duke actually understood. But the way Scott had relaxed in his presence, responding to his determination and then seemingly encouraging even more...that was the part that left Duke's thoughts whirling in a million directions, when he allowed himself the luxury of considering it. Every moment they spent together was one step closer to a comfort level that left him both breathless and calm, an ease and understanding that came from more than their passion for this case. Scott had him weighing risks he would have dismissed outright before, and he did so without seemingly putting any effort into it. It was as if Duke voluntarily handed over the reins of his life and said, "Go ahead, you drive for a while."

The most unsettling part of it was not truly feeling like he'd lost an ounce of control at all.

His destination arrived in swift order, and he stepped into the warm building, grateful for the reprieve from his disordered thoughts. The silence echoed around him, his steps booming in the empty foyer. He cast a measured eye around, drinking in the austere details. Tana Mayfield had spent most of her summer hours here. She'd had friends. Colleagues. This was the last time anyone other than the killer had seen her alive. Nobody connected with the ballet company had been implicated in any way in her disappearance, though the fact that Saucedo had conducted the initial interviews didn't necessarily clear the company of all potential blame.

A woman scurried from a nearby room, a frown drawing her

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penciled-in brows together. She was one of the tiniest women he had ever encountered, both in height and weight, and the bones in her face and hands were practically visible beneath her translucent skin. When she came to a stop in front of him, she barely reached the middle of his chest and had to tilt her head back to glare up at him.

“We’re not open to the public,” she snapped. This close, it was easier to tell her age. Late fifties, if he was kind. Late sixties if he wasn’t. “I must ask you to leave.”

“I’m Detective Owen Duke, ma’am.” Reaching into his jacket, he extracted his badge for her to see. “I’m here to talk about Tana Mayfield.”

Mention of Tana’s name hardened the woman’s features even further, her eyes flashing before a brittle mask fell into place. She took a step back, shoulders stiffening.

“I thought we were done with all that,” she said. “What else could you possibly need to know?”

“Did you know Ms. Mayfield?”

“Everybody knew Tana. She made sure of that.”

This was the first person he’d interviewed who had had less than the most glowing things to say about Tana. Duke maintained a neutral façade as he slipped his badge back into his inner pocket. “What is your name, ma’am?”

She looked even less pleased at having to provide one. “Delphine Kunz.”

“And what’s your position here?”

“I run the office.”

“Oh, so you worked with Ms. Mayfield.”

“Yes.”

He waited for her to elaborate, but when several seconds

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passed, he realized she wasn't going to unless he pushed her. "Are you the one who hired her?"

Ms. Kunz snorted, an indelicate sound bigger than her. "If I'd had my way, she wouldn't even have been in the Corps."

"Really? It was my understanding she was quite talented."

"Talented at getting what she wanted, perhaps. And she wanted to dance."

"If you didn't hire her, how did she get the position working with the school?" Working for the school was considered an honor. It had been seen as a stepping stone out of the Corps for Tana. He'd never questioned that she might not deserve it, though he couldn't dismiss the fact that Ms. Kunz might hold some sort of personal grudge against the younger woman.

"The same way she got her position in the Corps. Through her parents' money." A sly gleam appeared in her eyes. "She thought she was smart, that one. But eventually she would have learned that money only gets you so far in this company. Sooner or later, you need the talent to back it up."

The more she spoke, the more inclined Duke was to believe it was a personal grudge. Maybe she loathed someone as beautiful and nice as Tana had risen so quickly within the ranks, or maybe there was someone else who'd been sideswiped by Tana's ascendance. Either way, there was no indication Tana had been anything but talented or deserving of the recognition she'd received.

"Were you working the day she disappeared?"

Ms. Kunz rolled her eyes at what she obviously thought was an inane query. "Of course, I was. It was the last day. There was a lot to be done."

"Did she mention anything about her plans for that night?"

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Perhaps she had a personal celebration planned.”

“If she did, she wouldn’t have told me. All I know is the work she left behind that I had to finish up.”

Duke frowned. “I thought it was the last day.”

“It was. You think just because the classes are over, there isn’t more to do?” Shaking her head, she turned on her heel and marched back into the office from which she’d emerged. Duke followed as discreetly as he could. “We were in the middle of reorganizing the sponsor lists. Weeding out the dead ones, sourcing new leads.”

“Ms. Mayfield was helping you with that?”

“She was the one that actually suggested it.” The office was neat and tidy as he would have expected for Ms. Kunz. The smaller of the two desks had been stripped bare, but she went straight for the larger and sat down in the black leather chair behind it, engulfed by its frame. “It was the only decent suggestion she made the entire term. With the economy the way it is, we couldn’t afford to lose anybody willing to help fund the company. And whatever my opinion of her personally, Tana was a natural recruit. People liked her, but then again, most people are fairly stupid, especially around a pretty young girl.”

The list of potential sponsors added an entirely new dimension to the case, opening up who she might have been in contact with by... “How large is the list?”

“See for yourself.”

She pulled out a three-ring binder and slid it across her desk. Duke picked it up and flipped it open, not terribly surprised to see the order within. The folder was divided into three categories—active, dead, and pending. Lists of names and contact information, complete with a section for comments, filled page after page. On a

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whim, he thumbed straight to the H's in each one.

He found what he was looking for in the active section.

Bruce Horan. Active since '96. Mother danced in Corps when she was younger.

So, Tana knew Horan through the company, or at least, knew of Horan. It didn't help figure out what she could have that he wanted, though at least they knew the two were in direct contact with each other.

Ms. Kunz watched him with narrowed eyes, prompting him to hand back the binder before she got suspicious. He would love to have a copy of it, but there was no way he could get that without direct cause. Some of it, though, had to be a matter of public record. And he knew enough now to help steer James along with whatever he might learn.

"Did Ms. Mayfield have a lot of face-to-face contact with the various sponsors, or was it mostly phone work?"

"It varied. Depending on who they were and how much they were likely to donate." Her frown deepened. "What does this have to do with Tana's murder? That man you arrested didn't have anything to do with us."

"No, he doesn't, but he's also been exonerated. We're still searching for the killer."

Her pale skin turned ashen, her jaw falling slack. "That means...you think it has something to do with the company?" She bolted to her feet, her flying hand sending a stack of papers skittering to the floor. She immediately crouched to pick them up, squaring the corners as she worked. "But she left here. We saw her go."

Duke bent down to help. "I'm just following every possible lead, ma'am. There's nothing for you to worry about."

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“Until I get pulled out of the bay, too.” She snapped back with the sheaf of papers in hand, replacing them exactly where they’d originally rested on the desk. “How long will it take you to find my body?”

She was too agitated now to do him much good. Duke backed toward the open door, glancing out into the deserted foyer. “Is there anyone else present in the building I can speak with, ma’am?”

“Not now. They’ll be in after lunch. One o’clock.”

He thanked her, making the promise to return later that day. His thoughts were preoccupied as he exited, turning over the various permutations on how Horan and Tana might have interacted. An affair? She was young and pretty. She could have been taken in by Horan’s power and position.

If she hadn’t been a dancer, he might have thought she had other aspirations. The DA had a lot of political power in town. Anyone else might have wanted an intern position, or even a job.

The only problem with any of that was the fact Horan wanted something of Tana’s, not the other way around. What could a young, no-name ballerina have that someone of Horan’s position could possibly want?

Duke wandered into Sam’s Diner without otherwise paying too much attention to his surroundings. Only one of the booths was occupied, and he slid onto a red vinyl bench seat in the rear of the narrow restaurant, facing the street. He ordered a coffee and pulled out his notepad. He had plenty of time to organize more of his ideas before Finch arrived. Perhaps writing them down would show them in a light he hadn’t yet considered.

Raised voices filtered from the front of the building. He glanced up in mid-scribble, his pen pausing over the page. Two

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men stood just inside the doors, unkempt, agitated, both towering over the small Hispanic hostess. She had her back to the restaurant, hands on her hips as she faced off with them, but Duke's eye was caught by the other patron, another young man, sliding from the booth. His windbreaker caught on his hip as he stood. A gun was tucked into the back of his jeans.

His attention was focused on the doorway. Was he trying to help? Duke didn't know. Then, the diner patron looked over the hostess's head to smirk at one of the pair arguing with her.

Yeah, he was trying to help. Just not her.

So. Three of them. At least one armed.

Slowly, Duke set down his pen.

CHAPTER 15

Ben Malone was a beautiful man. When he walked into a room, everybody paused to take a second look. His was the sort of beauty that transcended things like gender or sexual preference. Scott would never forget the first time he saw Ben. They were at an arraignment, and Scott was convinced that Horan had sent the young assistant DA just to fuck with Scott's head. It wasn't as though his sexual preferences was a state secret. Most people who knew James Scott knew he was gay. Why not use that against him by sending somebody with devastating blue eyes, a full mouth, and perfect, broad shoulders?

When Ben had opened his mouth, Scott realized that he had more going for him than just his looks.

After their first night together, Scott realized that, while they

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were great in bed, he would probably be prosecuted for murder himself if they had to spend more than twenty-four hours together.

Ben may or may not have had the same epiphany about Scott. He was always happy to meet Scott for drinks, always happy to stay the night, and never even hinted that he wanted more. As far as Scott could tell, they had a perfectly satisfying, equitable arrangement.

Except, when Ben knocked on his door, Scott didn't feel the familiar flutter of anticipation in his stomach. Not even when Ben flashed him a perfect smile, gripped the back of Scott's neck, and pressed their mouths together in an enthusiastic kiss. Scott parted his lips before he had the chance to think about it, allowing Ben entrance. The taste and shape of Ben's mouth was more than familiar. It occurred to him that he could just give in to the caress for a few moments—and if he did, he would completely forget about why he had called Ben in the first place.

Scott took him by the shoulder and gently pushed him back until Ben had no choice but to break away. "I thought you weren't going to call me again. Especially after you cancelled our dinner date the other night."

"You really thought I wouldn't call you again?"

Ben grinned. "No, not really. Do you have anything to drink around here?"

"I might. Take a load off."

"Thanks." Ben managed to steal another quick kiss before falling back on the couch, casually crossing one leg over the other. "Actually, I had hoped you would call last night."

"Why?"

"The Jenkins verdict."

"Did you want to gloat?"

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Ben snorted. "I wouldn't do that. I know how hard you were working on the case. I know how hard that battle was."

"The battle isn't over yet."

"I know. But...despite the appeals process, you know how rare it is for a murder case to be overturned."

"It's rare, but it's not impossible." Scott took his best whiskey down from the cupboard. There were several ways to loosen Ben's tongue. With the memory of waking up in Duke's arms still so vivid, Scott decided to use his most expensive, most potent booze, rather than his own tongue.

"If anybody in this city can do it, I'm sure it's you."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence." Scott very carefully poured the drink, then thoughtlessly licked a drop of liquid from his thumb. He glanced up and Ben was staring at him. Scott couldn't help his small smile. Ben's blue eyes were also highly expressive. He couldn't keep his emotions to himself, especially when they were as powerful as desire.

"You deserve it. I can't think of any other defense attorney in the city who gets Horan worked into such a tizzy."

Scott's pulse jumped, but he kept his features carefully schooled. Especially since Ben was still staring at him as he approached. He passed the tumbler over to the other man, and their fingers brushed together. It was not an accidental touch. There was nothing casual about it. And there was nothing friendly about the way Ben gazed at him.

"What does that mean?"

"What? You're saying you don't know?"

"That is what I'm saying." Scott pointedly chose a chair just out of Ben's touching distance. He wasn't above flirting with the man, but he didn't intend to be a cocktease.

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"I don't believe it."

"Why not?"

"You know exactly the sort of effect you have on people. That's why you're so good in a courtroom. You can work the jury, the judge, the other attorneys, and every spectator in the room."

"Knowing how to work the jury isn't the same as putting the DA's office in the tizzy."

The corner of Ben's mouth lifted. "They thought Sammy Jenkins would be open-and-shut, you know? The man had a shoot-out with the police."

"Standoff."

"What?"

"It was a standoff. Not a shoot-out. Nobody fired any shots."

Ben waved his hand dismissively. "It doesn't matter. They had the evidence, the means, the motive...and one hell of a shot on the six o'clock evening news. This was supposed to be open-and-shut."

Scott hadn't called Ben over to discuss Sammy Jenkins. When he woke that morning, the heavy cloud of despair had lifted. It was completely gone. He thought it had everything to do with Duke, but not just because they spent most of the night wrapped around each other, buried in each other. He'd still called Monica and said he'd be working from home, but his confidence wasn't an act. The day before, he had thought he lost Jenkins completely. Now he was certain the conviction was only temporary.

"It looks like it was open-and-shut."

Ben shook his head. "No, I mean, open-and-shut. Not dragging out for over two months. And I have the feeling that you could have made it go for three or four if you really put your mind to it."

"You flatter me."

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“What are you doing all the way over there anyway?”

“Trying to have a conversation.”

“Since when are you interested in my mind?”

“Who says I am? I want to hear more about me.”

“So you like it when I flatter you?”

“Always have.”

“Then allow me to continue.” Ben sipped his drink and nodded at Scott, his eyes still sparkling. “The scuttlebutt around the office is that Horan is targeting you personally.”

“What? Targeting me for what?”

“He always wants to win, you know. He wouldn’t be so good if he didn’t have that...killer’s instinct. But the way he’s been talking...I just feel like the Young case is a lot more personal than it should be. Like he’s out to pay you back personally.”

“And I thought you were flattering me before.”

“I was hoping you could tell me what you’ve done to him.”

Scott shook his head. “I haven’t done anything. Just completely demolished whatever shaky case he was trying to build against Young.”

“But you’re still working his case now, right? Still *pro bono*?”

“Yes. Because he’s still in jail.”

“Except, he’s definitely guilty this time.”

Scott arched his brow. “And you definitely know this, how?”

“This is the classic locked door mystery. Except that it’s not too much of a mystery, and there aren’t any other suspects.”

“Another open-and-shut case, then?”

“If it’s not, it’s only because you have the ability to complicate matters.”

“If your bosses are so annoyed with me, why did you agree to come over?”

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Ben set his empty glass aside and leaned forward. “Well, you’re forbidden now, aren’t you? Before if anybody found out about our little trysts, I’d get a slap on the wrist and a reminder that I need to behave.”

“But now the stakes are a little bit higher?”

“It’s more exciting.”

Scott sipped from his glass. He still had more than half of his drink left. He was taking it in slowly, savoring it. Keeping his wits about him. If Ben did start talking, Scott didn’t want to be too far gone to pay attention.

“Not to mention the fact that you can pump me for information. And maybe even make yourself the hero of the office.”

“There’s the chance you could be pumping me for information.” Ben shrugged and stood. “Not that I mind.”

“Because you’re not talking?”

“I’ll talk.” He straddled Scott’s thighs and settled on his lap. His erection pressed against Scott’s stomach in a silent invitation. “Just tell me what you want to know. As long as you make it worth my while.”

“You must think I fell off the turnip truck yesterday,” Scott said, gripping the arms of the chair. “Or maybe you don’t expect me to believe you.”

“It’s worth a shot.”

“Tell me how Horan knows Tana Mayfield.”

Ben frowned, his eyebrows coming together just above his nose. “What? He didn’t know Tana Mayfield.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I have sources that tell me differently.”

“If he knew her, he wouldn’t be on the case,” Ben pointed out

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reasonably.

"It's up to him to recuse himself. What if he didn't want anybody to know that he knows her."

"No...no..." Ben shook his head. "That doesn't even...no."

"Maybe he was dating her?" Scott tried.

"I already told you that he didn't know her. I know Horan. He would not let himself be involved in a case where he has a personal investment."

"Really?" It might have struck Scott strange that he was having this sort of conversation with a man on his lap. But after the week he had, nothing struck him as strange. In fact, weird little moments like this were becoming completely commonplace.

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you don't believe me."

"I don't."

"He doesn't...didn't...know her."

"He took a personal interest in the case though, didn't he?"

Ben shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. "She was young, she was beautiful, and she came from a fairly prominent family. This is the sort of face that hits headlines and stays there. When the next election comes up, he's going to want something like this on his record. Putting somebody like Sammy Jenkins and Hector Young away in the same year? That's a hell of a record."

"Except he didn't try the Jenkins case, did he?"

"It still counts as a win for him."

"Sure it does. But so would Young's conviction if he had given the case to you."

"No. This is ridiculous. I thought it was funny you had him in such a tizzy. I didn't think you'd be freaking out, too."

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"I'm not. I'm just curious."

"Curious. Right. Well, there's nothing to be curious about. Because there's nothing there."

"If you say so," Scott said mildly. He had no trouble believing that Ben was completely sincere. He doubted Ben knew about Horan's regular visits to the jail to chat with Hector. And he was completely sure that Ben didn't know about the tampered evidence, the blackmail, or the death threats.

"You're talking about violating professional ethics..."

"I know what I'm talking about."

"But you're not going to...take it back? Apologize?"

"Take it back? What is this? Grade school?"

Ben scowled and pushed himself from Scott's lap. He wasn't looking at Scott with barely disguised hunger anymore. In fact, for the first time since Scott met the man, he looked genuinely agitated.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Did I hit a nerve?" Scott asked, standing as well. He didn't want Ben to leave. Not yet. He wasn't sure what he could do to make him stay, though. Short of distracting him.

"You can't just insult my boss with very serious...serious...implications and act like I'm the one with the problem for being upset."

"Insult your boss? All I asked is how he knew Tana Mayfield. And in fact, I know he knew her."

"How?"

"He told my client."

Ben stared at him. "Young? Hector Young told you that and you believe him?"

"Why shouldn't I? He knew Tana. Knew who she associated

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with. Who she talked about.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.”

“You don’t have to go. I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“It’s just...”

“I did hit a nerve?” Scott asked softly.

Ben opened his mouth, and every instinct Scott possessed told him he was going to get the answer he was waiting for. Ben might not know the specifics of the Young case, but he knew *something* about Horan. Something that was bugging him. Something he knew he shouldn’t talk about but he couldn’t stop thinking about.

Before Ben could actually reveal that something, Scott’s phone rang. He would have ignored it but it was the number he had already assigned to Duke.

“I have to take this,” Scott said apologetically.

“Yeah. Fine.”

Scott hoped whatever Duke had to say was good. “Hey. Wasn’t expecting to hear from you so early.”

A voice cleared. “Um, Mr. Scott?”

Scott frowned. “Yes. Who is this?”

“My name is Garrett Finch. I’m a cadet at the academy. Detective Duke asked me to call you.”

“Why? Where is he?” Scott’s tone was sharper than it needed to be, but he wanted the young man to cut to the chase.

“We’re at Saint Francis Memorial. Detective Duke got shot late this morning.”

Scott’s heart thumped painfully in his chest. *Shot. Shot. Shot late this morning. Shot.* “Is he...is he okay? What happened?”

“He stopped a robbery attempt. He’s okay, but he asked me to call you to see if you could come down here. He wanted us to

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meet, and he said he had some things to discuss with you. He wouldn't tell me what and, honestly, I wasn't going to push it by asking."

Duke wanted to talk to him. Duke had information to give him. Which meant that Duke wasn't really hurt, right? Scott couldn't be sure about that. Duke seemed like the sort of man who would have work on his mind even if he were barely holding on. That thought was not particularly comforting.

"Tell him I'll be right there. Does he need anything?"

"Not that I know, but he wouldn't ask for it anyway, I don't think."

"Tell him I'll be right there," Scott repeated before ending the call.

Ben looked at him curiously. "What's going on?"

"A friend of mine is in the hospital. I've got to go."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. He was shot. That's all I know." Scott moved as he spoke, scooping up his keys and heading to the door.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No. You should probably just go home."

"Oh." A single syllable, but completely infused with disappointment. Scott was a little disappointed, too, but not for the same reason Ben obviously was.

"Look, I'll call you, okay? I'll make it up to you."

"Maybe it's best if you don't."

"No," Scott said quickly. "I'll call you. Come on, I'll walk you down to your car."

They didn't speak on the elevator ride down—though it felt like they were trapped in the small car for an eternity. Scott repeated his promise to call Ben when they reached his car, but it

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felt more like an automatic promise. His mind was completely on Duke. Shot. Who shot him? Why? When? Where? How come this was the first he was hearing of it? How long would Duke be in the hospital? What did Duke want to talk about? The questions were like a tornado spinning through his mind, gale winds clearing everything else from his thoughts as he raced to Saint Francis Memorial.

When he saw the opera house, he knew it wasn't an accident Duke had been brought to this particular emergency room. He had to have been checking out the ballet company, like he'd planned to. Was that what he wanted to discuss? Had he been interrupted? Finch had said Duke had stopped a robbery, but where? At the opera house?

That question, and more, fueled his steps as he raced from the parking garage to the Emergency Room entrance. He burst through the doors, but was brought almost to an immediate halt by a young man stepping in his path.

"Mr. Scott?"

"Yeah. Finch? Where's Owen?"

He frowned for a moment before understanding dawned. "Oh, you mean Detective Duke. Come on. I've got clearance to take you back."

He led the way to the security door separating those who were still waiting for treatment with the rest of the hospital. Knocking on the glass, he waited while the attending nurse released the lock, then pulled the door open. Fresh noises and smells assaulted Scott, but he ignored them to follow Finch through the corridors.

Finch stopped at another door. Before opening it, he turned back to Scott and said, "They've got him on painkillers right now. He was a little...out of it last time I talked to him."

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Scott didn't care if Duke was stoned out of his gourd. His heart wasn't going to slow to the proper rhythm until he confirmed with his own two eyes that he was actually safe and okay. "I'll keep that in mind."

He pushed open the door, half expecting to find Duke stretched out on the bed, eyes closed, face pale and wan. But he was sitting up, looking more annoyed than hurt, his eyes only slightly unfocused.

"Are you all right?" Scott blurted.

Duke glanced at the clock on the wall. "I will be once I get out of here. Feel like throwing around some of that legal weight of yours and getting them to hurry it up?"

"What's the problem? Do they want you to stay overnight? What happened?"

His gaze swiveled back, overshooting a few inches before correcting itself and honing in on Scott's eyes. "I'm not staying overnight. It's just a graze. These doctors act like they've never seen a gunshot wound before."

"If they want you to stay overnight, maybe you should. I mean, they *have* seen gunshot wounds before. They probably have a pretty good idea of what they're talking about."

"I'm fine." As if to prove his point, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. He swayed slightly, but his grip was firm on the edge of the mattress. "It only needed six stitches, and they pumped enough morphine in me to keep me from feeling them for the next year. All I need is for you to give me a ride back to your place."

Scott had no problem with taking Duke home at the first reasonable chance. But he wasn't going to kidnap the man from the hospital in direct violation of his doctor's orders. "I will. But tell me what happened first."

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“It was nothing. I had a meeting with Finch to talk about his tailing you, but before he showed up, three guys tried to rob the diner I was at. I subdued two of them without a problem, but the third had a gun I didn’t see until it was too late.” His frown smoothed out, his mouth slanting. “Really, James. It was nothing. It’s not like it was the first time I’ve ever been shot.”

“So...you went to the opera house, and then to the diner and there just happened to be three armed men there?”

The smile grew wider. “Well, technically, there was only one there when I arrived. The other two didn’t show up until after I sat down.”

Scott knew that a coincidence wasn’t evidence—he spent most of his professional career arguing that coincidences were just that. But this just seemed a little too convenient for Scott’s liking. But he didn’t want to bring up the possibility that it was an actual attempt on Duke’s life until they were out of the hospital.

“You’re really sure you’re all right?” Scott smiled sheepishly. “I don’t want to sound like a broken record, but...I don’t think my heart has stopped racing.”

“Do you want to see it for yourself? Would that help?”

“Yeah, I think it might.”

Winning slightly, Duke reached up to untie his hospital gown, letting the blue patterned fabric slip down his arms and expose his upper body. Taped to his right side was a white gauze bandage. He picked at the edge of the tape holding it in place, only to scowl seconds later when it didn’t come free.

“Can you do this?” he asked. “The morphine’s affecting my coordination.”

Scott hesitated. Would it be wise to remove the bandage? He didn’t want to put Owen at risk, no matter how minor. On the other

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hand, *he* didn't seem concerned. "Yeah."

Holding his breath, he gently peeled the tape from Duke's skin and pulled the bandage away from the stitches. Scott had seen gunshot wounds before. Usually in large, graphic detail. Pictures of crime scenes always seemed more intense, more real than even real life. The wound on Duke's side was nothing like that. Yet, somehow, it was worse. Maybe because no matter how small it was, it still marred Duke's otherwise flawless skin.

"See?" Duke rested a hand on Scott's shoulder. "It's just a graze. Nothing to worry about."

"You're right...but I'm still going to worry a little bit." He replaced the tape, smoothing his finger over it to make sure it was secure. Without thinking about it, he leaned over and kissed the first bare patch of skin he could reach—the edge of Duke's jaw. "I'll go argue the attending into submission and get you out of here."

"Wait." The command came with the slide of Duke's hand, from Scott's shoulder to the back of his neck. Duke turned his head, burying his nose in Scott's skin. "God, I'm glad to see you."

"How long have you been here?" Scott took a deep breath. Duke's skin already had the slightly tangy smell Scott always associated with hospitals.

"Since eleven." He wasn't letting go. The drugs might have altered his reaction times, but they hadn't hindered his strength. "Too long. I hate these places."

"Eleven? Jesus. Why didn't you call me sooner?"

"Finch took away my phone." He lifted his head. "Don't laugh."

Scott didn't laugh, but his lips twitched a little. "How did he manage that?"

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“I was bleeding, and there’s a reason he’s one of the best cadets I’ve trained this term. And that’s all you’re getting from me.”

“How much pain are you in? Can I show you exactly how grateful I am that it was just a minor flesh wound?”

Duke’s eyes darkened. “I’ll put it this way. I could’ve done the tape myself.”

Scott moaned softly and gently pulled away from Duke’s grip. “In that case, I’m going to get you out of here right away. Oh...Finch said you wanted to tell me something?”

“Get me out of here, and get me home. We’ll talk about it there.”

“I can live with that plan.”

He left Duke with one more kiss before slipping out of the room. There was no way he would leave Owen in the hospital room for the night. Scott actually hoped the attending would be stubborn, because he was itching for a fight.

CHAPTER 16

Scott did not get the fight he was hoping for, but that was just as well. It only meant Duke was allowed to get dressed and leave the hated hospital room all the sooner. On the drive back to his place, Scott was tempted to slip into full lawyer mode and grill Duke like he was a hostile witness. He wanted to know every single detail of Duke's day, starting from when he left Scott's apartment and ending with the hospital room. *Every* detail, down to the number of coffees he had. No matter how Scott looked at the events of the day, he could only see one person. One man orchestrating the entire situation. DA Horan.

He had targeted Scott, and now he had targeted Duke. They were both lucky to be uninjured. Scott, for one, was not going to tolerate living in that sort of danger for another day. If he had been thinking clearly, the phrase *assuming facts not in evidence* might

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have occurred to him. But there was nothing clear or logical about his thought processes.

“You sure you don’t want to go back to your place? You probably need a change of clothes, at least.” Because Scott had no intention of letting the detective out of his sight any time soon.

Duke’s shot him a small smile. “I think you just want to see what my place is like.”

“I am a bit curious about your inner sanctum. I can only imagine it’s like the Fortress of Solitude.”

The smile widened. “Did you just equate me to Superman, or am I still high on the morphine?”

“The two options aren’t mutually exclusive. You know, I don’t even know where you live.”

“I have a small townhouse in Daly City. If you want to go there instead, just get on 280. I just hope you’re not disappointed.”

“Disappointed? Do you think I’m that much of a snob?”

“No, I think you expect to find something interesting. I’m not. In spite of how interesting the past week has been.”

“I’ve no doubt I’m going to find the place very interesting.” Every book, every photo, every stick of furniture, every small detail would help fill in the picture Scott was already painting of Duke. He couldn’t even imagine anything more interesting, which was both a little scary, and a little exciting.

They were only a few blocks from the 280 onramp, and it was late enough that the traffic was mostly clear. Once they were on the freeway, Scott couldn’t help stealing glances of Duke. If he hadn’t known that Duke had just spent several hours in the hospital, he never would have guessed. In the dim light provided by the passing traffic, Duke looked completely normal.

“Do you want to stay with me tonight?” Duke asked quietly. “I

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know we planned on your place, but I think I want my bed tonight, if that's not a problem. And I'd like you in it."

"I intended to stay with you tonight, even if you didn't invite me. You're high enough on morphine, I figured I actually had a shot at overpowering you, if it came to that."

The smile returned. He thought he'd seen Duke smile more in the past couple hours than he'd had in the past few days. "Ah, but the morphine will probably make me unpredictable. That makes me dangerous."

"I don't know if that makes a big difference. I already find you pretty unpredictable."

Duke snorted. "You'd be the first. I know I'm methodical. It's part of why I'm so good at my job."

"I know why you're so good at your job, but that doesn't mean you don't keep me on my toes. Have you ever...gone this fast with anybody before?"

"That depends on which part of all this you're talking about."

"I don't know," Scott answered honestly. It wasn't just the sex. He was sure that Duke had indulged himself with a few one-night stands. And it wasn't just the fact that they had spent the past three nights together. That was hardly any time at all. But Scott felt like there was more between them than a murder case and great sex. His fear wouldn't have been quite so acute if Owen Duke was nothing more than a good time. "Maybe every part."

Duke fell silent at that, and when Scott risked a glance sideways, he noted Duke's distant gaze focused out his window. The fact that Duke needed to think about his response didn't surprise him, but neither did it give a hint at how Duke might respond. For Duke, a question worth answering merited more than a few moments consideration.

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Seconds stretched into one minute, and then two. Duke's soft, "Get off here," disappointed Scott, but he obeyed, following the quiet directions until he had pulled to a stop in a carport space labeled, "Guest."

"I don't think it's just a matter of speed," Duke said, like they hadn't just had a lapse of nearly seven minutes from the original topic. "You're the first person I've brought back to my place with the full intention of not letting them go again in a decade."

Scott smiled. "I think that answered my question."

He wanted to help Duke out of the car, but he had the feeling the other man wouldn't actually appreciate that. He compromised by hurrying around the front of the car to open the passenger door, and he stuck close to Duke's side, his hand hovering at Duke's elbow.

A motion sensor turned on a security light as soon as they stepped onto a narrow sidewalk. It illuminated a carefully trimmed strip of grass, with a set of steep stairs leading up to the front door of the narrow townhouse. Duke climbed them without so much as a wince, though it seemed to Scott that he fumbled with his keys a few seconds longer than necessary.

The front door opened into a cozy living room, the switch Duke flicked as soon as they entered lighting a squat lamp sitting on a nearby end table. The room was small, but surprisingly softly decorated. The red and blue plaid couch had exposed oak feet and arms, with a plethora of carefully matched pillows, and an oak entertainment center, its doors closed to whatever it might contain, had a parade of framed photographs across its top.

Duke didn't stop, walking through the living room for the back of the house. "I haven't had any coffee since nine this morning. You want some?"

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Scott was still pretty wired from the adrenaline that had been dumped into his veins, but he nodded anyway, following Duke to the kitchen. It was narrow and clean, the countertops empty except for a coffeemaker and a toaster. Still, it was a brightly lit, even sunny room. Scott could easily imagine himself making breakfast in there.

“Ready to tell me what you learned this morning?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not you promise me that you’re not going to run off when you hear what I have to say.” He finished filling the coffeepot and poured the water into the rear of the machine. “I’m feeling selfish, and if you’re going to want to work on the case afterward, I’m not going to tell you until we wake up tomorrow.”

Scott took a deep breath. “Since you were the one who got shot at today, I’m going to defer to your wishes. No working the case tonight, I promise.”

He thought he caught another smile before Duke turned away to the refrigerator. “Horan’s a financial sponsor for the ballet company, and his mother used to dance with them. Before she was killed, Tana was working on a project, organizing all the sponsors and getting new ones. So there is absolutely no way Horan didn’t know her before this case came up.”

Scott blinked. “Do you think their relationship was strictly business?”

“I don’t know. The office manager at the company didn’t indicate Tana ever did anything scandal-worthy, and I got the impression, if there was dirt to be had on Tana, she would have dished it.”

“They could have been seeing each other privately without

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creating a scandal,” Scott pointed out. Which was true, but didn’t quite help him. If Horan had been involved with her, wouldn’t he be doing everything he could to find the killer, instead of using her dead body to blackmail a young man who had enough problems of his own? Unless, of course, Horan wasn’t interested in finding the murderer because he already knew exactly who the guilty party was. “You plan to talk to him soon?”

“I hadn’t planned on it, no. All I have so far is a distant professional relationship and a severe dislike for the man. If he’s involved, I don’t want to let him know I suspect him yet.”

“What do you mean, if he’s involved? Of course, he’s involved. He’s visiting Hector on a daily basis. He’s searching for something he thinks Tana had. He’s absolutely involved.”

Duke finished scooping coffee into the machine and turned it on. “What happened to the promise we weren’t going to work the case if I told you?”

“I’m not trying to work the case. I’m just...discussing some of the elements of the case.”

“Which will lead to working it.” With a sigh, Duke leaned against the edge of the counter. “All right. If that’s what you want. Did you find anything new out today?”

The way Duke leaned against the counter betrayed his exhaustion. Very little sleep the night before, on top of an early morning, a gunshot injury, and an entire day stuck in the hospital. He didn’t need to deal with Scott’s frustration on top of that. And at this point, there was no other way to describe or define Scott’s feelings.

“No, no. I made you a promise and I do intend to keep it.” He put his hands on either side of Duke, creating a cage with his arms and trapping Duke inside. “I’m sorry.”

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Faint shadows below his eyes lent a weary pallor that wasn't normally there, but the lines in his forehead disappeared at Scott's apology. "Is that the best you can do? I did get shot today, you know."

"I'm not apt to forget it." Scott tilted his head and caught Duke's mouth, kissing him softly. The caress was light, but not weak. He teased Duke's lips with his tongue, tracing the seam of his mouth, coaxing a stronger and stronger reaction. For a moment, he forgot everything about the day. Even—despite his words—the fact that Duke was injured. The taste of the other man overwhelmed everything else. As did the relief to be tasting Duke at all.

Duke parted his lips, slipping his tongue into Scott's mouth. He seemed completely in control, but Scott already knew better than that. He already knew the way Duke trembled just before he gave in to his desire. And there was the lightest tremor in Duke's fingers where they touched Scott's arm.

For several minutes, they contented themselves with slow, careful kisses, even when Duke tightened his grip, his nails digging into Scott's flesh. When they parted, Duke squeezed his eyes shut and rested his brow against Scott's shoulder, his ragged breath soaking through Scott's shirt.

"Okay, that was much better," Duke murmured. "But now I'm dizzy. Give me a sec."

"If you're dizzy, we shouldn't stay standing in here." Now that Scott was kissing him, he didn't want to stop. Duke didn't seem to mind Scott nuzzling against his throat. "We should be stretching out on a bed."

"Not before I get some coffee. Otherwise, I think I might pass out as soon as I hit the sheets."

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"I don't think I could survive such a blow to my ego," Scott said, stepping back. The rich smell of the strong brew already filled the room, wrapping around them in a cloud. The familiar sound of coffee percolating was almost comforting. "I can honestly say that nobody's fallen asleep on me before."

"And the way I want it, nobody will tonight, either." Duke started to twist around to reach for a mug on a tree on the counter, only to stop halfway and wince. He froze, holding his side, as he grimaced against the pain. "Shit. Remind me to move my ass faster out of the line of fire next time, will you? I can do without more of these stitches for a few months."

Scott gently took the cup from Duke's fingers. "Okay, I think that means you're going to go sit down somewhere comfortable while I get your coffee. And anything else you might need. Are you hungry?"

As if it heard Scott's question, Duke's stomach grumbled. Duke grinned. "I haven't eaten all day either. But I can make a sandwich. I'm not an invalid."

"I'm not saying you are an invalid, but you're still going to sit down. That's an order."

He knew Duke wanted to argue. It was etched in every line of his body. Maybe he saw something in Scott's face that meant it would be fruitless, though, because he nodded his head. "I'll just go watch the news in the living room." His mouth brushed across Scott's cheek. "Help yourself to anything you want. What's mine is yours."

"I'll keep that in mind," Scott promised, giving Duke the room he needed to walk past.

Scott had been a little horrified at the thought of Duke only eating a sandwich after the day he had, but an inspection of the

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fridge proved that a very good sandwich could be constructed. Scott pulled out roast beef, tomatoes, sprouts, gourmet mustard, thinly sliced provolone cheese, and mayo. He also found a big loaf of French bread.

He put together two sandwiches, then rooted around the fridge again until he found enough vegetables to make a salad—not because he wanted one but because he thought the vitamins would be good for Duke’s recovering body. Once he had the meal complete, he poured Duke a fresh cup of coffee, and carried the whole spread into the living room.

The doors of the entertainment center were open, revealing a widescreen TV currently on and tuned to Channel 7 news. Dan Ashley spoke from his place behind the news desk, but Scott’s gaze jumped immediately to Duke, sitting in the corner of the couch. He’d taken off his shoes and pulled his shirt free from his pants, a couple more buttons undone at the neck. He looked relaxed, more relaxed than Scott had ever seen him before. Scott was suddenly sure few people ever saw him like this.

Duke turned his head as soon as he walked into the room, smiling when Scott set the tray on the coffee table. “God, that looks good. Completely worth getting shot for.”

Scott snorted. “Next time you want me to make you dinner, just ask. Getting shot isn’t necessary.”

Duke grabbed the coffee first, heedless of how hot the mug was. He’d gulped half of it down before Scott managed to sit. The sigh that escaped him was one of pure bliss.

“Okay, that’s better already. Even better than the morphine.”

Scott bit into his sandwich, forcing himself to eat it though he wasn’t particularly hungry. He would need to keep his strength up later. He would rather be chewing on Duke, but it wasn’t a

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hardship to watch Duke enjoy his dinner. Especially since he was there to enjoy his dinner and if that bullet had just been a half-inch over...

Scott shook his head. He was not going to dwell on that.

"So?" Duke took a bite of his sandwich and looked at Scott expectantly, as if he should know what Duke was talking about. When Scott didn't speak, Duke swallowed and added, "About my place. You were the one who was so curious about what you'd find."

"It's exactly what I expected. And I mean that in a good way. Utilitarian and orderly, but not without your creature comforts. Cozy, too. I can easily see myself spending a few more nights here."

"Even after we finish these cases?"

"Yes. I'm going to assume we'll have something to talk about when we no longer have Hector Young and DA Horan between us."

"I work crazy hours." Though Duke seemed more than pleased by his response. "And this wasn't the first time I've been shot. It won't be the last, either."

"I work crazy hours, too," Scott pointed out. "In fact, these past few days have been really out of the ordinary for me. As for getting shot..." Scott swallowed something bitter in the back of his throat. It wasn't something he wanted to talk about casually. "Just...be more careful and don't get shot again."

"Well, I can promise to be careful, at least." Duke cupped the back of Scott's head and tugged, pulling him closer. Their lips met, caressed, parted, in the space of a single breath. "I have no idea what I'm doing with this. With us. But I'm willing to figure it out if you are." His mouth slanted. "Maybe I'll just follow my gut on

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this one.”

“Maybe you should. I always follow my gut, and it hasn’t led me wrong yet.” Scott slid closer, hoping he wouldn’t have to put space between them again. “What’s your gut telling you now?”

“Forget the food.”

Scott was pulling at Duke’s shirt before he finished speaking. “Yes, definitely listen to your gut on this one.”

There was nothing tentative about their next kiss, bitter from the coffee, sharp from their hunger. Duke’s free hand slid around Scott’s waist and molded their upper bodies together even more, angling back to force Scott’s weight atop him. For a moment, Scott worried about hurting Duke, but he made no sound of discomfort, no wince of pain. He had to believe, considering all the other times he’d stopped when he’d felt a twinge, that the absence could only mean Duke was perfectly fine.

He was more than fine. He was hard as a rock.

There wasn’t enough room on the couch to actually do everything Scott wanted to do. They remained locked together in the kiss for what felt like an eternity. Their tongues slid together, and Duke’s lips were soft and firm at the same time. Scott dragged his hand down Duke’s chest to grip his erection, and his tongue watered at the weight against his palm. But Scott wasn’t going to suggest they move to the bed. Not yet. Scott was not interested in delaying things for another second. He needed to smell Duke’s skin, taste his sweat, soak in his warmth. Instead of limiting himself to the couch, he lowered himself to the floor, settling between Duke’s legs.

“What’re you doing?” Duke rasped.

“I’m going to get a taste of you,” Scott murmured, pushing Duke’s shirt up to kiss his stomach. He moved lower, mouthing

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Duke's cock through his pants. The zipper pressed into his lips, but he didn't care. The inside of his cheek prickled, and he could already feel the weight of Duke's shaft pushing into the back of his throat.

Duke curved both of his hands over Scott's skull, not holding him down but rather, exploring its shape. He spread his legs wider, giving Scott more room to get settled, and leaned his head back against the couch with a soft sigh.

"If this is your idea of paying me back for the massage last night, you have my blessing."

"Well...not just that." Scott fumbled Duke's pants open, pulling down the zipper to get to Duke's straining erection. He dragged his tongue across the base of his cock and over the rough hair, taking a deep breath as he did so. Later that night he would drag Duke into the shower and diligently clean and lick and nibble at every inch of his body. But before that, he was going to indulge his desire for Duke's perfect cock.

Heat radiated from Duke, solid and reassuring even through his clothes. Even the shaft nestling against Scott's palm as he pulled Duke's balls free, too, felt feverish. It wasn't a temperature. The hospital would never have let him go if he'd had some kind of complication resulting in an elevated body temp. No, the more time Scott spent with Duke, the more he discovered that he ran hot most of the time, even when he appeared calm and collected. Maybe it was the incongruity that always made it stand out, that someone as cool as Duke would have skin that should have been flushed with its heat.

Whatever it was, it made Scott ache to shed the rest of their clothes in order to savor it firsthand. For now, he had to content himself with the soft skin of Duke's sac as he sucked into his

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mouth.

Duke groaned and jerked his hips. The fingertips at the back of his skull pressed harder, urging Scott even closer.

He rolled his tongue around Duke's balls, sucking gently on each one, closing his eyes as Duke's groans surrounded him. He might have done the same thing the night before. He honestly couldn't remember. Even though every moment was branded in Scott's memory, at that moment, he forgot everything that wasn't the smooth texture of Duke's skin against his lips, the rhythm of the pulse beating through his flesh. Other thoughts tried to intrude on the moment. What had Ben been ready to tell him? How well did Horan know Tana? What on earth would he have done if Duke had been really hurt?

Scott pushed those thoughts out of his mind. It was difficult to ignore work, difficult to ignore his fears. That was why he didn't have serious relationships. He couldn't give himself over completely to somebody else because there was always a part of him that couldn't be shut off. But Duke groaned again and tightened his hold, and the world narrowed.

The scent lured him away from Duke's balls, tempting him upward. He dragged his tongue along the prominent vein running the length of his shaft and stopped at the flared crown, already glistening with pre-come. He wanted to lick it away. It was what had drawn him, after all. But if he got his lips around the velvety head, he was going to swallow Duke down, and then, the end of this glorious exploration would already be in sight.

So he veered sideways, turning his head to trace along the ridge, and rubbed his thumb through the clear fluid, instead, drawing ever tighter circles until he reached the small slit at the tip. His nail caught on its edge, nothing harsh, nothing painful, but

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enough for Duke to hiss sharply through his teeth.

“James...” It could have been a plea, or a warning, or something else entirely. All Scott knew was that he loved the way his name sounded on Duke’s lips, no matter what the intention.

Scott soothed the skin with his tongue, running the tip over it again and again, until Duke hissed again. The drops of pre-come were almost intoxicating, and he wanted more of it. Behind him, the television droned on, the news giving way to much louder commercials, and then those commercials fading back to the anchor’s deep, rhythmic voice. Scott heard all of that with half an ear, using the voices and music to mark the passage of time as he licked every fresh bit of the salty liquid from Duke’s head.

But that couldn’t be enough to satisfy him forever. There was a world of difference between dragging the flat of his tongue across the crown, and wrapping his tongue around Duke’s shaft as he swallowed more and more of his length. He glanced up through his lashes, studying Duke’s face. His head was still back, his eyes closed, his mouth partially open to release his rapid, hungry breaths. Scott couldn’t remember the last time he had seen anybody look so perfect.

Holding the length away from Duke’s body, Scott sat up higher to get a better angle. The top of his head brushed against Duke’s stomach as he slowly sucked in the tip, his lips stretching to seal around the thick girth. The muscles in Duke’s thighs trembled, and his hands slipped down to Scott’s face, caressing his cheeks as he took more of the shaft into his mouth.

Scott swallowed his cock, angling it so the entire length went directly down his throat. He held it for as long as he could, swallowing around the shaft, before pulling back to gasp for breath. He barely had the chance to fill his lungs before Duke was

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gently pushing him, guiding him back down. Scott didn't mind the small show of dominance. In fact, his stomach tightened and churned in a delightful, uncomfortable way.

That was the rhythm they set. Slow and deep. Up and down. His mouth, Duke's hands, everything adding to the escape they both sought. He could let Duke take the lead, because then he didn't have to think, but he knew extending the control to Duke was a gift, too. Duke could forget for a few precious minutes about random gunfights and innocent men getting blamed for crimes they had no part of. Scott would do even more if that was what Duke wanted. It almost frightened him how much more he'd be willing to offer.

Duke began to thrust to meet Scott's mouth, holding him down for a few seconds longer with each stroke. His breathing became more ragged, the occasional word slipping free. Scott heard his name more than once, until that was all there was, a litany as Duke pumped into his throat. When he felt the vein throb against his tongue, Scott cupped Duke's balls and squeezed.

Duke jerked. A moment later, hot come hit the back of Scott's tongue, the cock pulsing with each shot into his mouth. Scott sank down the length again, eager to get it all, and his first swallow around the head finally brought a wordless shout he felt all the way to his toes.

Scott's own cock throbbed. It didn't just throb. It ached. The pain spread to his lower stomach, tightening the muscles in his abdomen, and then reached around to his lower back in a strange, awkward embrace. His balls were heavy, smashed in his pants, and his clothes had never felt more ridiculously uncomfortable. But he didn't let that distract him from the come hitting the back of his tongue. He swallowed again and again, coaxing every drop from

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Duke.

“James...James...” The hand on his head disappeared, gripping his shoulder instead. Duke tugged, but he refused to rise until he was ready, until he’d had enough to tide him over until they got into Duke’s bed. “Damn it, James, stop. Please.”

James blinked up at him. “What?” he asked innocently.

The gaze Duke leveled at him was pure black, the lids heavy. His nostrils flared, as he pulled again at Scott’s shoulder. “Play fair. If you don’t, I’ll end up tearing out my stitches getting to you.”

Scott smiled slowly. “When you put it that way, I have no choice but to play fair.” He slid his fingers beneath Duke, pushing past his sac to find his tight hole. “Of course, we might have different definitions of fair.”

The muscle clenched, then unclenched at his careful probe. Duke’s breathing quickened. “No, I could work with that definition.”

“So you don’t think this’ll tear out your stitches?” He teased the ring of muscle before slipping the tip of his finger inside. “I’ll be careful.”

“You just have to take it...” The word caught in his throat on a single, sharp inhalation when Scott pushed deeper inside. He licked his lips before finishing his sentence. “...slow.”

Scott dragged his tongue across Duke’s thigh, his gaze still locked on Duke’s face. “I can take it slow. In fact, you’ll be amazed at how slow I can take it.”

He sat back, pulling his hand free, and Duke responded with a small gasp. Scott’s head was spinning, but he managed to rid Duke of his shoes and yank his pants off. They would need to move to the bedroom sooner or later, but Scott wasn’t interested in moving

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right then. He gripped the back of Duke's thigh and pushed up until the other man bent his knee, resting his foot on the edge of the couch. He gently cupped Duke's balls, pulling them out of his way, and exposing his slightly stretched opening to Scott's view. And his mouth. "Very slow."

The sound that came out of Duke's mouth when Scott traced the hole with the tip of his tongue resembled a whimper, but Scott couldn't consider how he'd gotten this stoic man to crumble already any time soon. The twitch of muscles beckoned to him to do it again, though this time, he made sure to drag over it as well.

"Jesus..." Duke's hoarse voice encouraged Scott to continue, keeping the pace far more languid than he normally would. "I can't even remember the last time someone did this."

Scott paused long enough to shake his head. "Either you don't date enough, or you date the wrong kind of people."

"Probably both. It's a good thing I found you, then, huh?"

"Oh, now you've done it. I'm not ever going to let you forget you said that." He returned to his previous task, wetting Duke's trembling skin, preparing him. "When was the last time somebody fucked you?"

"A few years." The hand that settled over Scott's on his balls shook, much more noticeably now than before. "Something tells me you won't make me wait a few years for it to happen again."

"You're a very perceptive man."

Scott took a deep breath and pushed his tongue into Duke's channel, not surprised by the heat, or the smooth, dry texture of his skin, or the way Duke moaned. Pleasure like an electric shock went through him, and the only desire he had was to fuck Duke with his entire body. His mouth, his fingers, his cock. *Slowly, slowly*, he reminded himself, even as that hunger crawled up his

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spine.

Duke's other leg mirrored its mate, his heel resting on the edge of the couch to spread even wider for Scott. Worry twinged in the back of Scott's mind at what the position might do for Duke's stitches, but when Duke didn't make any noise of discomfort, he let it go to focus on getting the man ready. With that long of a break between fucks, Duke was going to be tight. Scott didn't want to hurt him.

Though the thought of just how tight he was going to be added a new throb to Scott's cock.

His hand snuck from Duke's balls to his semi-erect cock. He massaged the length between his fingers and palm, absently squeezing and stroking him while he moved his tongue in gentle rhythm. In response, Duke clenched his muscles, his entire body tensing and relaxing. There was still so much energy inside him. Scott could feel it, waiting for release, waiting for a chance to break free. His cock twitched and moved, each stroke bringing more blood to the area, until he was completely hard once again. That was Scott's sign to lift his head.

"Where do you want it? The bedroom or...?"

Duke blinked, as if waking from a trance. "I...hadn't thought about it, actually."

"If you want me to fuck you in bed, you gotta tell me now. Before I lose my wherewithal."

Another blink, followed by a slow sweep around the room to the stairs that seemed miles away. "Do you have a condom?"

"Of course," Scott said, pulling his wallet from his back pocket. It was one that was a few months old, but it hadn't expired yet, and if this wasn't an emergency, Scott didn't know what was. "No lube, though."

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“I’ll take care of that.” Duke lowered his legs to the floor and stood, his shirt falling straight though his erection poked through. “You get out of your clothes and I’ll be right back,” he said as he headed for the kitchen.

Scott stripped in record time, heedless of where he tossed his clothes. He had no idea what Duke had in mind, but if he didn’t want to have to wait to go upstairs, that was fine by him.

He was tearing open the condom when Duke returned, a bottle of olive oil in hand. His shirt was gone now, though the stark whiteness of the bandage on his side wasn’t what Scott stared at. He was too transfixed—again—by the sculpted muscles, the way his body narrowed down to his trim hips, the thick jut of his cock and all the pleasure it promised. Later, though. After Scott finally got to bury his own in Duke’s tight ass.

Duke came to a stop in front of him. “If we stay down here and fuck on the couch instead of my bed, I’ll have less room to move around.” He unscrewed the bottle and poured a small amount of oil onto his fingers. “You okay with that?”

“I don’t need you to move around too much,” Scott promised him. “In fact, I’ll do all the moving. You just hold on tight and enjoy the ride.”

“Like this?” His slick hand wrapped around Scott’s covered cock, squeezing tight.

Scott’s knees buckled, and he almost sank to the floor. He hoped when it was Duke’s ass instead of his hand wrapped around his flesh, he would be able to handle it instead of exploding in his immediate pleasure. Duke smiled a little, and it felt like a hot blade had sliced right through his chest.

“Yes...yes, like that.”

Duke twisted his wrist, spreading the oil around his entire

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length. A few droplets rolled down to his balls, tickling along the way. When Duke took a step back toward the couch without letting go, Scott had no choice but to follow, stopping only when Duke reached the edge and finally released him.

Carefully, Duke laid back against the cushions, lifting the leg against the back while resting the other foot on the floor. His oiled hand dipped between his legs, fingers slipping between the cheeks to lube his hole as well.

Scott watched silently, his mouth dry as Duke's fingers disappeared inside his channel. He fucked himself slowly, and Scott wasn't sure if he was simply being careful, or if he was intentionally trying to drive him out of his mind. He had had visions of bending Duke over the back of the couch, or maybe sitting with Duke astride him, but this was better. In this position, he would remember to keep it slow. He would be able to watch the color and light in Duke's eyes. He'd be able to kiss the man, and bury his face against his throat when it all got to be too much. And it would all get to be too much. Scott had no doubt about that.

Duke finally pulled his fingers free, his body slick and stretched. Ready for his cock. Scott kneeled on the couch, and kept his other foot on the ground. He hooked Duke's leg around his hips and let Duke pull him forward until their mouths touched. He breathed in Duke, savored the taste of him, and let the head of his cock push against his opening, easily slipping into the tight channel.

For a moment, oddly terrifying, Duke closed his eyes. Scott had visions of pain lancing through his body, of vows never to do this again, of another trip to the emergency room and having to explain that he'd ripped out his lover's stitches because he just couldn't keep his cock to himself even after a gunshot wound. He

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held still, holding his breath, waiting for Duke to do something—anything—to let him know that he was okay.

Then, Duke sighed and shuddered. His eyes opened and locked with Scott's, his hand straying down Scott's back to cup his ass. He lifted his head the fraction of an inch necessary to seal their mouths together and silently urged Scott to press deeper.

Slow. Slowly. Slow. Give him time. Let him adjust. Slowly.

The constant mantra helped. Duke's mouth against his did not. In fact, the dance of his tongue only served to make his head spin. Duke pulled him deeper and deeper, the two of them working together to gain an inch, then another inch. As Duke's heat surrounded him, pulsed round him, Scott suspected that he was never going to find quite that level of satisfaction with anybody else.

Duke only tore from their hungry kisses when Scott felt the light nudge of his balls against hot skin. He panted for breath, but didn't otherwise make any sign of discomfort, even going so far as knead the tense flesh of Scott's ass.

"Remind me when we're all done that my gut has fantastic ideas sometimes," Duke said.

"I will. Especially when your gut is telling you to agree with me."

Scott gave Duke plenty of time to adjust to him, and also plenty of time to raise any sort of protest or point out that Scott was hurting him. When he didn't, Scott began to move his hips. He didn't want to lose an inch of the heat, so he didn't slip from Duke's tight body. He kept himself buried, relying on the rocking and gyrating of his hips to create the friction they both needed.

Beads of sweat formed on Duke's brow, dampening the dark hair at his temples. Scott stretched to kiss it away, but when the

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salty fluid made his mouth water for more, he returned to Duke's mouth, unable to resist. Duke locked his other hand over the back of Scott's head, as if fearful James would pull away.

"I do not remember it feeling this good," Duke murmured between kisses.

"Me, neither," Scott admitted. Or tried to admit. The words were caught on his breath, and the three simple syllables were almost impossible to utter. Their stomachs slid together, Duke's cock trapped between their bodies. His skin was smooth, and sweat coated his chest. The smell of sex was already starting to fill the room, drifting around them, and then there were the sounds. Skin moving against skin. Moans. Harsh breaths. At some point, Scott decided he loved Duke's couch.

Duke was the one to goad him into longer strokes, writhing beneath him until Scott had to move or go crazy from the friction. The first time he pulled out nearly all the way, the cooler air coiled around his cock so surprisingly, he drove harder into Duke's body than he intended, earning a low grunt that vibrated through both of them. An apology sprang to his lips. It died when Duke swallowed it down with a kiss that put all its predecessors to shame.

His stomach twisted around itself like a snake. When he thrust forward again, it was with the same amount of force. That earned another hard kiss. Scott was a pretty smart guy. Always had been. He didn't need any more encouragement to finally just give in to what he wanted. To what they both wanted. He forgot the mantra of *slowly* and drove into Duke's body again and again.

He kept expecting Duke to reach between their bodies to jerk himself off, but that shift never came. One hand remained firmly on Scott's head, the other on his ass, only slipping when sweat interceded and loosened the hold. But even then, Duke resumed his

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position, effectively trapping Scott inside the circle of his arms. He held on with a sense of possession that might have scared Scott under other circumstances, but now, just felt incredibly right. Like this was where they belonged.

Scott loved the way Duke felt beneath him. So wonderfully alive, his body flexing, his muscles moving beneath his taut skin. Scott was careful not to touch the stitches on his side, but he let his hand drift everywhere else over his body. Occasionally, he broke the kiss long enough to look at Duke's face, contorted and vulnerable with his pleasure. He was always so perfectly composed and put together, but Scott knew that he would never think of Duke that way again. Not now that he had seen Duke like this.

Duke lifted his head and captured Scott's mouth, catching Scott's bottom lip between his teeth. The sting was slight, but the feeling behind it unmistakable. Scott groaned and fell into the kiss, his balls tightening against his body. His hard rhythm didn't slow, didn't vary. Even when he felt his cock jerk and lights and sparks erupted behind his eyes.

Beneath him, Duke sucked in a sharp breath, and the arms around Scott locked. Fresh warmth coated their stomachs, and new shudders finally tore Duke's mouth away. His eyes were squeezed shut, swollen lips parted. They moved to form a word, but without the benefit of air, nothing came out. Even when he tried again.

He finally gave up and sought Scott out again, his kisses shaky and broken as he rode out the end of his orgasm.

Scott kept himself from collapsing his full weight on Duke's frame, but he did drop his brow to Duke's shoulder, still gasping for breath. "See? We had just the right amount of room."

Something brushed across the top of his head. A kiss, perhaps. He really liked that image, for some reason. "Now I'm glad I

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didn't buy the love seat."

"I don't know. A love seat could have been fun, too." Scott sighed and forced himself to straighten, though he didn't want to abandon the heat of Duke's body. "Though this couch isn't going to be comfortable for long. Let me take you to bed."

"Eventually. I need a shower, and I'm finishing that coffee and sandwich first." He caught Scott's wrist before he could pull completely away, his dark eyes warm and twinkling. "And I need to tell you thank you."

Scott tilted his head. "For what?"

"For being there. Being here." His mouth slanted. "For not writing me off as an arrogant, know-it-all asshole."

Scott snorted. "I could say the same thing to you. In fact, that's how I'm known around the office. As in, 'Can you believe that arrogant, know-it-all asshole just drank the last of the coffee?'" He smiled. "I like that you're probably smarter than me."

"Well, you're definitely smarter than I am about some things." His grin widened as he swung his legs around and sat up. "But don't expect me to tell you that very often."

"You don't have to tell me how smart I am, but you should mention what a great lover I am. Often. With great detail."

That elicited a laugh, a real laugh, one that lit Duke up from the inside out. "Because you don't have a big enough head already."

"I just do my best work when I'm praised." At that point, though, he didn't need to be praised with the words. The sleepy satisfaction in Duke's eyes, the genuine smile lighting his face, the relaxed line of his shoulders, all told Scott exactly what he needed to know. He just wished his gaze didn't keep drifting to the bright white bandage on Duke's side. He had a feeling he wouldn't be able to stop seeing that, even when he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 17

Long after Duke fell asleep—full of food, sated, and doped up on pain killers—Scott stared at the ceiling, considering what he knew, his analytical mind putting each detail in place until he finally had a view of the broader picture. Hector Young and Tana Mayfield were unlikely friends. Maybe he loved the girl, maybe he only viewed her as a sister. Either way, Tana gave something to Hector that he never had before. Hope. Faith in himself. No doubt, Hector believed she gave him a chance to start over fresh. And it was that very hope that left him so vulnerable to the rot and corruption he suddenly found himself in the middle of.

The second known fact was Tana Mayfield's murder. Before, they lacked anything resembling a motive. Now Scott wasn't so sure. Tana hadn't been raped or otherwise violated. All ten of her

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nails had been broken, and there were bruises on her knuckles, indicating a struggle before her expiration. A mugging, perhaps? Or maybe she had walked in on somebody tearing her apartment apart.

Which fit in nicely with the fact that her apartment had been torn apart. The burglarized apartment coupled with the body being discovered in the bay, rather than her own home, pointed to one of two scenarios. She was killed in a third location, her body was disposed of, and then the murderer ransacked and robbed her place. Or, far more likely, she was killed in her own home, her apartment was torn apart, and then the body was dumped. Bodies could float in the bay for days or weeks, and eventually be lost at sea. Dumping the body there had its risks, but those were heavily outweighed by advantages. However, if that had happened, then she had invited the murderer into her apartment, because the lock had not been busted.

That led Scott to the fourth fact. She personally knew one of the most high-profile officials in the city. Who wouldn't open the door to the district attorney? Especially if said district attorney had crucial connections and clout in their chosen profession. And why would Horan choose to visit that dingy little apartment?

Because of fact number five. Tana had something on Horan. Scott didn't know what that was, or where it could be, but that was completely immaterial. Regardless of what she had on the man, *he* thought it was critical. *He* was desperate to get it back. It was difficult to imagine Horan arriving at her apartment, demanding the item, and when she didn't hand it over, he got more aggressive. By the end of the night, he would be burdened with the dead body of a beautiful, connected girl, and he would still have left her apartment empty-handed, for all intents and purposes.

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But Horan knew a few facts of his own. Like the one about Tana and her relationship with a no-good, twice-convicted loser who probably wouldn't know his ass from a hole in the ground. Horan was a powerful man in the city who had made a number of important friends long before he became the district attorney. He could pull a few strings, call in a few favors, and suddenly, fact number six exists. Tampered evidence.

Scott was completely certain Duke hadn't brought the tampered evidence to anybody's attention yet. He hadn't mentioned an internal affairs investigation, and heads would be rolling by now if there were an investigation going on. Horan directed all the attention toward Hector Young, certain he wouldn't be fingered for the murder, but still lacking in the one thing he had wanted the entire time. So he kept Hector dangling while he put the wheels of justice in motion—this time hoping they would crush Hector and the remaining evidence with it. That probably would have worked, except for two things. Scott taking the case and fighting on behalf of Hector. And Saucedo suffering a heart attack, giving Sager no other choice but to assign Duke to the case.

But Horan was in too deep to let those two things happen without some sort of response. Scott didn't quite believe that the DA wanted him dead. Another murder would only complicate things to an untold degree. But that wouldn't stop him from literally firing a warning shot. When that didn't work, he had no choice but to add to the body count in order to keep Hector in jail.

Now the one person who could literally blow the case wide open, who had all of the facts if not quite the evidence, was sleeping with several stitches in his flesh and a bandage taped to his side.

Scott wasn't going to give DA Horan a chance to hurt anybody

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else. He got his shot at Duke, but he was only going to get one.

He slipped out in the pre-dawn hours, sorry for abandoning Duke like that, but knowing he was doing the right thing. If he told Duke his plan, the other man would only try to talk him out of it. He would caution him to move slowly and advise that they just lay low and collect the evidence. That was a fine plan if Scott wanted justice, but for the first time in his life, he was looking for a little revenge.

He went home first, showering and changing as quickly as he could before ducking out again. Horan's office was located at the Hall of Justice on Bryant, which meant more driving, more walking, and more time to rehearse his words, as he waited for the elevator to take him to the third floor. Though the building was mostly empty at the moment, it wouldn't be long before it was buzzing with people. Jury trials typically started at eight. If he knew Horan, though, the man would already be in. Scott's lack of appointment wouldn't be a drawback. Horan was far too interested in his cases to ignore him unnecessarily.

Just as he'd thought, Horan's secretary was already at her desk, though she frowned when Scott approached. "Can I help you?"

He turned the full wattage of his smile on her. "I'm sorry, I don't have an appointment, but I need to speak to DA Horan. Is he in?"

"He is, but he's preparing for court." She turned to her keyboard. "Maybe I can pencil you in for this afternoon?"

"Actually, no. I have my own court appearance this afternoon. It's a bit of an emergency. Could you tell him that James Scott is here to discuss Hector Young? He might find he has time for me after all."

She nodded without further comment and pressed a button on

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her phone. Her professional demeanor relaxed when Horan responded to her announcement, and she disconnected the call with a smile at Scott. "You can go on in, Mr. Scott."

"Thank you." He flashed her another quick smile. "You have a good morning."

He strode into Horan's office like he was walking into his own. This wasn't the first time he had entered a hostile environment, and he refused to behave like he was on the defensive. Horan sat behind a huge mahogany desk. The placement of everything from the lamp to the pens revealed a certain fussiness that didn't surprise Scott at all. He didn't stand as Scott entered the room. Just glowered from his deep, leather chair, his brow thunderous. Scott recognized that look. He had seen it in the courtroom enough times. It was designed to intimidate. It wasn't going to work.

"Good morning," Scott greeted pleasantly, sitting in the chair opposite Horan before the DA had the chance to offer the seat.

"I'm not interested in plea bargaining for Young," Horan said, cutting straight to the chase. "So unless you're here to hand me a signed confession, I suggest you go tilt at windmills someplace else."

"I'm actually more interested in the sort of deal you'll be requesting to save your own ass. I wouldn't count on anything, though. The governor has to look tough on crime, after all."

Horan didn't even blink. "As per usual, you're making absolutely no sense. Is there an actual purpose to this impromptu meeting, or are you just hoping to annoy me to death?"

"There are several actual purposes for my visit. First and foremost, we need to discuss the little chats you've been having with my client. I've already reported you to the state bar on suspicions of an ethics violation."

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“And suspicions are all you’ll ever have. You have no proof.”

“No, no proof. Except for the security footage that doesn’t match the visitor’s log at the jail. You’re not the only one with friends.”

His leather chair creaked as he leaned back. “I’m assuming Young told you about our meeting.”

“Meetings. Plural. All of them. In an exceptionally detailed deposition.”

“It couldn’t have been too detailed. He barely has a fifth grade education.”

“His education has nothing to do with his memory.”

“No, but it has everything to do with how articulate he is. Which isn’t very.”

“He doesn’t need to be articulate. He has me for that. And the state board isn’t going to be grading his deposition. They’re going to be more interested in the fact that you’re using not one, but two murder victims as bargaining chips.”

Horan’s gaze turned flinty. “Just because I didn’t have enough to hold Young for Tana Mayfield’s murder doesn’t make your client any less guilty, Scott. The evidence is out there. It’s just a matter of finding it.”

“Evidence?” Scott ran the tip of his tongue over his top lip. “You won’t find any evidence for a crime he didn’t commit. However, I’m fascinated by the evidence that IA will uncover. Now, visiting Young? That would probably result in a quiet slap of the wrist. But after *that* investigation, you’re probably going to need a good attorney.”

“Your information’s faulty. There *is* no IA investigation linked to Young.”

“No, sir. There is no IA investigation linked to Young *yet*.”

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That did it. For the first time since walking in, he saw a chink in Horan's armor, an infinitesimal twitch followed by a slight narrowing of his eyes. "IA won't find anything. I had a few unauthorized visits with Young in hopes of getting him to deal. Tana deserves justice."

"How well did you know Tana?"

"I didn't."

"Was your mother a ballet dancer?"

"And she danced with the same company Tana did. Do you have a point, Scott?"

"And you've remained a local supporter of the company, haven't you?"

"I'm still failing to see your point."

"Humor me and it'll get me out of your hair faster."

Horan sighed. "If you're asking the question, you already know the answer. It's a matter of public record. I've been donating money to the company ever since I graduated from law school."

"You are no doubt aware that the company had recently decided to update their records, beginning with culling the names of the people who no longer offered donations. Tana Mayfield herself had suggested and spearheaded this project. Do you recall speaking to her?"

"She would have spoken with my accountant, but that's beside the point because my donations were never in question." Abruptly, Horan sat up. "Cut the bullshit, Scott. Obviously, you think you know something, so either spit it out, or get out."

"I just can't work out when she got it. Was it through the dance company? Or was it through Woodson?"

Horan went utterly still. Only because he'd been watching him so intensely did Scott notice. It took everything he had not to let

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his glee show. "Don't tell me Young gave it up to you."

"I'm not actually telling you anything. I'm giving you the chance to do the right thing before I bring down hell on your head."

"No, you're not. You want something. Otherwise, you would've already turned it over."

"I *told* you what I wanted. I want you to do the right thing. That means dropping the charges against Hector and releasing him before he wastes one more day in jail. That means coming clean about Tana Mayfield and Johnny Fender. Fixing this before it gets completely out of hand."

"If you're here, I'd suggest things might be already out of hand."

"No, all it suggests is that I'm close enough to the various pieces of this puzzle to understand what it all means. You can stop this before everybody else figures it out, too."

Horan's mouth pressed into a thin line. Scott knew how to read him. Like now. The man was weighing his options, not that he had many. Scott just had to wait him out.

"I think this might be a discussion better served elsewhere." Horan picked up his phone, his eyes never leaving Scott's. "Lynette, get Griswold to step in for me in court this morning. I'm going to be delayed."

Scott waited for Horan to hang up before asking, "Elsewhere? I think your office is serving the discussion just fine."

Ignoring Scott's mild protest, Horan pushed his chair back and opened his top drawer. "Not if you have something you need to show me. Which will be the only way Young sees the light of day again."

Scott's mouth went dry. Somehow, he hadn't expected Horan

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to go this far. He wasn't sure what he had expected. "I don't have anything to show you if I don't have your word first."

"I don't make promises without some kind of guarantee." His wrist snapped up, the keys he'd pulled out of his desk jingling against his palm. "Are you willing to gamble Hector's life away because I'm simply being reasonable? You're the one who came to me, remember."

Scott smoothly rose to his feet, his face set in a calm mask. Horan clearly expected Scott to take him to wherever he was holding whatever Horan was searching for. The fact that he did not know the answer to either of those questions was immaterial when compared to the fact that he did not know what Horan would do to him if he discovered Scott had been bluffing this whole time.

"No, I'm not willing to gamble Hector's life away. I want to make sure he sleeps in his own bed tonight."

Horan's smile was cold and dry. "Ah, now there are those windmills I was expecting from you. Glad you haven't let me down, Scott." He brushed past Scott without a backward glance, fully expecting him to follow.

Scott knew he wasn't going to extract any sort of promise from Horan, but a promise wouldn't do him as much good as a confession would. He had to keep Horan talking while they were going... *Shit, where are we going to go?*

He stayed a step behind Horan, following him respectfully through the Hall of Justice. He knew enough of Tana Mayfield to know she had a very limited life. By all accounts, the only time she wasn't at the opera house, she was at Woodson, or at home. Horan's men had already torn her apartment apart, and Woodson was clean. That only left one place.

CHAPTER 18

The insistent ring of his phone tugged Duke from an unexpectedly heavy sleep, his misshapen dreams lumbering away with all the reluctance he had in waking. He almost sighed happily when the ringing stopped, but seconds later, it started again, driving his eyelids open as he twisted to reach for it on his nightstand.

He immediately groaned. Damn it. He'd forgotten about the stitches. That explained his difficulty waking, too. Drugs always wreaked havoc with his system.

The phone stopped and started a third time by the time he reached it. The name on the screen woke him up the rest of the way.

“What is it, Finch?” He glanced over at the other side of the

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bed, noting the absence of Scott's clothing. "Don't tell me you lost him already."

"No, sir." The line sounded hollow. Finch was in his car. "I did exactly what you told me to. I followed you after you left the hospital, but when Mr. Scott never left your house last night, I set up a stakeout across the street. But you never told me anything about following DA Horan."

Ice water ran through his veins. "What? What are you talking about?"

"DA Horan. I'm following his car right now."

"Why are you following him?"

"Because Mr. Scott is with him."

No, no, no. What the hell were you thinking, James? Duke stood and went straight to his closet, yanking the door open to get to some clean clothes. "Tell me how you got from outside my house to behind Horan."

"Mr. Scott left this morning at six twenty-seven. He went to an apartment building and came out in different clothes, so I'm guessing that was his place. Then, he went to the Hall of Justice. I didn't follow him in, because, well, it's the Hall of Justice. He came back out eighteen minutes later with DA Horan, walked with him to his car, and got into it with him. I called you as soon as I got into traffic behind them."

He yanked on a pair of pants. "Where are you headed?"

"Considering it's the DA? It looks like they're going to City Hall."

City Hall. That was reasonable. Scott might have had a previously scheduled meeting with Horan. It could be about any number of things.

But City Hall was right next to the ballet company and the

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opera house. And knowing how Scott had responded to finding out about Horan's involvement, Duke suspected this had been an impromptu meeting at best.

"I'm on my way," he said. "I'm going to call you back as soon as I'm in my car, and you can give me an update on where they are."

"Do I get out and follow them on foot?"

"Only if they actually go to City Hall."

"Where else would they go?"

If you only knew. "Just do what I tell you, Finch. And if they stop before I call you back, let me know ASAP."

He dressed in record time, years of swift changes finally feeling worth it. With his weapon firmly strapped to his shoulder, he grabbed his coat, phone, and keys and headed for the door. He deliberately ignored the painkillers. He needed to be as sharp as possible to deal with Scott and Horan.

He rang Finch before he'd started his engine. "Where are you?"

"Just crossing Market."

Shit, they're almost there. Duke slapped on the siren and doubled his speed. "Stay on the line. I want to know what's going on."

"Is something wrong, detective? You don't sound like you usually do."

"I'm fine."

"Is it because of the DA?" Clearly, Finch didn't believe him, which, under other circumstances, would have reassured Duke that he'd chosen the right man. Right now, he just wanted Finch to drop it. "You don't think the DA's in danger, too, just because he's with Mr. Scott, do you?"

Duke hadn't actually considered Scott being in any danger at

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all at the moment, except to say something foolish and blow any chance they had of nailing Horan to the wall. But now that Finch mentioned it, he wondered if he was being a little naïve. He was pretty sure Horan was responsible for ordering the first hit on Scott, even if he didn't have the proof. He was the only one to have the kind of power necessary to pull as many strings as he did. And if Scott had jumped the gun, why would Horan ever let him walk away? Horan was prepared to put Young behind bars for murders he didn't commit. He'd likely been responsible in one way or another for Tana's death, for whatever it was of his that she had. It wasn't just that information like this could kill his career, no matter how many connections he had. It was that he'd already demonstrated a lack of control in ridding himself of obstacles in his way.

Scott excelled at getting in the way.

There was always the chance he was wrong, of course. It was entirely likely that Tana Mayfield was the corrupt one in this little play, and Horan had been executing his job in trying to obtain necessary evidence. But Duke's gut said that was wrong.

Scott's gut had said the same thing.

And enough of the known facts supported their instincts.

"The DA is the danger," Duke said. He extinguished his twinge of guilt at involving the cadet even more than he already had. Now was not the time. "And I don't think they're going to City Hall."

"Where else would they be going?"

"The opera house. Or the ballet school across the street."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew. But I want you prepared for a worst case scenario."

The sounds of traffic filled the line. He'd give Finch all the

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time he wanted to digest, just as long as he didn't do something foolish like call in reinforcements.

"They're pulling into a parking structure, sir. What do you want me to do?"

Duke checked his speed and the road ahead. It was going to take him another ten minutes to get there, at the very least. He wasn't as concerned as he'd been about losing them, but if Finch let them out of his sight, there was no telling what Horan might try pulling.

"I changed my mind. Follow them on foot. Do you have your weapon?"

"Yes, but—"

"No, buts. I'll be there in ten minutes." Even if killed him.

* * *

They reached the opera house much sooner than Scott expected. It was almost ridiculous. Horan was a powerful man, but he couldn't bend the very fabric of space and time. He couldn't make morning San Francisco traffic bow to his whims. Scott had thought they would have a good thirty minutes, if not forty-five. But everything had gone exactly right for Horan, and exactly wrong for Scott, and they parked near City Hall in what must have been record time. Scott still didn't have his story straight. He didn't know what Horan would do when he realized that Scott was bluffing the whole time.

He didn't want to find out, either.

Horan got out of the car without a word and pressed a button on his keyring that noiselessly opened the trunk. After he pulled out a soft black leather laptop bag, he slammed the trunk shut

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again, the noise echoing against the concrete walls of the parking structure.

“Well?” he said, when Scott didn’t move. “Lead the way.”

Scott wasn’t sure what happened. Just two hours earlier, it had seemed like a good idea to confront Horan. What else was he going to do? Go to his best buddies, the police? Maybe really try to tell the state bar that one of the most popular, well-respected district attorneys in California was guilty of ethics violations without a hint of evidence? He knew that Horan would trip himself up, but he had hoped it would happen sooner than this.

But he insisted on bringing his laptop case. Did that mean he was looking for something computer related? Some sort of disc or thumb drive? That wasn’t much to work with, but it was better than the nothing he had before.

Scott kept his steps slow and even, wishing that Horan would at least walk at his side. He hated the feeling of the man at his back, but the one advantage to this position was Horan couldn’t read his expression. The opera house loomed in front of him, and there, across the street, was the ballet school. Duke had visited the school yesterday. Tana had worked in the school’s office. That was the most logical place to go.

When they crossed the street, Horan finally closed the distance. “How did you figure out where it was?”

“Process of elimination. Where else would she hide it? Her place was clean, so I started on top of the list of possibilities and worked my way down.”

“Did Young tell you it was here?”

“No,” Scott snapped, his temper rising to the surface before he could dampen it. “The only reason Young is involved in this at all is...” He paused, reconsidering making a straightforward

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accusation of murder. "Because he was at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"He seems to have a bad habit of that."

"No, he never denied his earlier charges. But didn't it occur to you that anybody with a brain would see that Hector doesn't even match the likely profile of a murderer?"

"I'm sure that's what Johnny Fender thought, too."

"You're going to stick with that ridiculous story to the bitter end, huh?"

Horan smiled as they came to a stop in front of the closed front door. "I think the end is much sooner than you realize, Mr. Scott."

Scott *hoped* it would be much sooner than he realized. With a little luck, Duke would already be on his way. Unless it never occurred to Finch to contact Duke? The thought made him feel a little bit sick.

As he opened the door, a gust of cold air sent a shiver down his spine. Goose bumps dotted his arm and neck, and the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach didn't go away. In fact, it only intensified. He was in the middle of fucking things up, and would probably finish the job if Duke didn't get there.

"It's in the office," he said, his words not betraying his tumult of emotion.

"Of course, it is."

Horan paused in the foyer, resting his case on a long, low table that adorned the wall. His back blocked the view, but Scott saw well enough to note Horan opening the bag and pulling out a slim laptop. His attention honed in on the computer. He'd guessed right, then. That knowledge, however, wasn't quite as fulfilling as he'd hoped.

"I suppose I should thank you for doing the job for me." Horan

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turned back to him, leaving the laptop and case on the table. In his hand was a Smith and Wesson .38, aimed straight at Scott's chest. "But you're not quite done yet."

"What? You're going to shoot me?" Scott smiled with all the bravado he could muster. "You think nobody here will notice?"

"For one thing, nobody's here yet. Classes aren't in session, and rehearsals won't start until later. But it doesn't matter, because you and I will be long gone before anybody arrives anyway." He nodded toward a closed door behind Scott. "Go on. Get it."

Scott knew he could overpower the other man. He did work out on a regular basis, and Horan was quite a few years older than him. On the other hand, he wasn't Superman. Even he couldn't deflect bullets.

"Yeah," he murmured, pushing the door open. "Let's get it."

* * *

Duke parked illegally around the corner, leaving the siren in place to stave off any potential protests, and scanned the area. The streets were already starting to fill with people on their way to work, heads down, focusing inward. There was no sign of Scott or Horan, but Finch's last message, terse and anxious, had indicated they'd gone inside.

As much as he'd hated making the call, Duke told Finch to wait to enter. Scott hadn't appeared to be under duress, and the only item in either man's hand was a laptop case. Duke was praying that any immediate danger would happen elsewhere.

His phone vibrated against his hip when he rounded the corner. Duke paused and tapped the connection on his earpiece, frowning as he looked around for Finch. "Do not tell me you went inside,"

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he said through gritted teeth.

“Duke?” It wasn’t Finch. Captain Sager’s concerned voice filled the line. “What are you doing on the job? You just got shot. You’re supposed to be home, recuperating, or at the very most, tied to your desk doing paperwork.”

Damn it. This was the last thing he needed right now.

With one last sweep in search of Finch, Duke stopped and stepped closer to the building, out of the way of pedestrians with his back to the sidewalk. “I’m fine, sir. I’m just doing some follow-up on Mayfield. Nothing strenuous.”

“You answered and thought I was someone else. Someone who you thought might be disobeying an order. What kind of follow-up are you conducting?”

He couldn’t tell Sager. He had no idea how deeply involved he was. As far as he knew, Horan had called Sager specifically to make sure Duke stayed far, far away from whatever he and Scott were doing inside. Lying to Sager was one of the hardest things he had ever done in his entire career.

“Interviews with people at the ballet company. Regarding her work there.”

“Her work? Not her dancing.”

“It’s what she was specifically involved in prior to her murder, sir.”

“That’s good. Make sure you look at everything, even if something looks untouchable, understand?”

His chest tightened. “Something, or someone, sir?”

A door closed in the background. “If you’re asking that question, you already know the answer.”

He did. The question remained, though, why was Sager pushing him in that direction? “I’ll make sure.”

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Good,” Sager repeated. “Now, we need to talk.”

“I can’t. Maybe this afternoon—”

“Is too late. There are things you and I need to discuss, Owen.” His tone reverted back to the warm concern that had started the call, but it was the use of Duke’s first name that really caught his attention. “Look, I won’t keep you from your interviews for long. Find someplace secure you and I can meet for coffee near the opera house. I can be down there in half an hour.”

Duke’s mind raced. “You don’t want me to come into the office?”

“No, this conversation is for our ears only. It’s overdue.”

“What’s it about?”

Sager sighed. “If I was free to talk about that, I would have you come in, now wouldn’t I? Look. I’m on my way. I’ll call once I’m parked to find out where you are.”

The line went dead. Duke swore under his breath as he pocketed his phone again. He didn’t need the deadline. He needed to find James. But the fact that Sager seemed determined to talk about something suggested maybe everything wasn’t quite as cut and dry as he’d originally thought. That leant him hope.

Hope renewed his focus.

He approached the front of the building with casual caution, wondering yet again where Finch had gotten himself off to. It would have been nice to have back-up, but if Finch was going to wimp out and run, Duke wasn’t going to hold it against him. He was still green. He hadn’t signed up for problems with the DA. The fact that he was likely protecting his future career was understandable, if not necessarily honorable.

The door opened easily. Compared to the morning light, the interior was gloomy and cold, getting even more so when Duke

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closed the door silently behind him. It took a few moments of rapid blinking for his sight to adjust, but he didn't need to see details to hear the faint voices emanating from off the front hall.

"Stop dawdling," Horan barked.

Without making a sound, Duke reached inside his jacket and pulled out his weapon. His other hand dipped into his coat pocket. He was suddenly very glad he still carried one of Scott's many recorders. He would have preferred holding onto Young's interrogation, but he suspected recording Horan was far more important.

"I'm not dawdling. They've moved things around since I was here last." Duke heard the sound of a file drawer sliding along its tracks and then slamming closed again. "You need to learn a little patience."

What's Scott doing? Ransacking the ballet company? Why?

"If you had any idea how patient I've been, you'd give me a medal."

"How'd Tana end up with it anyway? That's the only thing I can't figure."

Horan snorted. "You figured out she hid it here, and you couldn't figure out those idiots at Woodson thought they could beat me at my own game? I can't believe I was actually nervous when you took Young's case."

"Nervous enough to hire some thug to shoot at me?"

Duke held his breath while he waited for Horan to answer.

"My problems all along have stemmed from letting other people finish tasks I should have done myself. I think I learned to delegate just a little too well."

"*That's* your problem?" Amazingly, Scott almost sounded like he was laughing. Amusement definitely colored his voice. "I think

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your problems might stem from the fact that you're an egomaniacal douche."

"That's a matter of perspective. It's understandable yours would be skewed. After all, you're going to lose. Again, though I suppose after botching the Jenkins case, you might be used to it."

"I don't mind losing when the fight is fair. When everybody is following the same rules. But you wouldn't know anything about having a fair fight, would you? I don't understand. Did you just get greedy?"

"I didn't—"

A door slammed at the far end of the hallway. Duke flattened against the wall next to the open office and squinted into the darkness.

"Shit," Horan muttered. His voice was closer, like he'd come closer to the doorway. "Well, it looks like your time just ran out, Scott. Let's go."

"Wait. Where are we going? We're not finished here yet."

"I didn't tell you to talk, I told you to *move*. Now."

Duke tensed at the edge in Horan's voice. He didn't sound like a man who expected to be disobeyed. He sounded like a man who could make an order with every expectation that it would be followed.

"Fine. Fine. I'm going." Scott's voice was closer now, and he took the first step into the corridor.

Their eyes met. Scott's widened for a split second, but he didn't falter, never made a move to indicate he'd seen something he wasn't expecting. Duke jerked his head behind him, toward the front of the building.

He didn't have time to hope Scott understood. Horan appeared in the doorway, a .38 aimed at Scott's back.

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Duke lashed out, smashing his heel into Horan's wrist. The gun went flying deeper down the hall, a bullet ricocheting off a wall from the involuntary shot Horan had made. As Scott dove to the floor, sliding along the smooth tile toward the entrance, Duke grabbed Horan's shoulder and shoved him fast first into the jamb, pressing the muzzle of his weapon against the back of Horan's head.

"I suggest you not move, Horan," he ground out. "I'm just itching for an excuse to hurt you."

"Make him tell us just what the hell we're looking for," Scott said, pushing himself back to his feet.

"What do you mean?" Horan tried to turn to glare at Scott, but Duke shoved him harder against the wood, earning a muffled oomph. "You're the one who brought me here."

"Yeah, well, I lied. I'm a liar. What is it? A thumb drive? A CD?"

"Please. Like I'm actually going to help you incriminate me."

Duke tightened his grip. "That's okay. We've got reasonable cause to search the office now. And if I know Ms. Kunz the way I think I do, she's going to know fairly quickly which one of the things just doesn't belong with the others."

Running footsteps echoed down the hall. From the corner of his eye, Duke saw Finch approach, skidding to a halt when he reached the downed .38.

"Leave it," Duke ordered, when Finch stooped to pick it up. "Get some uniforms here. Now. James, get a chair from the office."

He obeyed without questioning why Duke wanted a chair, but as soon as he returned, he addressed Horan again. "Not only do we have reasonable cause for a warrant, it's not going to look good for

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the former DA to be charged with kidnapping, attempted murder, and anything else I can make stick.”

Horan stumbled when Duke grabbed his arm and shoved him into the chair. “You don’t have anything that’ll make those charges stick.”

Without taking his weapon off Horan, Duke reached into his pocket and pulled out the recorder. “We have enough to start a lot of good people asking a *lot* of good questions.”

“I don’t have enough to make the charges stick?” Scott snorted. “Except for the eyewitnesses, the weapon, the testimony of an exemplary detective, and the recording of our entire encounter. You’re living in a dream world if you think you’re going to get away with any of this unscathed.”

Horan didn’t utter another word. He just glared at Scott with so much loathing, Duke instinctively edged sideways to protect James.

“It’s over,” he said, reaching for his phone. “No more cover-ups.”

CHAPTER 19

Former District Attorney Horan was probably the most hated man in the San Francisco criminal justice system, but James Scott was definitely a close second. More than one person had cornered him and demanded to know if it was worth it. If Hector Young was *worth* it. Was he proud of himself? Did he sleep well at night? Knowing that hundreds of criminals were on the street again—or would be soon—because Horan’s guilt had been enough to raise reasonable doubt and trigger appeals on every case the DA’s office had prosecuted in the previous four years. Was it worth it?

Privately, Scott didn’t know if the answer was yes. He didn’t need to be told that some very nasty customers were now free as birds. When you weighed one man’s life against the greater good, what was the right answer? Scott didn’t know. He couldn’t even

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begin to know the answer to that question, and he didn't see why he had to be the man with all the answers, anyway.

Publicly, Scott maintained that it was Horan's decisions that brought them to that point. Horan, who hired a man to break into Tana's apartment and "scare her a bit." It was Horan who tried to cover that murder with the arrest of an innocent man, and then tried to blackmail that man with the murder of another innocent. It was Horan who was willing to sacrifice the careers of not one, not two, but three good cops. And what could anybody say back to that? Nobody wanted to get caught defending Horan in this scandal. Updates still hit the national news on a daily basis, and while Scott didn't mind being in the national spotlight—being a hero in the national spotlight—the people who were struggling to pick up the pieces wanted to avoid the cameras and the questions at all costs.

Scott was a little annoyed that he still didn't know what Horan was willing to kill for. As soon as the pen drive had been recovered from the ballet school, it was confiscated as evidence and that was that. It would be revealed at the trial, of course. If there even *was* a trial. Horan had fucked up big time, but if he had anything that would implicate anybody else in his sphere of influence, he would avoid all that ugliness and probably plea bargain down. Scott fully expected that the state bar would strip Horan of his ability to practice law, but Horan wouldn't see a single day inside a jail cell.

Tana Mayfield would never dance again. Johnny Fender had probably been terrified and confused in his final moments. But DA Horan wouldn't spend one second in prison. That was just the way of the world.

James was sincerely starting to hate the world. There was a dark cloud around his head, and no matter what, he couldn't shake

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it. He had won. He had been right. From day fucking one, he had been *right*, and that should have been enough to make his entire year. It certainly made his career. Six weeks to the day that he took Hector Young's case because of a gut instinct, James Scott became the youngest partner in the history of Chesterson, Chesterson, & Terrell. Even that honor couldn't lift that cloud, and when he had called Duke to celebrate, Duke had sounded genuinely sorry when he turned him down, claiming he was absolutely buried under an avalanche of work.

Of course he was, because Scott hadn't been the only one given a promotion. And when Duke had called *him* to celebrate, what had Scott said? Had he jumped at the chance to go out with the guy he was falling for? No, because he had been up to his ass in briefs, and he had declined without thinking about it, falling into his own habits like Duke had never arrived to shock him out of his workaholic tendencies.

Had Owen been angry with him? Leaving without a note or explanation, potentially fucking everything up. Potentially going down in flames and dragging Owen down with him. Scott supposed he couldn't blame him for being angry. Everything *had* worked out in the end, but no thanks to him. The time to ask probably would have been right after Horan's arrest, but as the days slid into weeks, and the entire Bay Area was plunged into unseasonably cold weather, the question seemed more ridiculous and less important. When he called Duke, if he called Duke, it would be because he had something important to say.

Scott felt like he had fewer and fewer important things to say to anybody, and he didn't understand why. Or maybe he did understand, but he couldn't do anything about it.

When Monica buzzed him at four-thirty on a Friday afternoon

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in the first week of December, he answered it with a curt tone that was growing all too familiar.

“Your next appointment is here,” she said.

He frowned as he flipped over to his calendar. “I don’t have a four-thirty scheduled. Who is it?”

She was stopped from answering by a sharp knock at his closed door. Disconnecting with a silent promise to talk to Monica about just sending people back, he pushed away from the desk to answer it.

His heart ground to a halt when he was greeted by Duke’s dark gaze.

“May I come in?” Duke asked, when Scott didn’t speak for several seconds.

“Yes, please.” He stepped back and allowed Duke to pass inside, shutting the door behind him. “I’m just a little...surprised to see you. That’s all.”

“Well, that’s my fault. I asked Monica to help keep it that way.” He looked good. Damn good. As he took a seat in the chair in front of Scott’s desk, he showed no signs of discomfort from the gunshot wound, and the black eyes that followed Scott were bright and warm. “How are you doing?”

“Good. I’ve got this big new office, a whole staff of people under me, and plenty of work to keep me busy,” Scott said lightly, hoping he looked like he was actually happy about all these facts. “What about you?”

“A lot of the same, though I don’t get the fancy office or staff to do my grunt work for me.” Duke said it with a small smile, one Scott couldn’t help but respond to. “I kept expecting our paths to cross again, but maybe fate only does that once.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Scott perched on the corner of

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his desk. He didn't want to sit in his chair. That would make the whole discussion much too formal, and since he didn't know what Duke was actually doing there, he thought it best to keep things on a friendly, casual level. "I guess we've both had too many fires to put out in the past couple of months."

"And some that are still raging." He grimaced. "Well, I hope so, anyway."

"I...what do you mean?" Scott asked carefully.

Duke brushed at something on his pants leg. "I hoped we could go out for dinner tonight. I talked to Monica. She cleared your schedule, so if you'd like to join me, you're free to. If you'd like to."

Scott wanted to ask just how Duke had pulled that off, but it didn't matter. "You...you're asking me on a date?"

"Yes." His eyes twinkled. "I still owe you a first one, whether you agree with that or not."

For what felt like the first time in weeks, Scott smiled. It practically erupted from him. "I would be honored, then. I just need to wrap up this one thing and go home to change."

Duke's gaze swept over him. Scott thought it lingered a few seconds longer on his hips, though he fully recognized that might have been his overeager imagination. "Why do you need to change? You look great."

"Because I want to feel pretty on our first date. And because these are work clothes, not going out to dinner clothes."

"It's a suit. And you look fantastic in it." Duke stood again and stepped closer, though his hands remained regretfully at his sides. "I made reservations for six, for someplace you'll fit in wearing exactly that, so unless you want to spoil two weeks of finagling by insisting on going home and changing, just finish up whatever

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you're working on and let's get out of here, okay? We are way overdue for this date."

"You've been planning this for two weeks? Why didn't you call me two weeks ago?" *Or even before that.* "I won't insist on going home. The last thing I want to do is ruin your plans. You just sit back down, and I'll be done in a second."

Except, when he went back to his laptop and looked at the email he had left unfinished, he couldn't remember what he'd been writing about. For a moment, he couldn't even remember who he had been writing to. Duke was there, as gorgeous as he remembered, waiting for him. How could some email matter in the face of that?

Fuck it. He closed his laptop. "Right. Let's go."

Duke smiled the whole time they took to leave the office, nodding at Monica when they said good night, and leading him out into the cool wintry air. "Are you okay if we leave your car here? I'll drive you back to pick it up in the morning."

Scott didn't know why Duke thought he could say things like that and still take him to dinner first. Scott wanted to pull him close and get lost in his mouth until all the barriers between them were completely gone. He wanted to kiss away the last several months. He wanted to know if Duke still felt the same way, wanted to know if he still sounded the same when he was completely overwhelmed. If he thought for one second Duke would agree, he would suggest they just go directly to Duke's place.

"Yeah. My car will be fine here."

Neither said another word until they were in the car, buckled up, and on the road. The heavy traffic annoyed Scott, but Duke didn't seem fazed by it, navigating cleanly through the throng. He turned on a jazz station and kept the music low, tapping out the

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rhythm on the steering wheel.

Scott had never seen him so relaxed. The question of why, though, lingered in the back of his thoughts.

"It's hard to believe it's December already," Duke said. "Would you believe they've been playing Christmas music at the precinct since before Halloween?"

Scott grimaced. "Don't they know the rules on that? It's not supposed to start until after Thanksgiving."

"Captain Sager said we needed to start spreading good cheer early this year. Oh, Saucedo's back. On restricted duty, but he's still back. We've been teaming up on a couple of open cases, trying to get some headway on them."

"That's good. I'm glad to hear he wasn't down for the count. Did he or Sager get reprimanded at all?"

"They both got notices put in their files, but Horan ordered Sager's cooperation. He's the one who's taking all the steam on this." They coasted to a stop at the last red light before turning onto the highway. "Would you believe Sager specifically put me on the Mayfield case because he knew I wouldn't settle for the answers I got? He was counting on me bulldogging it the entire time."

Scott arched his brow. "I don't know if I do believe it. It sounds like it could be of justification after the fact."

"It could be," Duke conceded. "But I don't think so. The morning we busted Horan, he almost flat-out told me to follow the money at Tana's job. And the reason he got to the scene so fast was because he'd called me just before I got there, demanding a chat with me somewhere safe. I think he's on the up and up about this."

"I hope you're right about that," Scott said sincerely. "I know how difficult all of that was for you. I wouldn't want to see you go

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through it again.”

“Thanks.” As they eased into the intersection, Duke glanced sideways at him. “I’ve missed this. Talking to you about everything.”

“I’ve...I miss it, too. I’m sorry. I don’t really know what happened, which is weak, I know. But it’s true.”

“We both let it happen. Work. More work. The fact that we’re both married to our careers.” They glided effortlessly onto the highway, heading toward the coast. “I owe you as much of an apology, too.”

“Owen...do you think that’s going to change?”

“Honestly? No. But I wouldn’t want you so badly in my life if you weren’t that dedicated to what you do. I think it means...we need to decide if we miss each other enough to figure out a way to make us as important as the job.”

Scott snorted. “Given the hours we both keep, probably the easiest way to make sure we see each other is if we live together.”

“Then, maybe that’s the choice we end up making.”

Scott had been joking, but that was pretty insignificant when compared to the fact that Duke *wasn’t* joking. “Really? You’d be willing to consider that?”

“I’ve missed you.” Like that answered everything. “I’m not going to dismiss out of hand a viable option to getting what I want.” He shot him a small smile. “How about we wait and see how this date goes first? You might decide your memory isn’t quite as good as you think it is.”

There was absolutely nothing wrong with his memory, but Scott inclined his head, recognizing the wisdom of Duke’s suggestion. Before, they had both been in the middle of a highly stressful situation. On top of that, Duke had been teetering on a

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world that didn't make sense, in the midst of a very real personal crisis. The chemistry possible in a situation like that might not be something they could recapture.

"Hector sends me the occasional email. He moved to Oregon last month and he's already found some steady work. I don't think I'll hear from him often, though. I think he just wants to forget about all this."

"I can't blame him. But it's good to hear he's moved on."

"And stayed out of trouble. I'm sure if Horan heard about that, he would be shocked," Scott said dryly. "Or he'd accuse me of lying. So...have you seen what's on the drive? Do you know what he was trying to hide?"

"You know I'm not supposed to reveal details of an ongoing investigation, James." Disappointment flashed through Scott at the response, but Duke continued speaking. "He was playing silent partner to a lot of the shadier dealings out at Woodson. For a substantial cut of their profits and the occasional snitch, he made sure everything they did either flew under the radar, or got so bogged down in technicalities they got thrown out, or redirected department resources to prevent them getting caught. One of the men at Woodson got tired of Horan's greed, recorded some private meetings as well as managed to steal some of his personal files, and handed the whole thing over to Tana, expecting her to go to the police."

"But she didn't take it to the police. She hid it at the ballet school. Was she trying to get money out of him? A larger donation to the company?" Even as he said the words, they didn't make much sense to him. Why would Tana care about the size of his donation?

"Horan's not talking, but according to the pieces we've been

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able to glean from some of the flunkies he hired, we think she was blackmailing him to pull strings and get her out of the Corps.”

“He had those kinds of strings? Fuck, why not just get her out of the Corps and call it good? Why let things go this far?” Scott shook his head. “I’m sure Horan had his own reasons, but it’s not like she wanted something completely beyond the pale.”

“The man is all about control. I think he honestly never expected it to go as far as it did.”

Their conversation had distracted him from noticing they were on Ocean Beach until Duke turned and started south, parallel to the Pacific. The sun had already set, but there was still enough of a glow reflecting off the ocean to bring a smile to Scott’s face.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Duke’s voice was as wistful as Scott’s sudden mood. “I absolutely love it out here.”

Scott directed his attention to Duke’s profile, remembering the first time he had met the detective. That seemed like a thousand years ago, and that man had been somebody completely different. He had such a hard exterior, and his eyes had been so impersonal, not even offering Scott a hint of what hid behind the mask. Now Scott had wondered how he could believe Duke was anything other than an open book.

“We should make it a point to come out here more often.”

“We might have to keep it simple and stick to the hiking trails most of the time.” He slowed down and pulled into the parking lot at the Cliff House, the light spilling out from its walls of glass windows. “Sutro’s doesn’t fit in my salary range on a regular basis.”

“Owen, I’ve made partner. I’ll take you out to dinner, anywhere you like, every night, for the rest of your life.”

Duke didn’t have a response to that, but smiled at him as he

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eased the car into park. When they exited the car, he came around the front of it fast enough to be there when Scott slammed it shut, and rested his hand in the small of Scott's back to guide them to the front door.

One of the Cliff House's best selling features was the panoramic view it gave of the ocean. Sutro's was lined with windows all the way around, and the restaurant was mostly full already when Duke spoke to the hostess. His hand never left Scott's back as they followed her to a table on the far side, right against the glass with a perfect vantage on the Pacific. He even pulled the chair out for Scott before taking his own seat.

"The Balcony Lounge has jazz here on Friday nights, if you're interested in sticking around for it," Duke said.

"Can we make it a date for next week? Honestly, I kind of want to get you to myself tonight."

He thought he caught a stain of pink in Duke's cheeks before he disappeared behind a menu. "Sure. Next week it is, then."

"I'm holding you to that, you know. And I expect you to hold me to it, too."

"I didn't let you get out of it tonight, did I?"

"Good point."

Scott tried to study the menu, but while everything looked absolutely delectable, nothing looked quite as good as Duke did. Nothing seemed entirely appetizing, but Scott knew he couldn't eat at a place like Sutro's without full appreciation of the meal.

"Would you be willing to order for me?"

The quizzical look on Duke's face was actually adorable. "Really? Why?"

Scott smiled. "Because I have a feeling you know this menu better than I do. And because being this close you has me so

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distracted I can't even think straight."

The stain spread into a full-blown flush, though Duke didn't hide it this time. "All right. Do you have any allergies, or anything you particularly dislike?"

Scott wasn't entirely sure why, but he loved the way Duke asked the question. So matter-of-fact. Of course it was information he needed to have—a shellfish allergy could kill him and that would absolutely ruin their date. Still, Scott found it completely endearing.

"No, no allergies. And I'm not in a picky mood."

Duke nodded and turned back to the menu with what looked like renewed vigor. When the waitress came by to take their orders, Scott deferred automatically to Owen.

"To start, we'll have the braised mussels with harissa, and the crab cakes. Then, I'll have the maple leaf duck, and my dining partner will have the seared scallops with the saffron pearl pasta."

"And to drink?"

Duke looked to Scott. "Viognier all right?" At Scott's nod, Duke handed both menus to the waitress and smiled. "The Voss, please."

Scott grinned once she was gone. "I was thinking of ordering the seared scallops, actually."

"Oh, good. They're excellent. And you can have whichever starter you want. Or we can share."

"No, we're definitely going to share." He sipped his water and studied Duke over the glass. He wanted to apologize again. He shouldn't have waited for Duke to come to him. He should have held up his end of the deal. He should have tried harder instead of wasting weeks and months. Especially since the gray cloud that had been ruining everything was suddenly gone. "Thank you."

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He almost expected Duke to question what the gratitude was for, but instead, Owen shook his head. "You don't have to thank me. Just have a good time."

"When I'm with you, that's nearly a guarantee."

Duke cocked a brow. "You realize that only makes both of us look like bigger fools for not finding a way to do this sooner, right?"

"Yes. And I'm not even going to try to defend myself against that charge. I was an idiot not to call you back. But a part of me thought that maybe...well, you had pretty good reason to be annoyed with me."

"Because you skipped out of my bed without leaving me a note to go and confront the one person we needed to make sure didn't figure out we were on to him because he had all the power in the world to make the evidence disappear, without actually having anything on him except your powers to bluff?" His mouth curved. "I wasn't annoyed. I was terrified Horan would do exactly what he did. And then I was just relieved that the worst thing that happened was tearing open a few of my stitches."

Scott winced. "When you put it like that, it sounds really, really stupid."

"It just proves neither one of us is perfect. As much as we both hate to admit it."

"I guess until you nearly destroy everything and get yourself killed, I'll just have to acknowledge that you're slightly more perfect than me."

Duke's smile softened. "If that's what it'll take to get a second date, I can live with that. For the time being."

"You already got your second date. Now you're working on a promise for the third date."

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“Well, if dinner doesn’t do it, then I’ll just have to make sure the rest of the night does.”

Scott grinned. “Between you and me, I think dinner will seal the deal.”

Not that he wasn’t looking forward to the rest of the night. He hadn’t been with anybody, not even Ben, since the last time he spent the night with Duke. He kept telling himself it was because he was simply too busy, but now he suspected there was far more to it than that. Duke was the man he wanted, and Scott wasn’t going to forget it again.

CHAPTER 20

Dinner had been perfect. The food came out in a timely manner, their waitress had been cheerful and accommodating without being annoying, and Scott had seemed to enjoy everything Duke had chosen for him. The wine helped. It loosened Duke's tongue enough to relax and realize it was finally happening, that James hadn't uttered a single protest or exhibited an ounce of reluctance ever since he'd arrived at his office. He hadn't been convinced it would actually work, even if he wouldn't let Scott see that. A lot of time had passed. Scott was a man of position and growing power in the city, while Duke was still just a cop. Everything that had transpired between the two of them could have been unique to the circumstances at the time, and he had to be prepared that the night would turn out a total flop.

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So far, flop was completely off the menu.

Once the check was paid, Duke took one look out the window at the black horizon and decided the view wasn't worth sticking around any longer. "Normally, I'd suggest walking over to Camera Obscura, and then taking it onto the trails, but I think tonight warrants breaking my routine a little bit." He casually folded the napkin on his lap and set it on the table. "Would you like coffee back at my place?"

Scott smiled. "How routine is your routine? Do you bring a lot of guys up here?"

The way Scott said it made him flush in embarrassment. "You would be number five in the last six years. Though I haven't been out here for over a year."

"That's a bit of a shame. A place like this should be enjoyed more often than that." Scott finished the last bit in his glass of wine. "I think right now, coffee sounds perfect."

Duke rose, musing on how Scott could take something so innocent and turn it around into something else entirely. The one thing he'd missed most about James was how surprising life always was when he was around. In a good way. He kept Duke on his toes, because he never knew exactly what was going to come next, but never to the extent where misgivings could take root. No, Scott's surprises were more like...different perspectives on the same situation. A new vantage that Duke couldn't often deny was better.

His hand went automatically to the small of Scott's back as they left the restaurant. He wanted to tangle their fingers instead, but the display was more intimate than he wanted to share with strangers yet. He needed Scott for himself for a while. He only hoped the small, possessive gesture might relay how he felt well

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enough for Scott not to take offense at the lack of other physical contact.

The wind had picked up in the time they'd been inside, the temperature far chillier. They hastened their pace to get to the car, but when they reached the passenger side door, Duke gripped Scott's shoulder and prompted him to turn around.

"I need to do this," he murmured. Without debating the appropriateness of his actions, he slid his hands up to cup Scott's face and held him still while he bent for a kiss.

Duke had intended for the kiss to be brief—just something to hold him over until they reached his place. But his intentions were tossed aside when Scott gripped the back of his neck and pushed his tongue into Duke's mouth. It seemed like forever since the last time they'd touched each other, but Scott's mouth was so familiar, felt so perfect against his, that it seemed like there had been no break in their relationship at all.

He forgot the cold, forgot the biting wind, forgot everything but the man in front of him and the hunger in his kiss. Duke sank into the caress with an abandon that might have frightened him any other time, but this was what he'd wanted when he'd made the arrangements, this was what he'd needed ever since suggesting Scott wouldn't need his car until the morning. Heat he associated only with James washed through him, leaving him hard and aching, his hands shaking with desire.

"You keep this up, and I'm not going to be able to wait until we get back to my place." Duke had to swallow in an attempt to clear the raggedness of his voice, but he couldn't quite bring himself to let Scott go. "I don't think it would be a good idea for us to get arrested for public indecency right now."

"You wouldn't get arrested. You're a cop. There's still

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professional courtesy in this town, right?”

Duke snorted. “They’d arrest me, just because they’d think it was funny.” He leaned in for another nip at Scott’s lower lip, then let his hands drop to his side. “Though I almost think fucking you against the car would be worth it.”

“Don’t say things like that unless you plan to follow through with it.” Despite Scott’s warning, his hand went to Duke’s hip and he held him close. “Though if you’re not willing to fuck me against the car, in the backseat of the car would also be acceptable.”

He smiled. He loved this man’s eagerness. “Next week. It’ll give you something to look forward to.” He cocked a brow. “Unless this is your way of saying you don’t like my bed.”

“Your bed is great. But the backseat is much closer and...hell, I’ve missed you a lot.”

Scott was serious. Any other time, Duke would take him up on it. But...

“I need for this first time to be better than a quickie in my car, James. I know that sounds ridiculous, but...well, I just do.”

Scott kissed him once more, then released him and pushed away from the car. “It doesn’t sound ridiculous, but we better get moving. You’re driving me crazy.”

Duke unlocked the doors and let Scott open his own. If he didn’t, he’d forget his own good intentions and take Scott’s suggestion about the backseat. Images of James crouched against the leather, ass upturned while Duke ploughed into him, sent fresh shivers down his spine that had nothing to do with the external temperature.

He peeled out of the parking lot, eager to get home. Focusing on the road helped calm his libido a little bit, but when Scott

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reached across the distance between them and rested a hand on his thigh, Duke thought he was going to lose it and drive them onto the shoulder.

Neither spoke the duration of the short, tense ride to his townhouse, but the second he killed the engine, Duke bolted from the car. Scott met him at the hood, and this time, Duke didn't hesitate to grab his hand.

Their fingers entwined, locked together as Duke led Scott to the door. He must have used that key on that door a million times in the past several years, but for a moment, he forgot just how to do it. Scott wasn't being shy about touching or kissing Duke, and while each caress was light and almost fleeting, it drew his attention until he could barely focus on anything that wasn't Scott's skin or his mouth.

Finally, after what might have been an eternity, he pushed the door open and practically dragged Scott into the welcoming darkness. He didn't have a chance to turn on the light before Scott slammed their mouths together in a hard, hungry kiss.

Blindly, his hands clawed at Scott's jacket, pushing it off his shoulders and tossing it unseen toward the living room. Nails scratched through his shirt when Scott did the same, but they didn't allow their desperation to feel skin on skin to break the seal of their mouths. Duke took everything Scott had to offer, tangling their tongues into a new duet, and then thrust it back at him, shuddering when Scott moaned in the back of his throat.

"Jesus, how did we wait this long?" Duke muttered against his mouth. He bit at the luscious lower lip, his hand coiling automatically around Scott's tie to hold him even closer. "Not again, James. I'm not waiting this long again."

"You won't have to," Scott promised on a rush of breath as he

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tore Duke's buttons open. He pushed his hands beneath the cloth, smoothing his palms up Duke's chest. Their feet kept moving. Duke didn't know how they weren't tripping all over themselves on the way to the bedroom. Especially since none of Duke's attention was on where he was walking or what he might be backing into. "I'm not making that mistake ever again."

He was glad Scott anticipated the stairs because he wasn't sure how they would have made it up to the bedroom otherwise. Scott's hands shoved at his shoulders, driving him up. The hold Duke had maintained on the tie forced Scott to follow, and he grinned in the darkness when he realized what it probably looked like.

"I've got you leashed," Duke chuckled, and climbed a few more stairs, tugging the entire way. "I guess that's one way of making sure you don't disappear from my life for months at a time again."

"True, but what's going to stop you from disappearing from mine?"

He couldn't see Scott's face, but the teasing question still managed to burrow its way into his gut. "Whatever you want." They reached the top of the stairs and he angled toward the bedroom, unwilling to turn away from Scott for a second.

"Whatever I want?" Between the door and the bed, they managed to lose most of their clothes. Duke was a little surprised they weren't in completely tattered pieces. Except for Scott's tie. It still hung loosely from his neck. "You could fuck me like you don't intend to let me disappear again."

Using the tether, he hauled Scott close again, their erections rubbing together, his free hand cupping Scott's ass. "I was planning on doing that anyway."

He deliberately slowed down the next kiss, fusing their mouths

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together to steal every bit of breath Scott had left. When James tried to speed it up, Duke tightened his grip, fingers digging into the taut flesh, his tongue forcing Scott's to retreat and simply accept it. Next time, he would let Scott do it his way. Right now, he needed to make it last as long as humanly possible.

Scott wrapped his hand around Duke's cock, and every time Duke slowed down the kiss, Scott responded by flexing his fingers. The firm hold didn't hurt, but it did make Duke's flesh throb, each heavy thump of his heart pulsing through his flesh. Scott's ass would be even tighter, hotter, than that. It would wrap around his length until the heat would threaten to melt Duke from the inside. The thought was a delicious torment, but even that wasn't enough to make him rush.

He sank down to the edge of the bed, drawing Scott down with him. Under other circumstances, he would have lain back and let his partner weigh over him, but memories of their first time together, when Scott had ridden him and his entire world had flipped on end, compelled him to stay upright. Scott had no choice but to straddle his thighs, and the hot pressure along with the bump of cock to cock, drew a husky groan from Duke's throat.

It only got more exquisitely torturous when Scott took both of their shafts in hand.

Scott moved his wrist slowly, mimicking the deliberate rhythm of Duke's mouth against him. Duke could feel the tension in Scott's muscles, and he didn't miss the occasional shiver that wracked Scott's frame. But he had ceded the control, now following Duke's lead without fighting him. Every inch of Scott's body drove him crazy, each point of contact electrified by Scott.

Duke's fingers strayed from their hold to find the warm crease between Scott's cheeks. He tickled the skin at the top first, refusing

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to indulge in his desire for more until the need became too great to deny any longer. Then, he only traveled a few inches, stopping before he found the tight hole. Back and forth, he went, memorizing the route until it was as ingrained as breathing. He never ventured lower. Not even when Scott was shaking within his arms.

“Oh...Owen...please. God, you’re making me crazy.” He tore his mouth from Duke’s and closed his lips around the skin on his throat. He sucked at the flesh, and it occurred to Duke that he should stop Scott before he marked the skin. He didn’t want to have to go to work with giant hickeys visible above his shirt collar. But he couldn’t find the energy to actually give voice to those thoughts. It was much easier to just drop his head back and moan as Scott moved to new patches of skin.

Scott claimed he was being driven crazy. Twice now, he’d characterized the contact between them like that. What he didn’t know—maybe what he couldn’t see past his own fierce desires—was how hard it was for Duke not to just take everything he had to offer and devour him on the spot. He’d thought of little else over the past month. Fantasies of Scott, of waking up with him in the morning, of fucking him senseless whenever the whim took him, had consumed nearly every waking moment, and all of his sleeping ones. The force of it had frightened him more than once. It had been enough to stop him from looking Scott up right away, using work as a convenient excuse. It still frightened him.

But what frightened him more was losing Scott entirely. So he was going to prove to both of them just how worth it, it really was.

Though his fingers trembled, he added a few more inches to their journey, finally finding the clenching muscle they both wanted him to explore. He didn’t stop and penetrate, but instead

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skimmed over the opening, absorbing the heat and texture before sliding away. Scott whimpered against his skin, and the need in that single sound was enough for Duke to move his hand back down.

Duke continued to tease and caress, and the lighter his touch became, the harder Scott sucked and bit at his throat. He moved his hips, too, pushing their erections together, and grinding against Duke's body. Duke understood the need to move. He understood Scott's hunger for friction. Sweat rolled down Scott's skin, and similar drops gathered at the back of Duke's neck. Even if the room was frigid, Duke had no doubt that Scott would make him sweat.

When he finally pressed his finger into Scott's tight channel, he was rewarded with a low whimper.

"You're not riding me this time." Duke trailed his lips over Scott's damp temple, his mouth prickling at the heat and salt. "I plan on laying you back and pounding into you until neither one of us can move."

Scott shuddered. "God, Owen, I've been dreaming of that for months. Been dreaming of *you*."

"No more dreaming. For either of us."

Though he adored the idea of making Scott beg for it even more, the thought of prolonging the agony was no longer nearly as appealing as it had been. Gripping Scott's ass, Duke twisted to the side, tilting forward to stretch James out on top of the blankets. They were kissing before Scott's head hit the pillow, their bodies aligned for the bliss that was yet to come. Duke didn't even have to coax Scott's legs apart. They opened naturally, giving him space to get situated, each brush against the other man's balls causing both of them shiver.

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“Duke...you better grab a condom now...” He ran his heels along the back of Duke’s legs. “Otherwise, we might forget completely.”

He didn’t want a condom. He wanted to feel Scott’s heat squeezing around his length without any kind of barrier between them. But he knew that wasn’t smart, even if he trusted Scott’s word. It was too soon for that level of commitment, even though he realized deep in his heart that he wanted that, too.

Reluctantly, he tore away from Scott’s mouth to reach for the lube and condom he’d left on the nightstand for just this purpose. He pressed the packet into Scott’s hand. “I want you to put it on me.”

Scott accepted it and smiled up at him—it was almost dazzling in its pleasure. He ripped the wrapper open with his teeth and plucked the condom out. Duke held himself still above Scott, his cock jutting between them. He tried not to shiver when Scott pressed the cool rubber against the head, but as Scott’s clever fingers unrolled it down his length, he couldn’t stop his shudder of pleasure. When he had it in place, Scott’s fingers danced over his thighs and across his heavy sac.

“Ready,” he breathed.

He sat up then, though he really didn’t want to. He wasted no time coating his fingers and cock with the lube. He wasted even less smearing it around Scott’s opening and thrusting his fingers inside.

“Will you be all right if I don’t stretch you?” God, he hoped Scott said yes, though he’d take whatever time was necessary to make this as good for Scott as it was going to be for him.

“I’ll be all right,” Scott assured him quickly. He slid closer to Duke and wrapped his legs around Duke’s waist, pulling him

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against his body. “Can’t wait anymore.”

Nothing had ever sounded so good. Duke propped himself up on his knuckles, reaching between to grasp his cock at the base and angle it downward. The covered tip dragged over Scott’s balls, along velvety skin, finding its home at the fierce heat of his slick hole. He could have slammed into him right then, buried himself in a single stroke and probably climaxed from just that. But that wouldn’t have been what was best for Scott, and ultimately, far from what Duke truly wanted.

He nudged forward. The tense muscle resisted the first push, and he searched Scott’s face for any sign of discomfort. There was none. There was a sheen of sweat, and a flare of nostrils, and desire burning bright in his eyes, but nothing else that might indicate pain.

Duke thrust a little harder, a little deeper, and moaned when the resistance yielded to him, allowing him to sink a few more inches without any effort at all.

Each inch he gained was absolutely exquisite. The heat, the pressure, the way Scott moaned, the smell of his sweat, the salty taste of his lips—completely, absolutely exquisite. It twisted Duke up in every way. Scott’s walls tensed and fluttered, and his flesh seemed to echo Duke’s own heartbeat. Scott wrapped his arms around Duke, his fingers pressing into Duke’s back, his mouth sliding along Duke’s jaw to find his ear.

“Fuck me, Owen. I want to still be feeling it next week.”

The sheer hunger in Scott’s voice startled him into driving forward the last few inches, his balls slapping almost painfully against Scott’s skin. Scott arched away from the bed, like he wanted to suck even more of Duke into his flesh, but Duke had a promise to fulfill, one he desired as much as his lover.

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He withdrew swiftly, stopping only when the head of his cock threatened to breach the tight ring. Scott's words filled his head, mixing with everything he'd fantasized about for the past six weeks, and he drove back in with all his strength, heedless of anything but the need to claim this man as his.

"Oh, fuck...yes." His fingers dug into Duke's flesh. "God, like that." Duke pulled out and slammed forward again, prompting another encouraging shout. "Don't stop."

Duke had absolutely no intention of stopping. Ever, if he could help it. Scott's body was beyond welcoming, clinging to him, holding him deep inside each time he thrust his hips. Occasionally, Duke would fear that he was moving too hard, that he was asking too much of Scott. But when he tried to slow, or even pause long enough to make sure that he wasn't hurting him, James only responded with a moan of protest at the broken rhythm.

He'd waited all night for this—hell, longer than that. Six weeks, eight, maybe even since before meeting Scott face-to-face. Nothing had ever felt so good than to be bound tight to James, than to feel his desperate hands claw and scratch at his back, than to revel in the tremors that occasionally overtook his arms as he struggled to hold Duke even closer. His mouth found Scott's without problem, and the kisses that jolted between them were just as needy as the rest of their bodies.

Everything inside of Duke burned. Small flames licked at his stomach and chest and throat. There was a high buzzing in his ears, and it was almost enough to drown Scott's moans, and Duke's answering sighs. And no matter what he did, it didn't quite seem to be enough. He moved faster, and Scott begged for more. He moved harder, and Scott whimpered and writhed as though trying to increase the pressure. Yet, Scott's face and eyes betrayed what

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could only be complete bliss. Like everything Duke did was absolutely perfect.

“James...”

The single word was all his tight lungs could manage. It came out breathy and not nearly as assertive as his thrusts, but the weight of everything he felt carried on his voice, or he hoped it carried, because he needed Scott to realize this wasn't just about the sex. It had never been about the sex. Always, from that first sparkling smile, it had been about James.

“Owen...please...”

Duke didn't know what he was pleading for, but he would give James anything. There wasn't any part of himself that he would hold back if Scott asked for it. There wasn't any part of himself he would deny.

“Owen...I'm so...”

Duke sat up on his knees, lifting Scott's ass farther from the bed, and adjusting his angle. The new position allowed him to drive harder into Scott's body, and the sudden widening of his eyes told Duke that was exactly what he had been trying to ask for.

The clenching around his cock was maddening, each shuttle in and out of the welcoming passage hurtling him that much closer to orgasm. He refused to come before Scott, though. Half of what made this worth it was knowing he would be the one to make James shatter. He wanted to witness every vibrant second of it, so as much as he wanted to smother Scott's body with his, he maintained his position, ploughing into him, scraping across his prostate, reaching for his gorgeous cock and stripping it from base to dripping tip.

“I can't take...” The rest of his words were lost, his voice breaking into pieces as Duke drove into him. His cock twitched

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against Duke's hand, his length throbbing as streams of come erupted from him. Duke didn't stop moving his hips or his hand, fucking every last drop, every shudder, every moan out of Scott's body.

His mouth watered at the fresh smell filling the room. Each jerk of Scott's cock sent an answering reverberation straight into Duke's shaft, adding to the tumult already threatening to overtake him, but it was the reach of Scott's hand, the way his trembling fingertips grazed along the front of Duke's thigh, that undid everything inside him.

He drove into Scott's ass one last time, his shout echoing in his ears. His body wouldn't stop shaking, not from his cock to his toes, and he grappled for some kind of real hold on Scott's sweaty flesh. Once he found it, his grip tightened. He wasn't letting go.

Not now. Not ever.

"God, Owen." James released a trembling breath. "So...is this what happens after a two-month dry spell?"

"Don't even think it." Without leaving the heat of Scott's body, Duke leaned down and met him eye to eye. "There is no way I'm waiting two months again. I don't care how good that was."

"There's no way I'd let you," Scott promised. "I just...I mean, that was unbelievable."

He glanced down between the bodies and grinned. "I think we might have ruined your tie, though."

"I'm pretty sure I never liked this tie, anyway," Scott murmured, pulling on Duke's arm until he bent close enough to taste the salt on Scott's lips. "Unless you like it, then I'll buy a dozen more."

"I like you in them." He traced along Scott's swollen mouth, gentle and soothing. "I like you, James. And I want the chance to

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prove to you we can make this work, no matter what.”

“I like you, too. A lot. Maybe...maybe there’s something to the suggestion of living together?”

He smiled. “I seem to recall already telling you there was.”

“I didn’t know if we were being serious.”

“Well, according to everyone at work, I have no sense of humor anyway, so I must have been serious.”

Scott smiled, his eyes warm and more than a little sleepy. “You have a great sense of humor, but I’ll keep that in mind in the future. I’ve never, ever suggested that to anybody else in my life, so I must have been serious, too.”

The possibility of the future stretching out in front of them, a future comprised of two lives entwining, their steps complementary and always together, filled Duke with even more joy than the simple pleasure of the sex. He closed the distance between them and sealed their mouths together.

He wasn’t letting go.

Not now. Not ever.

JAMIE CRAIG

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

* * *

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