



A MATTER OF TIME

BOOK I

By

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CHAPTER ONE

AFTER CAREFUL THOUGHT AND consideration I have come to the conclusion that things happen to me for two reasons. First, I have a terrible habit of tuning out in the middle of a conversation. I'll hear the beginning, start thinking about what I'm going to do later, and then come back in time to hear the end. This gets particularly dicey when I'm getting directions, because you never want to ask someone to repeat something they have already gone over in specific detail. This is why I often end up in some spooky neighbourhoods after dark. I'm winging it. Second, I am not the most discriminating person on the planet. So when a friend of mine asks me to do them a favour, I'll usually just do it without asking a lot of questions. Not that I would be listening to the whole explanation anyway, since like I said, I'm probably the poster child for ADHD—Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, unless you're my boss or a really hot guy.

The night my friend Anna called me, sobbing on the other end of the phone, I immediately went into nurture mode and walked out of the club, so I could hear her better. There is no way to hear anything over trance music, so I had her wait to spill her guts. I was happily surprised to hear that she was finally leaving her husband. She had stayed with me or her sister many times, after he'd hit her for the millionth time. It's hard to watch your friends come to class wearing oversized sunglasses, and make-up that's so thick it could have been applied with a putty knife. Everyone knew her husband beat her, I just never knew how bad or constant it was. I lost track of her after graduation when she moved to the suburbs, but when she called I was right back there, instantly in that place where I was ready to help any way I could. I told her that of course, I would do whatever she needed.

In all the movies on the *Lifetime* channel, which I watched the last time I was home sick — hung over and hurling— the wife always has to go back to get her kid's stuffed animal from the house of horrors she lives in. But before she can put the pedal to the metal, and point the late model station wagon with the faux wood paneling into the sunset, she has to return for Boo-Boo Bunny or Mr. Snuggles, or a teddy bear that has been loved so hard and long it now resembles an iguana. Anna didn't have any kids but what she did have was her beagle, George. She couldn't go back but neither could she leave without her partner in crime. They had apparently executed all manner of petty crimes and misdemeanours against her husband over the years. From peeing in shoes, George's part, to hiding miscellaneous items, Anna's part, they had made Brian Minor's daily existence annoying, in exchange for the abuse he had handed out with fist and word. It had given her some degree of satisfaction knowing that one day, vengeance would be hers. She knew she'd been a coward to not just leave but she suspected her husband was far more sinister than he let on. So Anna was finally ready to call it a day with Brian but he would have suspected something, and probably killed her if she'd tried to take her dog. She needed me to get her puppy to make a clean break of it. Because I wanted her out of there so badly, and because I would have gone back for my own dog were he still alive, there was no way to say no.

After leaving my friends dancing at a club on Halsted, I took a cab and headed out to the suburbs. I tried never to leave the city and had only been outside of downtown Chicago on two previous occasions. On the way over there I tried to remember where in the house she had told

me the dog was, but since I hadn't heard that part it was useless to try and dredge the information from my brain. I figured when I got to the house, which I had only been to once, it wouldn't be hard to find a beagle. The problem turned out to be finding the house itself. I forgot the address and I didn't want to call Anna back and look like I hadn't been listening. Even though I hadn't. And by then enough time had gone by that if I had called her she would have wondered why I just didn't call her earlier so... the cabbie and I took the tour of La Grange until I remembered the street in an energy drink fuelled vision after I made him stop at a gas station. It had only taken two hours to get to her huge three-story apparition. I asked the driver to wait for me and he said he'd rather drink Clorox. I understood. I can be exhausting at times. I watched him drive away before I headed toward the house.

The front door swung open when I went to ring the doorbell. I called for Brian and got no response. When I called for George I heard muffled barking from a room to the left. It was the study and as soon as I walked in I realized the noise was coming from behind the curtain. When I checked, there was another door behind it. If you weren't looking for it you would have never seen it, but there was no missing the high-pitched puppy whining. When I opened the door, George was all over me, whimpering, dancing, his whole little body moving with his wagging tail, trying like mad to claw through my jeans. I bent to pet him, and when I did, without meaning to, without even thinking about it, I stepped into the office. The door was open but behind the curtain so even though I had never intended to hide, I ended up doing just that. It was only for a second and I was ready to step back out when I heard the crash. George yelped and retreated behind my leg. I peeked around the drape and saw a man lying on top of the remains of the heavy glass coffee table that I had walked by seconds earlier. He was covered in blood and mumbling softly.

There are those moments that seem like a strobe light is going off in your head. You see pieces of things but not the whole picture. I saw the shattered glass, the burnished black leather shoes of the guys standing on the royal blue Persian rug; I saw the polished marble floors and Brian holding a gun on the guy. It doesn't sound like it does in the movies. When a gun goes off there's no boom it's more of a firecracker pop. I saw the guy jerk, heard him scream out "no" and watched Brian unload the gun. It was fast, like a jump cut in a movie, and it was over. All the guys took a turn spitting on him and it was at that moment that two things happened simultaneously. First, my phone rang which does *Karma Chameleon* and second, George bolted through the drape. I lunged for him and caught his collar but not in time to stop my forward momentum. It was like being on stage. I came out from behind the curtain. Like ta-dah!

My eyes swept the room; I saw every face before I settled on the one I knew the best, the guy holding the empty gun.

"Jory!" Brian roared and because I have no fight reflex whatsoever, I went immediately to flight. I yanked on George's collar and whipped him back into the other room. As I dived after him I heard the shots and Brian screaming my name. He'd never been all that crazy about me but we were definitely in another place by that moment.

I got my legs under me and ran. I yelled for George and he was running along beside me as fast as his little legs would carry him. I saw a guy in front of me but instead of slowing down I

sped up. When he pulled his gun, I dropped to my knees and slid halfway across the polished wooden floor. It would have been very cool if I weren't running for my life at the time. He fell on top of me but I got untangled and ran for the front door. When I threw it open I was faced with Darth Vader.

"Get down," he ordered me and what sounded like a baseball hit him in the chest.

I dove for the ground and he stepped on me and then somebody else kicked me and then my arm got yanked so hard I thought my shoulder was dislocated. Outside, someone dragged me to my feet before pulling me into the street where like a hundred police cars were, lights flashing everywhere. It was cold and I registered that before anything else. There were more shots and I got shoved back down to my knees on the ground. I lost my balance because I got bumped and pushed and then somebody covered me in a jacket that weighed like a thousand pounds. I fell back and George was on me, licking my face as I tried to breathe. I was winded and when I finally grabbed the dog and hugged him so he'd stop I realized four men were standing over me. Not one looked pleased. One guy in particular looked like he wanted to strangle me right there in the middle of the street.

"Two years of undercover work blown in seconds," he told me icily.

What to say? "Sorry?"

"Who the fuck are you?" He snarled at me. The scowl looked permanent.

I coughed twice. My ribs hurt. "Jory Keyes."

"What are you doing here man?" One of the others snapped at me.

I tried to take in some air. "I came to get the dog," I told them, which was really all the explanation I had. It had seemed like such a nothing task at the time.

"The dog?"

Their expressions were priceless and even lying there on the pavement I had to smile.

* * * *

IF I DIDN'T WATCH so much TV real life wouldn't be so disappointing. As it was I was expecting the interrogation room from *Law and Order* and the reality was nothing like that. It wasn't dark, it was really bright and the metal table was bolted to the floor. The chairs were cold and metal without any padding, and just basically had no atmosphere or character to speak of. It was just plain anticlimactic and so I was bored. I had an ice pack on the back of my head, a Sprite for my stomach, which had gotten queasy when my adrenaline ran out, and a pen and paper so I could write down everything I remembered. I had recounted what I'd seen to a lot of different people ten different ways. When Anna had come to get George they wouldn't let me see her. She was being taken

somewhere safe right that second. I couldn't blame them. I didn't want her to get hurt either. My head was down on my folded arms when the door opened. So many people had been in and out that I didn't even look up.

"Mr. Keyes."

I rolled my head sideways and realized that Detective Sam Kage was back. He was, I'd decided, the one that hated me the most. I had screwed up his undercover investigation with my need to be rescued. He and his fellow vice detectives had to break cover, turn their guns on Brian Minor and save me. The only luck they had all night was that Brian had actually killed a man in cold blood and they had an eyewitness to that... me. He was going to jail for a long time. It was just as good, they said, as racketeering, bribery, blackmail and extortion. First-degree murder had its own timeframe that worked for them.

"Sit up and look at me."

I lifted my head off my arm and leaned back in my chair, staring at him. He had changed out of his Kevlar body armour and was now in a shirt and tie. He was trying to pull off mild-mannered police detective but I wasn't buying it. I'd seen the beast inside of him already. The others, his tall but balding captain, his dark sort of eastern European looking partner and the two others, who looked like poster boys for the *Marine Corps*, all of them were nicer than Detective Kage. I wanted anyone else but him in the room with me.

"Mr. Keyes you—"

"What kind of gun is that?" I asked, pointing to his holster.

"What?"

"What kind of gun?"

"Why?"

I shrugged. "I was just wondering."

"It's a thirty-eight."

"Okay," I yawned, letting out a deep sigh. That exchange had maybe killed a second and a half. What was next on the agenda?

"Tell me about yourself Mr. Keyes."

I looked back at him. "Whaddya wanna know?"

"Where are you from?"

“Kentucky,” I said flatly because I usually said LA or Miami just to make it sound more glamorous, but I figured he was looking for the truth being a police officer and all.

“How long have you been in Chicago?”

“I moved here when I was seventeen.”

“You run away from home?”

“Nope. I graduated from high school when I was seventeen. See my birthday’s in January so I started school at four instead of—”

“Can we move on?”

Rude much?

“Well?”

“Rude much?” I said out loud instead of just thinking it in my head.

“Sorry, go on.”

“Never mind,” I snapped at him. I hated getting caught rambling on to people that didn’t give a crap. It was mortifying.

“Just talk already, sorry for interrupting.”

He wasn’t sorry but I figured if I were waiting for actual sincerity I’d be sitting there a long time. I was better off just letting it go. What did it matter to me if he cared or didn’t? “Okay so I got here and got a job and I’ve been here ever since.”

“Uh-huh. So what, your family’s still there in Kentucky?”

“No,” I breathed out. “There was only my grandmother and she died when I was ten.”

“Where are your folks?”

“I have no idea.”

“You have no idea where your father is.”

He said it like he didn’t believe it. “No. I don’t even know who he is. It doesn’t even say on my birth certificate, and my mother left when I was like three months old or something. Her name was...is Mandy but that’s all I can tell you. She never came back so I’ve never met her.”

“I see. So you were raised by your grandmother and when she died what?”

"I went into Foster Care."

He looked straight at me. "Any horror stories?"

"No, I was lucky. I lived in a group home from the time I was ten to the when I graduated from high school."

"You close to any of those people?"

"No. Why?"

"Why not?"

"I dunno you're acting like I have a character deficit or something."

"Was I?"

"It was implied," I assured him.

He grunted.

"It was group home, detective; it wasn't the whole mother/father deal. It was like a dorm. I wasn't close to anyone; they could have cared less if I was there or not."

"Did that bother you?"

"I don't need some bullshit psych eval here all right? It was what it was, it doesn't matter."

He nodded. "So you graduated and what?"

"I bought a bus ticket from Lexington Kentucky to Chicago Illinois."

"And so you got here and then what happened?"

"Why is this important?"

"I just need some background Mr. Keyes, if you don't mind."

Did I mind? "Okay so I got here and got the job I have now. I worked all through college and when I was done I decided to stay instead of doing something else."

"And where do you work?"

"I work at Harcourt, Brown and Cogan," I said proudly.

"By your tone I'm assuming I'm supposed to know what that is."

I felt my brows draw together.

“What’s with the look?”

“Are you kidding?”

“No I’m not kidding?”

“You’re serious?”

“I said I was.”

“Huh.”

“What is whatever you said?”

“Harcourt, Brown and Cogan...it’s one of the premier architectural firms in the city.”

“Uh-huh.”

“My boss, Dane Harcourt, he’s the main architect, Miles Brown does Interior Design and Sherman Cogan is the landscape architect.”

“What does main architect mean?”

“He designs houses.”

He stared at me a long minute. “Does he?”

“Yes. He’s very famous.”

“If he’s so famous why haven’t I ever heard of him?”

I scoffed at him. “I bet the people you haven’t heard of could fill a book, detective.”

“You’re a punk you know that?”

I smiled at him. “Particularly nice comeback, detective.”

“So that’s it, no family, just you?”

“Just me.”

“This’ll be easy then.”

“What will?”

“Making you disappear.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Protective custody, witness protection.... are you starting to get it?”

I shook my head. “Just tell me when I can go home.”

His eyes narrowed more than they already were. “Are you stupid?”

I just waited, staring at him.

“Mr. Keyes, you are never going home again. You are going into the witness protection program. Federal marshals will be here in the morning to transport you to—”

“Yeah right,” I got up. I was tired of being treated like I did something wrong. “I’m going now. I’m beat and I gotta go to work in the morning.”

“Mr. Keyes, people want to kill you. Do you understand that? Brian Minor is a very well connected and—”

“I gotta go,” I said as I got up and headed for the door.

“Mr. Keyes you are going into protective custody.”

“Uh-huh,” I scoffed at him, stopping at the door only as long as it took to open it and go through. At the end of the hall, Brian was being walked to wherever he was being taken by two uniformed police officers.

“Jory!” he yelled at me. “You’re a dead man! Do you understand me? Dead!”

I smirked at him and flipped him off. He yanked free and came charging down the hall toward me. I had no idea what he thought he was going to do to me handcuffed like he was, but he came anyway. He’d always been so big and brutish, one of those bull in a china shop kind of guys. A lot of big men were still fluid when they moved, like their size was perfect for them, but Brian had always seemed unaware of how strong he was or the confines of his own shoulders and legs. Plodding like an animal was what had forever come to mind. So when he got to me I ducked and crouched and swept my leg underneath him. He went down with a hard face plant into the tile floor at my feet. I stood there a second and then very theatrically stepped over him.

“You sonofabitch!” He shrieked at me.

“Shut the hell up,” I said irritably.

“Jory!” he screamed at me as I jumped over his thrashing legs before he was buried under five policemen. “I’m gonna fuckin’ kill you...you fuckin’ faggot! You hear me! Jory! You goddamn cocksucker!”

“Oh go to hell Brian,” I groaned, turning to walk away from him. “And that whole faggot crap is so old. Who even uses that word anymore?”

“Jory!” He screamed after me.

“People with pick-up truck and gun racks that’s who,” I chuckled, my own laughter sounding a little unhinged. I was ready to pass out.

“Jory!” His voice had lost some of its power but he was still shrieking.

I headed toward the stairs.

“Mr. Keyes!”

I pivoted around and Detective Kage was there with his nice captain that I’d met earlier and another of the square-cut jaw/square-cut hair guys who had been on the street with him. He did the two-fingered poke into my collarbone like he was trying to drill through my skin.

“Where the hell do you think—”

“Sam,” the captain cautioned him, putting up his hand. “Let’s not—”

“He’s an idiot,” he gestured at me, “and he’ll be dead this time tomorrow.”

“And who would do that? Brian?” I smirked at him. “Gimme a break.”

He gestured at me again but said nothing.

“Mr. Keyes,” the other detective began, his voice gentle, soothing. “Even though you think of Mr. Minor as simply the sonofabitch husband of one of your girlfriends, you must believe us when we tell you the man is not that benign. He’s a drug dealer, a murderer and someone you don’t want to cross. There are a lot of people that don’t want him in the position of choosing between jail time or talking about them. You alone have the power to put him behind bars. Without you he walks. Do you understand that?”

“I get it,” I told him. “I do. I will testify. I will do whatever you need so he never sees Anna again as long as he lives. I promise but seriously I have a life. I mean I get from being here for the last five hours that you guys don’t think being someone’s assistant is important. But I promise you that to my boss I actually matter. I’ve got so much shit to do you have no idea.” I let out a quick breath, finally shaking my head. “Call me and tell me what day I need to appear in court.” I said, heading down the stairs to the exit.

“Mr. Keyes.”

I sighed and turned around, looking up at the captain.

“They’ll come after people you love.”

I shrugged. “Good luck finding any.” I said, before I turned back away from him.

Outside the air was cold. I had forgotten I was still in my dancing clothes, which consisted that night of a black spandex t-shirt, tight brown distressed bootcut jeans and motorcycle boots. So because it was November, I was freezing. It smelled like it was going to rain and the breeze was icy. My teeth started to chatter as I looked for a cab.

A car slowed down beside me and I heard the sound of the automatic window going down. When I turned a guy was smiling at me from the driver’s side.

I waited for the come-on line.

“Hey man you need a lift?”

The whole ick factor of some middle-aged man in a van trying to pick me up in the same ride that he took his kids to school in made my skin crawl.

“I’m talking to you pretty boy.”

“No thanks,” I said quickly, hoping he’d just drive away. “I don’t need a ride.”

“C’mon,” he persisted, “how much?”

“I’m not hustling man I’m just walkin’,” I said, moving faster.

“Sure you are,” he leered at me. “Get in.”

And I thought it’s the club clothes outside of the club, downtown, walking the streets alone at two in the morning. I couldn’t fault his logic. I had rent boy written all over me. “I…”

The horn scared us both. I jumped and the guy was so startled that he gunned the motor and drove away. It would have been funny if my heart weren’t pounding so hard. I shivered in spite of myself and looked up when someone shouted my name.

I saw the enormous SUV then, named after something nautical, black and shiny and through the lowered window was Detective Kage. He was motioning me over. I shoved my hands down in my pockets as I walked over to see what he wanted.

“Get in,” he snapped at me as soon as I peered in the window.

“I—”

“Mr. Keyes,” he said sharply and the exasperation was not lost on me. “You’re this close to being put in the vehicle whether you like it or not.”

The way he said the word vehicle, so clinical, so like the cop that he was. Step away from the vehicle, put your hands on top of the vehicle, get in the vehicle... it was funny. “Oh yeah?” I baited him because I figured I could move before he got a hold of me. “You think so?”

“Yeah,” he warned me, his gaze level and dark. “I think so.”

And it wasn’t so much the ominous tone or the way he was looking at me as the muscle that flexed in his jaw. I realized I was closer to jeopardy than I realized. He was bigger than me so the chances that he could hurt me were pretty good.

I opened the door and climbed up into the seat, swinging the heavy door shut hard.

He grunted at me. “Put on your goddamn seatbelt.”

“Do you know where I live?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he almost growled. He had one of those voices that was low and husky, the kind that under other circumstances I would have found sexy as hell.

“I don’t live in the city.” I wanted to make sure he knew where he was going. “I live just on the other side of Austin Avenue in Oak Park.”

He didn’t respond so I gave up. There was some cowboy crap playing on the radio but it was low so I didn’t complain.

“Did you hear me?” I asked him, checking.

“I know where you live,” he said fast, clearly exasperated. “It was one of the many questions you answered for me as you may recall.”

I rolled my eyes as my phone rang. “Hello?” I answered.

“Where the hell did you go?” Taylor Grant asked me irritably.

“To get a friend out of a jam,” I smiled, slouching down in the seat.

“Were you gonna come back or call?”

I chuckled. “I thought that wasn’t our deal. Either one of us could split at any time. It’s your rule.” I reminded him cheerfully.

Long silence.

“Right?”

“Yeah, right,” he said, the annoyance clear in his voice. “So where are you?”

“On my way home.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Tell me where that is.”

“Nah. I’ll call you,” I told him.

“Jory,” he said softly. “Please lemme see—”

“Later,” I yawned and hung up. I wasn’t in the mood for company. I just wanted to go home, shower off the night, and pass out in my bed.

“Friend of yours?”

“Not really,” I told him, “just a guy.”

“You got a lot of guys?”

I turned slowly to look at him.

“What?” he asked gruffly.

“What kind of question is that?”

“Fair, I would say.”

I went back to staring out the window.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.” I clipped my answer, trying not to snap.

“Twenty-two” he repeated.

“Yeah.”

“How can you afford to live alone?”

It was a weird question. “I told you already, I have a good job.”

“And what else?”

I turned again to look at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I think you know.”

“I don’t think I do, detective. You need to spell it out for me.”

“Fine. Does some guy help you out with your rent in exchange for fucking you?”

That was definitely clear. “No,” I barely got out through my clenched jaw.

“No?”

“How do you know I’m even gay, detective?”

He glanced at me, scoffing. “Dressed like that?”

“You know what just lemme out.”

“Knock it off. Don’t be so dramatic.” He was annoyed and his voice was dripping with it. “All you guys are so goddamn dramatic.”

All you guys? “You mean gay guys?”

“Just drop it all right? I’m tired and I don’t feel like getting into a pissing contest with you. I’m driving you ‘cause if I don’t you’re gonna freeze to death. You don’t even have a jacket.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Just sit there and shut-up.”

And I granted his request and didn’t say another word to him for the rest of the ride. When he dumped me in front of the old Victorian house that had been converted into four apartments, I got out. I slammed the door and ran across the lawn without a backward glance. I didn’t check to see if he waited.

When I got inside I immediately fell down on my bed, fully clothed with my shoes still on. I was exhausted. Having people shooting at you, as you as you ran for your life, was really very draining.

CHAPTER TWO

BY THE TIME I got to work it was almost ten on Wednesday morning and I felt like turning around and going back home. Riding into the city on the subway was usually almost fun. I liked seeing all the same faces every morning and talking to people I barely knew. The problem was we had an icy rain that morning that made everyone soggy and cranky and impatient with the routine inconvenience of being packed together like sardines. Once I got downtown I had to walk two blocks over to Cullen's and pick up my boss' car. He had called me at six in the morning to tell me that the mechanic forgot to drop it off at his house, so I had to make it happen. I had to bring the car to the office. For the billionth time I remembered why I didn't own a vehicle. Driving in the city was hell. Between dodging traffic, having people blow their horns at me and suicidal pedestrians, I was ready to scream. I had to be careful not to hit any parked cars on the tight streets, remember which way all the streets went and try not to drive into a pothole that I could lose a wheel in. I thanked God that Dane's BMW was an automatic; I would have been dead otherwise. People almost always touch your back bumper at a stop and when you're driving a stick shift it's so hard not to roll backwards just a teeny bit and nail somebody. When a horn blast startled me I made the light just in time. It felt like it took a year to go ten blocks.

I stood in the lobby and shook like a dog while I took off my topcoat and stamped my feet. Piper Dowling, our front desk receptionist, was watching me, giggling the whole time.

"What?" I asked, looking over at her. She was a vision like she was every morning, all big honey-blond curls, soft blue eyes and perfect, flawless make-up that accentuated her beauty.

"You look really good all wet angel."

I shot her a look, which sent her into peals of snorting laughter. When she recovered she let me know that the coffee was still hot in the break room.

"Morning," Sonja Lawson called out to me from her desk as I walked by.

"Hey," I greeted her, smiling. "How are you this morning?"

She shrugged and I stopped before I hung up my coat on the vintage hat rack.

"What?" I found myself asking before I could stop myself. I didn't really care what was wrong; I found her all together boring. She didn't date, didn't buy designer clothes or shoes, and didn't watch any of the same shows I did. We had absolutely zilch in common.

"Well we're coming up on three months J and I still don't know if I'm staying here permanently or not."

I had no idea either.

"I mean the only reason I'm even here is because his office is ten times busier than any of the other partners. Everybody wants him to do their homes, not Mr. Cogan or Mr. Brown."

"Sherman Cogan is a landscape architect, Sonja," I sighed, having explained that to her like a million times. "And Miles Brown's an interior designer. They don't all do the same thing."

"No I know but Dane's office is the busiest because he's the best."

As usual she didn't get why but I just let it go.

"Jory, I want to stay here."

"Yeah I know." She'd only told me that every single day since she started. From the day Dane had come into the office, and she had looked up from her desk into his cool grey eyes, from that moment she had wanted to stay.

She sighed heavily. "I love everybody here."

I knew exactly who it was that she loved and wanted to be loved by in return.

"Jory, please."

"The decision has nothing to do with me." I said, shaking as much water off my coat as I could before walking over to my desk, squishing the whole way.

"What'd you do swim to work?" She chuckled, momentarily distracted from her campaign to stay in Dane's office.

I grunted. "Yeah it felt like that."

"You know what I'd really like?"

"I have no idea," I said, looking over at her.

"Your job," she smiled big.

"And what would I do?"

"My job."

"Yeah right. Can you even imagine me being cute and perky all day long?"

She laughed at me as I cocked an eyebrow for her benefit. I gave her a lot of credit for the smile she kept plastered on her face for eight hours a day. No way was I capable of such forced charm. My job had more wiggle room to be bitchy.

I got to contact clients, sit in on initial meetings, go with my boss to clients' homes and make sure that no one without an appointment ever got to see Dane Harcourt in the flesh. I also made a lot of trips to the dry cleaners and ordered flowers for whomever he was dating at the time. Picking out birthday and Christmas presents also seemed to be in my job description. I didn't particularly mind that though, it was fun. Besides, I liked it when people complimented Dane on his taste and he had no idea what the hell they were talking about, because he forgot to ask me what I bought. Since I carried a Platinum American Express card with my name on it, and I was the one that reconciled his statement, nine times out of ten he had no idea what he had spent or on whom. It was nice to be trusted implicitly and I found that I was somewhat addicted to it. When Sonja's intercom buzzed suddenly and an annoyed voice asked her if I had arrived yet, I was amazed at how quickly all my good feelings fled.

"Yes I have," I answered loudly, letting out a deep breath, raking my fingers through my damp curls, before flopping down into my chair

"Come in here now," Dane snapped brusquely, and the intercom went dead.

I groaned loudly.

"Shhh," Sonja warned me.

"Why?"

"He'll hear you."

"And if he does?"

"I just think you should be sweet to him."

I was instantly suspicious. "Why?"

"Because he might have had a long morning."

"Why?" I asked again and I could feel my brows drawing together.

"Well," she said hesitantly, "Therese Warner called like an hour ago and told me she was coming by."

"That wouldn't do it," I said, standing, fussing with my sweater, my dress pants, making sure I looked good before I walked into his office, checking my shoes. "Unless you let her talk to him."

Silence so I looked up at her. She looked guilty as hell.

"Oh shit," I groaned. "Are you kidding me?"

"What's the big deal?"

“Sonja,” I whined. “C’mon.”

“I forgot that you told me she wasn’t to be put through,” she took a deep shaky breath. “So when she told me she was coming by, I asked her if she wanted to speak to Mr. Harcourt.”

“Perfect,” I grumbled. Wednesday was getting better and better. “Anything else you wanna tell me before I go in?”

“I put Mr. Reid through too.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and counted to ten. My friend, Evan, always said that it was about visualization. You had to imagine your happy place and you would be there instead of in that moment. Unfortunately it didn’t seem to be working. It really wasn’t such a big deal that he was irritated; he was irritated with me ninety percent of the time. The problem was sitting through the lecture that always followed. The man lived to reiterate my mistakes.

“I’m dead. I’m so dead.”

“Why? It’s my fault not yours.”

“But I’m responsible for everything that happens to him at work.”

“She giggled. “C’mon J. You’re taking yourself a little seriously right now.”

I shook my head. “No, I mean stuff that has to do with the office, that’s my baby. I’m supposed to make sure that things run smooth here.”

“I don’t think it’s really that big a deal.”

“If you knew him better you’d know what this is really about.”

“What’s it about?”

“Following directions,” I told her just as the door to Dane’s office opened and he filled the doorway. I couldn’t stifle my groan in time.

“Has the meaning of the word *now* escaped you completely?”

“No sir.” I said getting up and following him back into his office. I was careful to close the door quietly behind me.

“I want you to make arrangements with the temp agency to have Miss Lawson transferred out off this office as soon as possible. I think our contact over there is Darcy somebody. Call her.”

“Pardon?” That I hadn’t expected.

"I want her out of my office. Preferably today." He clipped his words. It was so early for that.

"But she does such a good—"

"I don't care where she goes," he said crossly, cutting me off. "I just want her out of here. She can't follow simple directions."

"Why? It was a simple mistake about letting Miss Warner and Mr. Reid talk to you this morning," I defended her, sitting down in the chair in front of his desk. "It won't happen again. I'll explain that—"

"Do you see that," he said sharply, cutting me off again. He motioned to the flowers on his desk that I hadn't noticed. They were long stemmed red roses arranged with Baby's Breath and they were absolutely beautiful. The vase they were in was lovely too, very expensive.

"Yeah."

"Yes." He corrected me. He hated *yeah*.

"Yes," I said again.

"And?"

"And what?" I asked, my tone a little sharper than I meant to.

He cocked an eyebrow at me like he was waiting for me to say something. I looked at him and waited. He laced his fingers slowly and continued to stare at me. I looked into his cool grey eyes and noticed for the billionth time how beautiful they were with the flecks of silver in them and how much darker they got when he was annoyed. And then it hit me.

He could tell I'd had a revelation, and smiled smugly.

"Did Sonja leave you flowers again?"

"Yes," he smiled but it never touched his eyes. They didn't sparkle like they did when he was actually happy. When he was really pleased there was a warm glow that was irresistible.

"She's got a huge crush on you, you know." I smiled because it was sweet.

"Yes, I know."

"But that's not—"

"I've told you and I've told her that I do not appreciate her advances toward me no matter how innocent they may be. I gave specific directions that the behaviour needed to stop." He spoke very slowly, very crisply, spacing each of his words so I'd be sure to hear them. "It is not appropriate office

decorum and will no longer be tolerated. Between the flowers and the little notes and the chocolates on Valentine's Day I'm done."

"What if I make her promise?"

"No," he snapped.

"But Boss, it's just not—"

"Call Darcy and tell her that I want her moved today and a new receptionist in here tomorrow. I want it done before lunch."

"Seriously?"

"Yes," he assured me.

"What if Darcy's got no one else to send us? You're saying you'd rather answer your own phone than have her here?"

"You answer my phone not her."

This was an excellent point.

"I want her out," he repeated.

"But what if they've got nowhere to send her? Maybe then she can't afford rent or—"

"I don't care."

"Wow. That's a little harsh don't you think?"

"I don't," he said irritably, and I could see that his patience was at an end. I knew instantly that there had to be something else bothering him. He hated to be irritated, hated repeating himself, but minor annoyances never got to him. He was a rock. "She goes today. I've had it. I will not be bothered everyday for no reason."

"But—"

"She's gone. I gave her every chance."

"Why should she be punished because she finds you irresistible?" I thought maybe I could appeal to his vanity. "I would think it would nice to walk into the office first thing every morning and know that someone thought you were the absolute epitome of everything that was right with the world. I know I'd like it. It would be very flattering."

"Unlike others," meaning me of course. And I got it even before he let it hang in the air between

us. "I don't need my ego perpetually stroked. She needs to go, and go now. And furthermore, I don't think you would find it flattering, I think you'd find it to be more like harassment. At least I would hope you would have that much integrity." After a beat he asked, "do you?"

I looked down and counted to ten again so I wouldn't tell him where to go. He could be so arrogant that sometimes just thinking about telling him off made it almost impossible not to. When I looked back up he was staring at me again with the dark scowl he held the patent for. After a minute I squinted at him making his head small thinking how easy it would be to crush. How satisfying if his eyes bugged out when it exploded.

"You're doing that thing with your eyes."

"What thing?"

"That thing you do where you make my head small and then think how easy it would be to crush it."

I grunted. He knew me too well.

"Listen; just tell Miss Lawson that I'm sure she'll be happier elsewhere. Also," he added, pulling an envelope out of the top drawer of his desk. "Give this to Miss Warner when she comes by. I don't have time to speak to her."

I took it and got up to leave.

"Don't you want to know what it is?" he asked slowly. "You're usually so inquisitive."

He meant nosy.

"Jory?"

"You mean nosy." I said flatly.

"Is that what I said?" He was back to clipping his words.

"No."

"So do you plan to be surly all day then?"

"No."

"I see," he nodded, taking a breath and getting up to go to the window of his office. "Tell Miss Warner that in lieu of my attendance at the Bachelor Auction next week, I've given her a check for ten thousand dollars. That's far more than she would have gotten had I participated so she should be well pleased."

It was an AIDS benefit and in my opinion he was short changing himself. I could just see Miss Therese Warner and Miss Lacey Collins waging the battle of the pocketbooks over who would have my boss as a dinner companion that night. I was sure it would go well into the thousands, much more than ten. Therese would see this as her opportunity to talk to him and convince him he was wrong about breaking it off with her. Lacey would be in defence mode, trying to keep all other women away from her man. She was the flavour of the month and she did have Dane Harcourt after all, for the moment.

“What are you thinking?”

I looked over to where he was and noticed he was staring at me again. “Nothing.”

“Tell me,” he ordered, walking back to his desk, and passing me the roses. “You think it's not enough? I'm not doing all that I can? I should do more for AIDS research?”

“Everyone should, but that's not it.”

“Well then,” he waited, and his grey eyes were back to mine.

“I just think that you'd have raised more money if you'd gone.”

“Why?”

I smiled in spite of myself. He sounded like he was fishing for a compliment. “Isn't it obvious?”

“Not to me.”

“Okay, I see it starting off with everybody bidding and then finally it'll come down to Miss Warner and Miss Lawson fighting it out for the privilege of your company.”

“You do,” he said tiredly.

“I do,” I told him. Hell, he'd asked. “And maybe Miss Palmer and Miss Smythe will want to bid too. It'll be a feeding frenzy.”

“I see.”

“Don't you think so?”

“Well, we'll never know will we?”

“Guess not.” I shrugged, putting his car keys that I still had in my hand down on his desk.

“Also, should Mr. Reid come by, he is to be removed at once. I've already made my feelings perfectly clear to him on the subject of any unsolicited visitations to this office. So, should he come by, he knows what reception to expect. You should alert building security at once. Am I making

myself clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Good.”

“He called me last night,” I threw out, remembering having seen the familiar number on my cell phone after Detective Kage dropped me off. I hadn’t even heard it ring while I was taking my hour-long shower. I had to wash away all traces of the night with the hottest water possible. It had felt amazing.

“Who?”

“Mr. Reid.” I said, reaching the door.

“Wait,” he ordered before I could open it. “When did he call? After work?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes.”

“Yes,” I repeated, rolling my eyes.

“He called your cell?”

“Yes but I didn’t actually talk to him. I was supposed to call him, he left a number.”

“And were you going to call?”

“Yes,” I almost snapped at him. “I have to tell him not to call me again because if you’re not talking to him then I’m certainly not going to. It’s none of my business whatever he wants to talk about.”

“You’re dying to know what that’s all about aren’t you?”

He could be so conceited. Here I had this huge event transpire in my life and I wasn’t going to tell him, but he thought I was just burning up with a need to know why Mr. Caleb Reid had basically stalked him for the last three weeks.

“Jory.”

I looked back at him. “You’re right; I used to want to know.”

“But you don’t anymore.”

“Now it doesn’t matter so much.” And even as I realized how irrational I was being, I was still

annoyed. Logically, being mad at him for not caring about something I'd never told him was ridiculous. Unfortunately I got a D in logic in college. I only passed because I had tried so hard and my professor knew it. I still remembered her shaking her head asking me how in the world I couldn't grasp the material after spending time with both her and the grad student that was assisting her in class. Half the problem had been that her so-called teaching assistant had been much more interested in sleeping with me than in helping me learn anything. But I really was so seriously right-brained that it was a wonder I could walk a straight line. Time had done nothing to help this.

"Jory."

"Hmmm?"

"You're a million miles away. What's going on with you?"

This was my opening to come clean. "Nothing."

"Why don't you care about Mr. Reid anymore?"

I shrugged.

He was searching my eyes. "You're curiosity borders on compulsive and you are incessant with your questioning. What's changed?"

"It's not my business."

"Which I've pointed out a million times and has never once stopped you."

"Well it will from now on."

He gave me the slightest smile. "So you're growing up is what you're telling me."

I let my irritation out in the sharp exhale of breath and turned for the door.

He walked over to stand in front of me. "Has he called you before?"

"No."

"And how did he get your number?"

"Someone gave it to him."

"Who?"

"I have no idea," I yawned involuntarily.

"Miss Lawson?"

"I dunno."

"You know," he said, closing the door as I opened it. "And it matters to me and that's why we're going to rid ourselves of this little problem."

"You're blowing this way out of proportion."

"Am I? Is my number being given out as well?"

"Nobody but me has that number here at work." I assured him. "And I don't want to die young-younger so don't worry. You're safe."

"It would be nice for you to know that someone cares as much about your privacy as you seem to care about mine."

"I don't seem to care, boss," I said tightly, emphasizing the word *seem* just as he had. "I *do* care."

"Well we'll see won't we?"

He was using his snide tone. I closed my eyes for a second so I wouldn't scream. Instead, once I took a breath, I asked him if that was all. He didn't answer so I tilted my head back so I could see his face. "Is that all?" I repeated.

"It is," he said, walking back to his desk.

I left his office and walked out to the main lobby with the roses.

"For me doll?" Piper asked.

I grunted at her and went back.

Later that morning I was looking for my green highlighter as Therese Warner turned the corner and entered the outer office. As she headed toward Dane's door, she thanked Sonja for putting her through to him earlier in the morning.

"Miss Warner," I called before she turned the knob.

She looked at me over her shoulder as I came around my desk. "I have business to discuss with Mr. Harcourt." Her tone was sharp.

"No, I'm afraid you don't," I handed her the envelope. "Mr. Harcourt regrets that he will be unable to attend the benefit next week, but has provided you with a check for ten thousand dollars to make up for his absence at the charity event."

"Did you practice that all morning?" she said tightly.

Funny, but when she was dating my boss she thought it was marvellous the way I brushed off his old flames, and we got along great. I liked her because she was so talkative. Most of the others didn't bother to speak to me at all, except to order me to do something. *Oh Jory, be a dear and do this that and that and the other for me. Dane will be delighted that you're doing me this small favour.* Therese had been different. She would sit in the chairs outside his office and visit with me, asking if I was dating any cute boys, telling me that she wished her eyelashes were as long as mine, her eyes as big and dark.

"I swear, Jory," she would lean on the desk. "Your eyes look just like melting chocolate, that beautiful deep brown with those flecks of gold. I just hate you. And all that thick blond hair you've got, my goodness it's a wonder you don't have a stalker. You look more like a model than an assistant."

And I'd laughed because she was funny but now our days of getting along were over.

"No, I told her. 'I'm just telling you what he said.'"

She took the envelope. "Why isn't he going?"

"He didn't say."

"I'm sure you know, he tells you everything."

Such a lie. "He doesn't."

"He told me he does."

It was too bad that Therese didn't know when she was being baited. He probably said he told me everything to see what her reaction would be. I knew how he operated. It was too bad she didn't. I "He didn't mean it."

"Dane means everything he says."

"You think?"

"I have to speak to him," she said, leaving my desk and walking back to his door. "It's very important."

"Is it?"

"I have to speak to him," she mumbled again, as I walked up beside her. "He's not taking my calls. Here, at the club...he doesn't answer his cell..."

"Oh," I needed to assure her, "that has nothing to do with you. He's got other stuff going on."

"So I'm just what, another irritation for him?" she snipped at me cattily.

"That's not what I meant," I told her seriously. There's nothing more irritating to me then having people misconstrue my words or my motivation. I hated people that assumed things.

"I need to see him Jory," she said softly, trying to appeal to me like we were pals.

"Take the check and leave Miss Warner," I told her, moving her hand gently off the doorknob. "He doesn't want to see you. Don't force a scene that you'll both regret."

"I wanted to marry him."

"I have no doubt that you did."

"One day everything was perfect and the next day he said he thought it would be better if we started seeing other people."

I nodded. I knew all this already. He gave all of them the same speech, the "you're-just-too-good-for-me speech" when he needed air and had to get away. The key to the man, the same as most, was to give him tons of space and act like he didn't matter at all. Be there when he wanted you and make yourself scarce when he didn't. But not one of them had ever been able to pull it off. They started out all outrageous and aloof and then fell hard and wanted to smother him and keep him locked up. He got under their skin so fast; the desire to cage him came with panicky obsession almost overnight. And I saw him recoil and then retreat behind his crazy jam-packed schedule and me. He loved to use me as a shield, sometimes even in person. He would show up with me in tow just to drive a point home. Dinner dates became dinner meetings, weekend retreats became working weekends, whenever he was looking for distance... he brought me along as a buffer. Whenever he wanted the person he was with to stay back.

"I am so in love with him I can't see straight."

I was brought back sharply to the present. "I'm sorry Miss Warner. Whaddya want me to say?"

She let out a shaky breath.

What was I supposed to do? It had to be agony for her. All she had to do was open the paper to the society page to see a picture of another woman on her ex-lover's arm. It had to be maddening, especially since he'd belonged to her such a short time ago.

"How can he just turn it off and forget about me so quickly?"

She was asking the question to the air; addressing no one in particular. I doubt she remembered I was even there. I just stood beside her looking stupid because I didn't know what else to do. If we were friends I could console her; sit up nights with her, make her go out on blind dates just so she'd be out and not stuck in the house, and stay up late and let her cry on my shoulder for hours. If she were my friend I'd entertain her constantly for as long as it took to get Dane Harcourt out of her system. The problem was Therese Warner was not my friend so I felt awkward and embarrassed and desperate to leave the room.

“Good morning, Mrs. Bradley,” Sonja said from behind us. We both turned and I offered a hand to the lady who joined us at the door to Dane's office.

Mrs. Miriam Bradley took my hand and squeezed it tightly. She seemed genuinely pleased to see me and I felt like I knew her as many times as we'd spoken on the phone.

“How are you Jory?”

“Fine, thank you. Are you ready for your initial meeting with Mr. Harcourt?”

“I've been waiting for this for months. I'm more than ready.”

“Terrific,” I said cheerfully. I stepped aside so I could open the door for her and make sure Therese didn't get in at the same time. Not that she was trying to.

Mrs. Bradley didn't enter the room, but stood and looked at Therese. “Have we met? You seem very familiar to me.”

Therese smiled automatically. “I think we have a membership at the same club in Highland Park. I seem to recall seeing you there. My father is Simon Warner.”

“Yes, that's it,” she smiled, offering Therese her hand. She was so beautiful and graceful. I knew women that didn't look that good at thirty let alone at sixty. I didn't understand guys that were in their fifties and sixties that went for trophy wives, when there were stunning women out there who were their own age. But I didn't get gay men that went for guys half their age either. I guess a mid-life crisis was the same no matter who you wanted in bed with you. “You're Therese Warner. Well my dear, I'm so glad to finally get to meet you in person.”

Therese thanked her tightly, trying hard not to cry.

“Come in Mrs. Bradley,” Dane called from inside his office.

I closed the door behind her after she told Therese that she hoped that they would be able to play a set of tennis together very soon. I turned back to Therese and begged her to leave.

“I want him to see me.”

“He doesn't want to see you.”

“Why? What did I do wrong?”

“I'm sure you haven't done anything wrong.”

“Has he said something?” she brightened instantly. God, she was hoping so hard, I was sorry I'd said anything at all.

"No," I mumbled. "He hasn't said a word. But he's going to come out of his office in a minute and I think you should leave before that and try and talk to him another time."

"How am I supposed to do that? I can't call him here and I can't call him at home. He doesn't answer his cell and he won't speak to me in public... I've tried to-to talk to him and he just won't-won't do..." she trailed off, beginning to tear up.

I shook my head. "There's something really bothering him, Miss Warner. I would just give him some time if I were you to sort through-"

"So you think everything will be all right then?"

"I don't know that I'm in any position to—"

"But you know him so well Jory," she said, cutting me off. "Please tell me what you think."

She wanted some kind of encouragement so badly. I sighed heavily, "Miss Warner, I don't know what-"

The office door suddenly opened and Dane stepped out. He looked at Therese, brows furrowed, and she started to cry. He took a deep breath and rubbed his forehead hard. I knew that particular movement well. I got it a lot. Like when he would talk to me and I would ask him questions instead of answering. I couldn't help it; I liked to delve into his life. Not that he ever let me but it never stopped me from trying.

He sighed deeply and put a hand on Therese's shoulder. "I want to apologize for what happened Saturday, I was not myself. I've had a lot of things on my mind lately, and I'm sorry it came to a head while I was speaking to you. I deeply regret having raised my voice to you. Please accept my apology."

"Of course," she breathed. I saw her melt just looking at him. She leaned toward him even as he took a step away.

"I should be more careful." He turned to me then, and was going to say something, but stopped himself. He just looked at me and I stared back for a minute before I got uncomfortable.

"What?" I asked, feeling weird all of a sudden.

"What have you done about Miss Lawson?"

"I haven't had a chance to—"

"Do so now," he grumbled, turning back to Therese and giving her a little pat on the arm before dropping his hand from her shoulder. "I am sorry."

She just stared at him with this pained expression on her face.

His eyes fell to the floor and then were back to me like he was searching for something to say but was unable to find the words.

“What?” I repeated, keenly aware that Therese was staring at me instead of him.

“I’m hungry.”

I smiled suddenly I couldn’t help it. “What do you want?”

“What do you want?”

I shook my head. “I’ll just get you something.”

“Something good,” he muttered.

“Like I don’t know what to get,” I baited him, trying to get a response.

He raked his fingers through his thick hair, gave me a crooked grin, and then retreated back into his office and shut the door behind him.

“He’s flippin’ out,” I said firmly, realizing I might be right. If Dane freaked out, then my sanity was sure to go. He was the steadiest person I knew.

“What’s the matter with him?” Therese asked me, as she followed me back to my desk.

“He’s flippin’ out,” I repeated, before I sighed heavily. “Maybe you can give him a call later huh?”

She nodded and left without another word.

“What did he mean when he asked you about me?” Sonja asked me, looking at me pitifully.

I let out a deep breath before I reminded her about the roses I had taken to the lobby.

“Ohmygod,” she said, her eyes filling up. “Is he really mad about that?”

“Not mad exactly,” I said softly. “It’s just that I think we’ve answered the question of whether or not you’re going to be her permanently or not.”

“We have?”

“Oh yeah,” I drew it out.

“But I don’t want to-”

“I’m sorry Sonja,” I cut her off quickly. “There’s nothing that you or I can do about it now. He’s

made up his mind and when he does that we both know that's it."

"It's just because of the flowers?"

"And all the other stuff," I sighed, "you've got a crush on him."

"He knows that?" She was incredulous.

"Everyone knows that."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. You've made it very clear that you're interested in having more than a professional relationship with him."

"Who doesn't?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Well me for one," I told her honestly.

"You're a guy Jory and Dane's not gay."

There was that.

"But I swear to God, you're the only one I know who doesn't want him. Both Celia and Jill are crazy about him too."

"Maybe so, but maybe that also makes it possible for me to be the only one who can work for him. You obviously can't." I knew that Celia Johnson and Jill Kincaid were both crazy about my boss, but they didn't work for him so he didn't know they wanted to jump his bones. Celia worked for Miles Brown and Jill worked for the third partner at the firm, Sherman Cogan.

"But," her voice dropped to a whisper. "I think he's starting to like me."

You irritate the hell out of him, I thought, sitting down on the edge of her desk. "He likes you fine Sonja, we're just going to make sure you get out of here before he starts not to like you."

"You don't know what it's like to be around him every day and not be able to touch him."

Oh God, all these lovesick puppies in the office.

The door to Dane's office opened, and he and Mrs. Bradley came out. He walked over to me as I stood up, sliding off Sonja's desk..

"I'll be out of the office until twelve so get lunch for us and be back so we can go over the schedule for the Mamon house. I expect to find only you here," he said, making a point of looking right at me when he said it. "We've got a lot to do."

“Yessir.”

“Don’t be late.”

“No.”

“And don’t forget my lunch.”

I felt the frown, my eyebrows lowering fast.

“Fine,” he grumbled.

“Should I get you a drink too?” I asked sarcastically. I obviously needed everything to be spelled out for me in big neon letters. Since I was such an idiot and all.

He gave me a smile then and turned and followed Mrs. Bradley out of the office. Mrs. Bradley *herself* was a case of puppy love; she had asked me over the phone, without even having laid eyes on the man—their conversations alone sparking more than professional interest—if Dane ever dated his clients. I told her that I didn’t know. She confessed to me that she found him compelling and impossible to get out of her mind. Having heard so many other such confessions, I had merely smiled on my end and given her an appointment time.

“Oh Jory,” Sonja sighed. “Can’t you just tell him I’m sorry and it won’t happen again?”

I shook my head and was going to try and say something comforting when my phone rang. I went around my desk and answered.

“So Thanksgiving’s in two weeks. You know that right?”

“Nick,” I smiled into the receiver because I never forgot a voice. Sometimes it was a bad thing because it gave people I hardly knew the feeling that I cared more than I really did, which was the case here. “What’re you talking about?”

“I’m just reminding you that you promised.”

“I’m sorry what did I promise?”

Heavy sigh from a guy I had been on two dates with. He was very nice, a resident at the county hospital. “You’re spending four days with me. My parents have a cabin in Tahoe, I mean in Incline Village, but it’s like the same thing. We can ski every day. You’re gonna love it.”

I doubted that since skiing was not really my thing. “Huh.”

“And I know you’re not psyched about it, but I really want you to go and you can just sit around and relax and drink all weekend with me and my friends.”

"I see." I chuckled.

"I already bought your ticket."

"I can pay you back."

He cleared his throat. "C'mon Jory. I don't wanna be paid back. If you don't use the ticket it's not like I can't use it or—"

"Oh good."

"Not oh good." He chuckled. "I want you to go with me. I have a reoccurring fantasy of being under a mound of blankets with you while snow is falling outside."

I smiled into the phone. "That's very romantic."

"Don't I know it!"

I laughed at him. "I'll think about it all right?"

"Okay, that's fair. In the meantime can I take you to dinner tomorrow night?"

"Actually I've got a—"

"Jory," he cut me off, and his voice dropped to a whisper. He was obviously somewhere other people were and he didn't want them to hear. "Baby you can't just sleep with me once and blow me off."

"No? Most guys like it that way."

"I'm not most guys. I want to see you; I want to spend time with you. I have this great breakfast nook in my townhouse that you'd look great at first thing in the morning."

Which was nice. The problem was there was no spark at all. Not even a drop of chemistry. I had sex with him because I felt like if I didn't I would be a cocktease. I had a personal rule; if you made it to my apartment you were getting laid. He'd been there on the second date and even though I didn't really feel like it at that point; I had sex with him anyway. I knew I was in trouble when we were done and he wanted to spend the night. I lied to get him out of my bed because I didn't sleep with anyone. Screw yes, cuddle up with, no. I'd never loved anyone enough or trusted anyone enough to let them spend the night.

"Listen," I said gently. "Why don't I call you later after I see if my boss is gonna need me tomorrow night or not."

"Oh, you gotta work. I'm sorry I thought you were trying to blow me off."

I was but it was nicer this way. “No.”

“Okay. Great. Call me later.”

“I will,” I lied.

“Maybe I should run over there and write the number on your hand so you don’t forget it.”

“No-no-no.” I chuckled into the receiver. “Don’t do that. I’ve gotta go get my boss some lunch. I’m not even gonna be here in like five minutes.”

“Then I’ll leave it on your voicemail.”

“You’re persistent Nicky, I’ll give you that.”

“You have no idea.”

I hung up the phone, then thought about it, and was about to call him back and just be honest when Sonja plopped down on my desk.

“Talk to Dane one more time please J.”

So funny that she called my boss by his first name. I could never do that. It wasn’t respectful enough.

“Jory, sweetie, please.”

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. Didn’t she know that reasoning with Dane Harcourt when he had his mind made up was like reasoning with a hungry grizzly bear?

“If anyone can get him to come around it’s you Jory.”

Why did everybody always say that? Why when Sherman wanted something did he come to me to break the ice for him first? Sherman Cogan and Miles Brown had been in this business with Dane Harcourt from day one, and yet they still walked around on eggshells with him. One of the men was himself a high profile interior designer, with years of successful multi-million dollar projects to his credit, the other, one of the top landscape architects in the country. Yet they both worshipped my boss because he exclusively worked on residential homes. Apparently that was where the big bucks really were. I had thought that commercial buildings were where the money was, and I was right, but big-ticket contracts were harder to come by than society homes. And I had to admit that it was the name *Harcourt* that brought most people through our doors, having seen his work in *Architectural Digest* or *Sunset* or other magazines. The name recognition belonged to my boss.

When I first came to work for him almost five years ago, I had no clue who Dane Harcourt was. All I did know was that his firm had advertised for an assistant and I needed a job. Being brand new in town, I needed to get out of the YMCA and start paying rent. I had three days to figure everything

out before I would be living on the street. I had put in applications practically everywhere and the panic was starting to settle in.

I had shown up, with at least a hundred others, to fill two positions at the design firm of Harcourt, Brown and Cogan. Debbie Towney was the Office/Accounting Manager and she was done with it being just she and Jill Kincaid, the workload was just too heavy. Jill herself could not be expected to answer the phones, do all the typing, filing, Xeroxing, scheduling of hundreds and hundreds of business appointments and still remain sane. It had been decided that each partner would have his own personal assistant that would be responsible for only his work. I figured since typing speed hadn't been a prerequisite for the job, I could apply without making a fool of myself. I was wrong.

They made us all take a typing test. I failed miserably. I was allowed to return the next day because I got a perfect score on the vocabulary and spelling portions of the test, as well as knowing my stuff in the graphic design area. Not that I was a pro or anything, but the entire Adobe suite and I were very close friends. The problem was the next morning I had found a puppy, a Siberian husky mix the vet said later, walking around on the street on my way over. I tried to get rid of it but the little bastard followed me for eight blocks. He was tenacious and when he almost got run over darting across Michigan Avenue after me, I broke down and scooped him up. The whimpers of joy melted me right there. The dog and I bonded. I told him he was lucky he had a heavy coat because we'd be living outdoors in the very near future. He gave me the angled head-tip that dog's do when they're not sure what's going on with you.

Since I figured I didn't have a hope in hell of getting the assistant job anyway, I took my new puppy with me to the second interview. Needless to say, I was the only one who arrived with a barking dog in a cardboard pet carrier. Jill Kincaid asked me to leave just as Dane Harcourt walked out of his office. Everybody smiled, I grimaced, and he scowled.

I was invited into his office and I sat down in front of his enormous, antique wooden desk. His office was dark with a polished hardwood floor that made one think that an English scholar lived there instead of an architect. Bookcases took up almost all of the available space and several beautiful oil paintings hung on the walls. In one corner were several large plants, and in the other, next to the big bay window, were two huge wingback chairs and a small coffee table that was inlaid with tiles. The tiles were each hand-painted, I later learned, and each piece fit together to make a picture of a peacock. It had been his grandmother's table and it made him feel good to have it in his office, close to him. It made him feel like he still had a piece of her with him. After several minutes, he had stopped talking and looked at me. Like he was surprised at himself for explaining. But everyone shared with me. It was a gift.

He started to ask me about my qualifications and my brand new puppy started to howl. I answered as best as could, and he seemed genuinely impressed that I was planning to pursue a degree in Fine Art, until he started grilling me about what I was going to do with it once I had it. I told him I didn't know. I explained that I was going to major in it because I liked it and that was all. I was unsure of what I really wanted to do with my life. He replied that he wanted someone who was sure of their career choice, not some fly-by-night person who could be there one day and gone the next. I denied that would be the case when my puppy let out a blood-curdling cry.

“What the hell’s the matter with it?”

“*He*,” I emphasized, “is just scared. He doesn’t know where he is and I’m sure it’s frightening.”

“May I ask a stupid question?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“You know perfectly well what,” he smiled, and I knew I could like the man. “Why did you bring your dog to this interview?”

“Because I just found him this morning and I didn’t have enough time to take him back to the Y, or else I would have been late to see you, and I can’t really leave him in my room alone anyway, I mean... I’ll have to sneak him in tonight as it is.”

“You found him today?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes.”

“Excuse me?”

“I hate the word *yeah*. Say yes instead.”

“Okay,” I said slowly because who hated the word *yeah*? “Yes.”

“When?”

“On the way over here.”

“You found him just now.”

I shrugged. “At least I stopped to get a carrier for him. I didn’t want him taking a dump in your office.”

“Very thoughtful of you.”

I sighed deeply. This was a disaster.

“You found a dog on your way to this interview,” he said like he was trying to get it to sink in.

“Maybe it’s a good omen.” I smiled wide.

He stared at me. “Big believer in signs are you?”

“Yes sir I am,” I said, using the word he preferred that time.

“Why not just take him to the pound?”

I squinted at him. “How is that hopeful?”

His eyes were locked on mine before he cleared his throat. “You know your dog is loud, good luck sneaking him in anywhere.”

“He’s just noisy because he’s stuffed in a box.”

“Is that right?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s test your theory.”

“Pardon me?”

“Let’s see him.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” Dane said, getting up and walking around his desk and sitting on the edge of it. “If you don’t let him out it sounds like he’ll die or something.”

I leaned over and opened the top of the cardboard carrier and Shiloh stopped howling and sat down. He looked up at both of us and started to wag his tail. I was about to pick him up, when Dane bent down and scooped him out of the carrier. My little puppy immediately started licking his face and then shoved his wet nose into the man’s eye.

“Sorry,” I half-laughed, “he’s just happy to see you.”

“He’s real cute.”

“I know. I can already tell he’s gonna be a real pain in the ass.”

Dane put him down and Shiloh proceeded to run circles around the room. “Tell me Mr.,” he stopped, and looked up at me, “Keyes is it?”

“It is,” I answered, reaching unsuccessfully for my dog as he ran under my feet. “But you can call me Jory or J or whatever. I don’t care.”

“Tell me Mr. Keyes what do you think is more important, loyalty to me or loyalty to Harcourt, Brown and Cogan. Are you a team player or more inclined to support the individual?”

I thought a minute, calculating what I thought he wanted to hear, but decided to just go with my gut. What could it possibly hurt? “If I work directly for you Mr. Harcourt, then that's where my loyalty lies. I would be your personal assistant, no one else's.”

He nodded, “thank you Mr. Keyes, we'll be in touch.”

I thanked him and would have left then, but it took the both of us in a team effort to catch Shiloh and put him back in the carrier. Once we did, much whimpering and howling soon followed.

“He's such a faker,” Dane smiled broadly. “He's going to be quite a handful.”

I nodded, “I know, but imagine the fun.”

“Imagine the fun,” he echoed his voice warm.

I looked up at him and smiled. “You've been really great about this.”

He nodded. “What are you going to call him?”

“Shiloh.”

“Civil War fan are you?”

“No,” I said flatly, “Neil Diamond.”

“Oh.” He was at a loss for words and I laughed. He was okay.

A day later, the last day I had before I was forced to leave, Jill Kincaid called and offered me the position as Miles Brown's personal assistant. I accepted immediately and was able to say yes to the guy I had met out at a club a week before. He and four others were moving into a studio apartment and he had asked me if I wanted to live with them. I had just enough for the first month of rent if I didn't have to spend another penny. After I got the call, I forked it all over to the landlord of my new place, the tiny apartment downtown beside the train tracks, looking like heaven after having nowhere to call home. That night I made them a deal that if they would feed the two of us, my dog and me for the next two weeks until I got my first paycheck, I'd take care of the groceries and cooking for a month. I was shocked when they all agreed. Turned out that I was unanimously liked, they thought my dog was cool and the idea of having a home-cooked meal every night for a month appealed to everyone. When Shiloh and I left the YMCA, I felt like I was finally going to be all right. And I was so thankful to the firm of Harcourt, Brown and Cogan.

When I reported for work, Jill informed me that she had been confused and that I would be Mr. Harcourt's assistant instead of Miles Brown's. *She* was supposed to have been his assistant, but apparently he had other plans. She wanted to know what exactly I had done for him during my

interview. I wanted to deck her. Dane saved me the trouble though when he walked out and told everyone that I had been the most honest person he'd interviewed. And the dog helped. Jill rolled her eyes and Miles' new assistant, Celia Johnson, was baffled. Dog? Had he said dog?

I soon found out, from the steady stream of applicants checking in to see if the position had been filled, the real reason he had chosen me to be his assistant. I was by far the only one not completely infatuated with him. Women swooned when he walked by. Jill and Celia both wanted my job very badly and we couldn't keep a receptionist out front. The rotation in the office was about one every two months. That was about how long it took them to really piss him off. The girls all fell hard for his casual charm and that smile that lit up his eyes. I saw them lean over his desk and talk to him and I watched their hands hover over his shoulder when he wasn't looking, wanting to touch him but not daring to. They all wanted to be close to him, everybody except me. I could have cared less, so of course I was the only one he let get near him. He was himself with me because gay or not, I was a guy and he didn't have to be careful with physical contact or with what came out of his mouth. He was painfully, brutally honest, blunt to the point where I was wincing for awhile every time he spoke. But over the passing months I found that I just plain liked him and my feelings sprang from a different source than infatuation or longing. I understood beneath all the polish and style that the man's heart was actually the most amazing thing about him. He hid his warmth and kindness well but I knew him better than anyone. I knew the man had gotten choked up when he drove me home from the vet after I put Shiloh to sleep. My sweet dog had succumbed to cancer at a year and a half and I could no longer bear to watch him suffer. I had gotten the hard squeeze on the shoulder when I got out of car. It was all he would let me see but it was so much more than anyone else.

"Jory."

My mind had been drifting and when I looked up I saw how pained Sonja Lawson looked.

"Please Jory, talk to him," she pleaded. "I swear I'm not leaving until he gets back. I want to talk to him. I think I can make this right with him."

"If you think so," I conceded, knowing full well that the whole thing was hopeless. "Stay if you want, but I'm telling you what I think you should do."

"What's that?"

"Run away," I teased her.

"That's not very mature."

"I'm just letting you know what I think. He wanted you gone and you're doing just the opposite. Don't expect him to be happy when he gets back from lunch."

She turned away and went back to her desk. I felt really sorry for her, but there was nothing I could do. I had already asked him to reconsider his decision without success. I knew that when she irritated him by staying until he got back, I'd be the one in trouble. The phone saved me from thinking about it.

“You want the number to the doctor’s lounge now?” he asked without a greeting.

“Nick, you’re seriously demented,” I assured him before I took down the number he gave me. After he hung up I left for Greek food because that usually put my boss in a pretty good mood.

I barely heard Sonja when I walked back into the office. She was crying and whining and saying how much she didn’t want to go. I tuned her out after a few minutes while I answered emails, checked his calendar and ordered flowers for Samantha Palmer, who he was apparently taking to the Opera the following night. Her name had popped up on the calendar on my desktop over lunch. So much for Lacey Collins, it sounded like the AIDS benefit might be their last date.

“Jory!”

My head snapped up and I realized she was sobbing. “Jesus what’s with you?”

“He’s ruining my life!”

“What?” I was confused.

“Jory he—”

“Oh c’mon Sonja.” I half-laughed because it was ridiculous. “He doesn’t want you and you’re hurt for whatever reason. Just get over it already. Go home and tomorrow you can start a new job with a new boss and forget all about Dane Harcourt.”

“I’m really crazy about him though.”

And I looked at her and got it. She was one of those pretty girls that was used to having men fall at her feet. What she didn’t get was that she wasn’t even in his league. Even to date. “Oh for crissakes get over it.” I sighed, tired of the topic. “You’ve got no chance with him.”

“Jory I have—”

“Please,” I scoffed at her. “He’s a fantasy. No one actually gets a man like that.”

Of course just as I said it, Dane stepped into the office. We both realized that he had been standing just around the corner for several minutes. Heard everything. I sank into my chair; Sonja slunk out of the room mumbling that she was off to see our office manager Debbie.

“Excellent,” he told her.

I finally looked up and found that he was still towering over my desk. I had to tilt my head all the way back to see his face. He was staring at me hard, his eyes searching mine. I saw the muscles in his jaw flexing, but he didn’t say a word, just looked at me. It was unnerving having his full and complete attention and I wasn’t at all sure that I liked it. I felt myself start to squirm.

“You’re back early,” I muttered.

“Who knew you thought so much of me.”

“What?” I asked, pretending I hadn’t heard him, hoping he’d give me the out.

“You heard me.”

No such luck. I took a deep breath. “Yeah, well,” I said, my eyes not turning from his steady gaze. “It comes and goes.”

“So,” he said, finally looking away. “Do I get to eat?”

I sighed loudly so he couldn’t miss the irritation. I fished out his meal of humus and couscous and falafel and all the rest of the stuff he loved. The smile I got was his real one; the one you hardly ever saw, the one that did the killer thing to his eyes where they went all liquid and warm.

“Enjoy your lunch, sir.”

He looked down at me and I had no idea what else to do so I reached into the top drawer of my desk and pulled out my last pack of pop-tarts. I held it out to him.

“Are they Strawberry Frosted?”

“Aren’t they always?”

He took it from me and walked into his office without another word. I sat there for a minute thinking about what I must have sounded like when I was talking to Sonja. Like maybe I had a crush of my own going on.

“Hey,” Jill called out to me from the hall.

When I looked up at her she was smiling wide.

“Another one bites the dust huh baby.”

I threw up my hands and she burst out laughing. And as I watched her walk away I realized that even as Sonja had not been accepted, I was. The girls and me, we were in the grind together.

Jill, Celia and I had gotten close after six months, Debbie being a tougher nut to crack. It took a whole year. In the end though it was one of those things. All three of them still coveted my job but nobody wanted me to go anywhere, either. When Piper started and seemed immune to my boss’ charms, it felt like we were finally in the process of building a strong crew that was going to stick around. As I looked across at Sonja’s empty desk I realized that I would be meeting somebody new that week. I probably should have suggested to Debbie that she ask the temp agency to send over a guy.

CHAPTER THREE

I HAD JUST STEPPED out of the shower when my cell phone rang. My friend Evan was on the other end. He reminded me that it was his birthday and I had better be at the club by nine. Like I would be late for a party.

Amnesia was a dance club on Halsted that I really liked. It was way over the top with the go-go dancers in cages, purple neon everywhere and the bar that ran the length of one wall. I saw Evan in his group of friends and crossed the floor to get to him.

"Hey buddy," he smiled wide, grabbing me into a tight hug. "You came."

"Have I ever missed your birthday?"

"No," he said, looking me over. "You're the most dependable person I know."

"Good." I squeezed his shoulder tight. "So what's your plan for tonight?"

"First I gotta tell ya...I just saw Kevin."

I nodded slowly. "That's okay. I knew he'd be back this month at some point."

"But you're not pissed he's out at a club?"

I shrugged. "It's not my business anymore E."

He nodded slowly, and then suddenly smiled. "What'd you get me?"

I pulled an envelope from my back pocket and presented him with three tickets to the ballet.

"Oh baby." He reached out and hugged me again. "When are we going?"

"Uh-uh," I shook my head. "Take your Mom."

He gave me a look.

"You know you should. You never go over there and she lives like ten minutes away."

"She always wants to know who I'm dating. What am I supposed to say? I don't date Jory...I have sex in the backrooms of clubs. I'm not looking for anything serious."

"One of these day Ev... love's gonna get ya."

"Not likely."

“Whatever.” I shrugged. “Back to Mom. I bought the tickets for you and her.”

“She drives me nuts.”

“She’s a lovely lady.”

He grunted and slid an arm around my neck to pull me close. “Come say hello to the girls.”

Evan’s fellow flight attendants were catty and flirty and drank more than I thought possible. Three of the women and two of the guys propositioned me and by the time midnight rolled around I realized I was starving. I was on my way back from the bathroom when Kevin Wu stepped in front of me.

“Hey,” I said, moving back so I didn’t touch him.

“Jory.” He smiled and reached for me.

I took another step back. “What’s going on?”

His smile fell away and I saw his jaw clench. “You’re still mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I assured him, because I wasn’t. I truly could not have cared one way or another if he was there or not. “Good to see you,” I said and brushed passed him.

Last year Kevin Wu had told me he loved me. He’d taken me to a very romantic dinner and after much hedging, blurted out that he didn’t think he could stand it if I slept with anyone but him, for the rest of my life. At that point, I wasn’t on the same page, but in time I was almost certain I would have been. We had dated solid for six months and it was the closest thing I had ever been to a grown up relationship. His only complaint had been that he wanted to sleep all night with me. I wasn’t ready for that step and in the end I had been right.

When he told me he was coming out to his family I had eagerly gone along with him to offer support and meet them for the very first time. It had been a disaster. Not only did he chicken out, but he also told them I was just a friend. He ended up dancing with a girl his parents had invited, all night long. I was left alone at the table, and when I confronted him later that night he told me that I couldn’t possibly understand since I was basically an orphan. I had no familial obligations. When he wanted to get in bed with me I asked him how stupid he thought I was. I could see the writing on the wall. I was not partner material. He agreed with me but went on to say that once he took his place in the family business that he would be able to set me up in style. Apartment, cash allowance, car... he would keep me very comfortably. I was so glad we were at his place so I could leave and thrilled that we had never exchanged keys like he’d wanted. We were done. I had obviously been suspended in some dream state for the entire course of our relationship. I was very thankful that the drugs or trance or alien mind meld had worn off so I could get back to my life and pretend that Kevin Wu had never happened to me.

“Jory.”

I turned and waited while he caught up with me.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to Evan. It’s his birthday.”

He looked confused. “Jory.”

“What?”

“I wanna see you.”

“Here I am.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

I shrugged and turned to go.

He grabbed my arm. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Jory I—”

I peeled his fingers off my arm and got a few feet away before he caught me again and held on while he stepped around in front of me, blocking my escape.

“Don’t be a jerk just because you can. Please let me see you.”

“No.”

Furrowed brows. “Jory,” he argued. “C’mon please don’t—”

“Let me go Kevin.”

“Listen I’m sorry I didn’t call as soon as—”

“It doesn’t matter.” I brushed his hand off me.

“Why doesn’t it matter?” He had miscalculated and there was the first glimmer of concern in his eyes.

“It just doesn’t,” I assured him.

He grabbed my arm fast, holding tighter the second time. “Jory just calm down all right.”

“I’m calm you’re the one who’s bein’ weird.”

“C’mon J. All I did was think about you while I was gone.” His voice was rising as he spoke.

“That’s crap. The only thing you thought about was the stuff I did to you in bed.”

He smiled slyly and stepped in closer to me. “There was that.”

Having not had a lot of partners, Kevin was much less experienced than me. My lovers numbered in the double-digits, and I had learned something I liked, or something someone else would enjoy, from each and every one of them. What I had learned from Kevin was that I didn’t want to trick anymore. Orphans wanted homes and I was no exception. I wanted to belong to one man just like every woman in every Hollywood three-handkerchief chick-flick I had ever seen. I didn’t want to sleep around anymore.

The hand on my cheek startled me and I looked up at Kevin. “Where did you go?” He smiled, stepping in close to me, both hands on my face. “You’re thinking so hard about something.”

I lifted my chin out of his hands and pulled back. “Nothing. I’ll see ya.”

“C’mon J,” he said gently, staring into my eyes. “I just want to talk to you.”

I turned to go but he grabbed a handful of the front of my shirt and yanked me forward off balance so I almost fell into him.

“Jory,” he whispered. “What can I do to—”

I stepped back before I pushed him away. “Get off me man,” I warned him, more annoyed than I probably should have been. I realized suddenly that I was in no mood for anything but being home on my couch. I definitely didn’t want to be out at a club. I needed to spend some time processing everything in my head from the night before.

“Listen,” Kevin said, holding onto my arm. “I’m sorry all right. I didn’t mean to... I really have been thinking about you like non-stop for—”

“You’re bein’ a dick,” I cut him off, pulling free.

He got hold of me again, this time yanking on my arm hard. “Stop playing hard to get. We both know you’re gonna give me whatever I—”

“Let go of him.”

We both froze and turned to Detective Kage. He was looking at me with the permanent scowl of his, furrowed brows, deep lines between them, the smoky blue eyes cold, and his gaze pure irritation. I was amazed that Kevin still held onto me.

“What are you doing in here?” I asked him flatly, because that more than anything was amazing. Frankly, I was stunned.

“I could ask the same of you,” he growled at me. “Is this your idea of laying low?”

“Oh.” I was even more confused. “Is that what I’m supposed to be doing?”

“You know you are.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I do?”

“Yeah ya do.”

“Huh.”

He turned his gaze on Kevin. “Let him go. I’m asking nicely.”

It wasn’t so much the words as the look. Just standing there doing nothing he seemed menacing. Like a gunfighter or a samurai warrior... like the stillness could be broken at any second with violent movement. Kevin let me go and I took a deep breath.

Detective Kage put a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Kevin said, reaching for me.

“Please,” he warned him. “I don’t wanna hurt you.” But you could just tell from his tone that he hoped he would try.

“Hurt me?”

One eyebrow arched slowly.

Kevin’s jaw clenched tight. “You think you could hurt me?” It sounded like a dare.

“Oh hell yeah,” the detective said smugly, smirking the last.

In his street clothes, Sam Kage looked even bigger than he had in his shirt and tie the night before. The jeans showed off his long muscular legs, his slim waist, the t-shirt clung to his wide chest and shoulders, tight across bulging biceps, triceps, the veins in his arms and hands visible. He had that v-shape to him; all solid, heavy, rippling muscle and I realized that standing there in a gay dance club he probably had more than just Kevin and me looking at him. The slate blue eyes, short golden brown hair, thick brows, full lips, chiselled jaw... I had missed that the man was a walking wet dream the night before. Probably because of the way he looked at me. Like he hated me.

“Who are you?” Kevin snapped at him.

Detective Kage just shot him a look before he gave my arm a tug. It was different from when Kevin had pulled; I nearly came off my feet. The man had no idea how strong he was.

He wanted to steer me out of the club but I darted over to Evan to say goodbye. When I put my hand on my friend's shoulder he turned around to look at me. I saw his eyes fill with Detective Kage. He didn't even see me. I was an afterthought.

"Jesus Jory who's this?" He sounded almost breathless.

I stepped sideways so I could introduce them. "Evan Rheems this is Detective Sam Kage. Detective Kage, my buddy Evan."

He nodded but didn't hold out his hand. "Okay. Can we go?"

"Oh no you can't go," Evan argued, reaching out, putting a hand on my wrist. "It's my birthday. Jory and I haven't even had our—"

"He's coming with me," Detective Kage said flatly and I felt his hand on the back of my neck. "So you'll hafta do whatever you people do another time."

"You people?" Evan looked at me; eyebrows raised the question there in his gaze.

It felt like my right eye was twitching. "It's not; he's not with me Ev. He's..."

"I'm done," he grumbled, and I felt his hand clench on the back of my neck. "Outside now."

I leaned in and kissed Evan on the cheek, promised to call him the next day and asked the detective to get his hand off me.

"If you walk toward the goddamn door," he barked at me.

I started toward the exit but a guy stepped in front of me.

"Hey," he smiled at me. "Do you remem—"

Heavy hands clamped down on my shoulders, squeezed tight. "Excuse us," he said behind me.

The guy looked up from my face and saw Detective Kage behind me. He moved out of the way and I got shoved forward hard.

Outside on the street I pivoted around to face him.

"What the hell was that about?"

"Why don't you just paint a goddamn target on your chest you fuckin' idiot?"

I started away from him but he grabbed my arm and swung me back around to face him.

“Christ can you stop manhandling me,” I snapped at him, twisting my arm free, annoyed.

“Sorry,” he said automatically, no sincerity at all; hands shoved down into his pockets. “But you’re just not listening. I don’t get you.”

“Whatever.” I sighed. “Listen I gotta eat all right and then I promise to go home.”

He nodded. “Fine.”

I gave him one last look and then turned to walk away.

“Wait.”

“God, what?”

“Will you stop please?”

I stopped but I didn’t turn around.

“I gotta eat too.”

I looked at him over my shoulder. “I’m getting breakfast. You want that?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Okay.” I smiled, turning to look at him. “Where’s the tank you drive?”

I got just barely a smile, the slightest curl to his lip.

* * * *

I CAN TALK WHEN I have to and I had to at dinner. I kept up a steady stream of conversation from *CSI* to how I was thinking of becoming a Catholic because I liked all the different saints. I had him try my banana pancakes and smiled wide when he admitted that they weren’t bad.

“Christ you talk a lot,” he said under his breath.

I went silent and drank my orange juice.

“Hey.”

I looked up into his silver blue eyes.

“I didn’t mean you should stop. You just remind me of my sisters is all.”

“That can’t be good,” I said, leaning back from the table.

“No,” he said quickly. “It is actually.”

I nodded and drained my glass. “So you want something else or are ya done?”

“I want something,” he said really looking at me.

And I got the weirdest feeling, which I was sure was just wishful thinking on my part, that maybe he was talking about me. Because even though the man obviously hated me the man was gorgeous. Impossible for me not to notice the deep laugh lines around his eyes, the scar over his left eyebrow or the way his clothes clung to him like a second skin. And even though I had complained earlier, the idea of him being rough with me was very exciting. Every guy that had ever tried to throw me up against a wall or down on a bed I had been able to get free of. Most of them didn’t really want to be that physical anyway, didn’t want to wrestle me into submission, it was all for show. But Detective Kage could make me do whatever he wanted. The defined muscles, his size, the look in the dark eyes all told me as much.

“Cold?” he asked when I shivered.

I shook my head and took a breath. “No I’m good,” I said, getting up, pulling out my wallet.

“I’ll get it,” he said stiffly, rising to stand beside me.

“Oh hell no,” I told him, putting twenty-five down. I had to cover the tip too. “I’d rather get shot than owe you anything.”

He glared at me and I laughed before I gave him a pat on the arm. “I’ll see ya.”

His hand clamped down hard on my shoulder to hold me where I was. “I’ll drive you home. Just stay.”

So I stood beside him while he put his half down and then walked out ahead of him.

“You wanna cuff me so people don’t think we’re dating?” I asked him casually.

“No one in their right mind would think we were together.”

“No?”

“Yeah, no.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” But he didn’t explain so I let it go.

The alley was dark but he was right behind me so I didn’t worry. I saw his car as soon as we came out the other side and I was glad because I was starting to freeze.

“Can I ask you a question?”

I winced.

“What’s with that?”

I tried to smile. “Sorry?”

“Don’t say you’re sorry when you’re not. What’s with the flinching? Whaddya think I’m gonna ask for crissakes?”

“Something horrible.”

He squinted at me. “Nice.”

“It’s like navigating a minefield,” I muttered as we reached the SUV.

The car alarm chirped as the door opened and I climbed in. I leaned over to crack his door for him and then buckled in before he barked at me.

“Why don’t you have a fuckin’ jacket?” he asked me curtly.

I shrugged. “I do it’s just not super cold yet. It’s a pain in the ass to carry it to the club, check it and then remember to get it after.”

“So getting Pneumonia is more your speed?”

“Detective, did you know that disease is actually caused by germs and not the cold?”

“Funny,” he said flatly.

I leaned my head back and got comfortable. My phone rang and it was Kevin so I let it go to voicemail. Taylor called and then Nick but I didn’t feel like talking. It was warm in the car and with both of us silent, I started to doze. When my phone rang again I put it on vibrate.

“That thing ever stop ringing?”

“Mmmm,” I answered him, half awake.

“You’re popular, huh?”

I grunted as he pulled the car out into the street. He got on his phone and I listened absently as he talked about times and dates. It was hard to imagine the life of a police detective. I wondered what it was like to have a job that could never be walked away from.

The car was warm, the ride was smooth and there was the low hum of the tires on the road. I lost track of time.

“Jory.”

I felt the back of his fingers slide up my throat and I realized that the car had stopped.

“Shit, sorry.” I took a breath, sitting up. Hard to know how long I’d been asleep. “I’m crap in cars. I always pass out.”

“Me too if I’m not driving,” he said softly.

“Thanks,” I said, my voice husky as I opened the door to get out.

“Hey.”

I looked back at him.

“Watch yourself all right?”

I nodded.

“You’re an idiot for not going into the program.”

“I don’t want a new identity detective. I—”

He put up a hand. “Spare me all right? Just try and be a little less visible.”

I promised him I would work on it.

He muttered something I didn’t catch.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you worried about me, detective?” I asked hopefully.

“No,” he grunted. “I just don’t wanna find you with your brains blown out.”

Which basically closed the door on my wishful thinking.

CHAPTER FOUR

PEOPLE CONSTANTLY SURPRISE ME. I understand when you're out at a club in the tightest, sexiest clothes you own that getting hit on is the response you're after. But fresh from the gym, hair still wet from the showers, hooked up to your iPod, is not the time for someone to try and pick you up. So when a guy leaned against me at the salad bar the following night, I was scowling by the time I turned around to look at him. I had walked through my day at the office in a haze and went to work out in hopes that it would clear my head. I couldn't quite seem to start feeling like myself. Being accosted by strangers was doing nothing for my mood.

"Jory."

I waited. People knowing my name never puts me more or less at ease with them.

He smiled quickly. "Trey Wyndham. I met you at Richard's party last Saturday."

I had no idea who he was.

His lowered his voice. "You went home with me."

That bit of information was not designed to jog my memory. I went home with lots of people.

He cleared his throat. "You don't remember?"

It was rude to tell the truth in this situation. "No I remember. How are you?"

Instant smile. "You were gone in the—"

"How are you?" I repeated, cutting him off.

"Oh... fine."

"Well it was nice to see you again." I smiled, closing up my spinach salad and turning to leave. After having picked everything, I realized I didn't want it. It was typical me.

"Wait."

I kept moving but before I could walk toward the cashier, he stepped in front of me.

"Don't just dismiss me," he snapped irritably. "I want to talk to you."

I took out my other headphone and gave him my attention.

"You know what," he moved out of my way. "Forget it; this whole exasperated, annoyed look you're giving me is bullshit. I don't deserve to—"

I turned around him and started fiddling with my iPod again.

“Jory!”

I kept walking, not fast, just moving at my normal pace.

“Goddamnit wait!” he yelled, suddenly in front of me again, barring my path.

I stopped. “Whaddya want?”

“I want you to not sound like you’re bored out of you mind.”

“Sorry,” I said automatically.

“No you’re not.” He forced a laugh. “I don’t remember you being such an asshole.”

“Okay.”

He let out a sharp breath, raking his fingers through his hair. “Richard told me you eat at this deli a lot so I’ve been sort of hanging out here and...I got your number from him but you never pick up and you don’t return your messages and...I just want to know what’s up.”

I squinted at him. “What’s up is that I don’t return calls to numbers I don’t know, and the idea that you’re stalking me is creepy as hell.”

“What? No...I don’t need to stalk anyone I—”

“Fine then I’ll see ya.”

But when I tried to walk by he grabbed a fistful of my sweat jacket.

“Jory I want to see you.”

Was he kidding? “Are you kidding?”

He slowly released me. “That night was amazing. You...I’d like to—”

“I gotta go.”

But again, he stepped in front of me, making sure I couldn’t leave.

“What the hell?” I groaned, hungry, annoyed and tired. It was a bad combination.

“Why did you leave? Why didn’t you stay?”

Since I couldn't place him I went with what seemed logical. "We were done." It seemed self-explanatory to me.

"Jory you—"

"Listen man I need to go so—"

"Just wait," he said, his hands up to keep me from walking away.

"What are you doing?"

The sound of the voice, the level of irritation was unmistakable. I couldn't help the smile as I turned and found Detective Kage. "Hi."

He was scowling at me, which was the norm for him whenever he saw me.

"How are you?"

"I asked you a question."

"Excuse me I was—"

"Fuck off," the detective told Trey before he grabbed my bicep and dragged me after him.

I didn't fight or argue or anything. I let him manhandle me because for whatever reason, it felt good to be taken care of. He made me feel protected and at that moment, I liked it.

He stopped suddenly and I had to tilt my head back to see his face. The man was very tall. "I can't decide whether you're stupid or just—"

"Thank you for saving me from that guy," I interrupted, staring up into his grey-blue eyes. "He was being a total dick."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "He just didn't want to take no for an answer."

"Seems like maybe that happens to you a lot."

"Maybe," I agreed.

He nodded slowly. "What is that salad?"

I chuckled. "From the sneer of contempt I'm gonna assume you don't eat much salad."

"You would be right."

I glanced into the shopping basket he was carrying and couldn't contain my gasp.

"What?"

"Jesus," I looked at all the frozen food. "You're not gonna eat that are you?"

"Yeah why?"

I picked up one of the frozen appetizers. "Do you have any idea the kind of preservatives that are in this?"

"And I should care why?"

I looked back up into his eyes. "Detective, do you have any idea what this shit will do to your arteries?"

He grunted.

"And your cholesterol and your—"

"I don't eat salad."

"You don't hafta eat salad," I assured him. "But you could eat—"

He put up a hand. "I'm due at my buddy's house and he said to bring stuff."

"So you're planning to kill everyone?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know what why don't you just mind your own goddamn business, buy your rabbit food and I'll drop you at your place on my way."

I shrugged and turned to walk toward the cashier.

"Wait."

I looked at him over my shoulder.

He scowled at me for several minutes. "Shit. Show me what to get."

"What?"

"Don't be an ass just show me."

But I wasn't trying to be a jerk. I was just surprised. "You'll let me help?"

"Yeah."

I felt a weight suddenly slide off me. There was something about spending time with the man that lightened me. “Okay then. What do you want to take over there?”

His scowl darkened. “Like I know. Just...I’ll follow you.”

I walked directly to the produce area and started putting things in his basket. I only ever bought organic even though it cost more because as I had told him earlier, I didn’t do preservatives. I put apricots in the basket and carrots and green beans and zucchini and plum tomatoes. He followed me all over the store listening as I talked, telling him what to make with the ingredients I was getting. When I was done, having placed two bottles of Chardonnay into the basket last of all, I looked up at his face.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said flatly.

“About what?”

“That’s just it, what the hell is a fritter whatever?”

“A frittata.”

“What is that?”

“It’s kinda like a quiche.”

“So why not say quiche?”

“Cause its different, not as heavy. More like a tart.”

He groaned. “Whatever...you can come with me and make it yourself.”

I was stunned.

“Christ could your eyes get any bigger?”

“I’m sorry what’d you say?”

“Just come with me.” He was exasperated. “This way I can go to my friends place since I’m late, you can eat and then I’ll dump you at home.”

“Will your friends want me there?”

“They won’t give a shit.”

The idea of going home alone was not appealing in the least. The idea of going out to a club and sleeping with somebody else was not appealing either. The only thing I wanted to do was spend time

with Detective Kage. He was new and interesting and just looking at him made heat race over my skin.

“Okay.”

“Fine.” He sighed like he was tired. I noticed then the dark circles under his eyes.

“Maybe you should go home to bed huh?”

“Just get in line,” he barked at me, shoving my shoulder to get my feet moving.

I went ahead of him into the line at the cashier.

I enjoyed people watching and seeing the woman count back his change was fun. The way her hands trembled, the sharp intake of breath when his eyes met hers, the flashing smile she gave him was very telling. I was not the only one who saw the appeal of Detective Kage. I wondered what his friends would be like.

* * * *

IT WAS LOUD. THERE was football on in the living room, men drinking beer and yelling at the TV, music on in the kitchen and women talking in the dining room. The kitchen smelled amazing and it was warm as several women moved around setting up appetizers. Sam shoved me into the room with the groceries, told them that I was going to make his part and left me there.

I stared at them.

They stared at me.

“So,” one of the women said, crossing her arms as she looked at me. “Whatcha gonna make?”

She had one eyebrow arched daring me to say something...anything. I liked her instantly.

“Vegetable Frittata.”

“A what?”

“It’s like quiche.”

She nodded, holding out her hand for me. “I’m Megan.”

I took the offered hand in mine. “Jory.”

Her face softened and her eyes warmed. “So what’s in the frittata?”

I explained about the eggs and vegetables and cheese.

“Sounds yum, I don’t usually eat when I’m here.”

“Me neither,” one of the other women said. “It’s disgusting what the guys call food.”

Apparently the evening had evolved over the years from *Monday Night Football* with the boys, to couples night at whoever’s turn it was to host. Pizza, Buffalo wings and beer had morphed into a potluck. From the sound of it however the men were still bringing frat boy fare.

“I’m gonna cook,” I announced, smiling as I walked to the sink, putting down the bags. “Who wants to help me chop broccoli?”

Everyone did.

An hour later I stepped in front of Detective Kage and he slowly lifted his head until his eyes were on my face.

“Here ya go,” I said, offering him the plate in my hands.

He took it still staring up at me.

“It’s good, try it.”

“What is this?”

“It’s the Vegetable Frittata, goat cheese flatbread with bruschetta and green beans with hazelnuts.”

He nodded.

“God what is that?” The guy sitting beside Detective Kage asked as he reached for the plate I had just surrendered. “It smells awesome.”

“Get your own,” he told him, elbowing his friend to keep him away from his food.

I grinned down at Detective Kage. “We have fruit salad for dessert with a raspberry glaze.”

“Okay.” He exhaled before starting on his food.

I turned to walk back in the kitchen, but Megan, my new friend, stopped me.

“I’m going to open the wine.”

“Perfect.”

“Jory honey, this is so good,” Linda, who had helped me cook, called from the dining room table.. I got a chorus of agreement from everyone else. I ate in the kitchen with Megan and two others, all of us talking about food. They all watched me chop the berries and add the walnuts and almonds to the salad I was serving for dessert.

“I had no idea fruit salad could be whatever,” Bethany, another of my new friends, said as she watched me. “I always just do boring old bananas and apples and oranges. You’ve got none of those in there.”

I shook my head. “I hate all those.”

“God Jory, you’re gonna make some girl very lucky.”

I arched a brow for her and she giggled.

“Okay, some guy very lucky.”

“How do you know Sam?”

I explained to them all that I was in a little bit of trouble and he was helping me out. They accepted my words without hesitation because he was a police detective and obviously straight. They didn’t question me even for a second.

Even though I had cooked I helped Darla, the hostess, clean up her kitchen since it was a disaster area. Just the number of empty beer bottles was staggering. I was looking at the very sad looking herb garden on the windowsill when I felt someone behind me.

“It was good.”

I looked over my shoulder at Detective Kage. “Thanks.”

“You eat like that every night?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t have a big enough kitchen or a big enough food budget.”

He nodded. “Well tell me when you’re ready and we’ll go.”

“Sure. I just gotta look at Darla’s wedding album. I promised I would.”

His eyes were locked on mine, which had my heart slamming against my chest. The man took my breath away and he had no idea he was doing it.

“So I’ll tell ya when I’m ready.”

“Fine,” he said before moving away.

Flipping through photographs later, I had Darla draped over my shoulder, Linda leaning against my right and Megan with her hand on my thigh, leaning into me from the left. Two others were lying across the table to offer their memories from their friend's big day.

"Sorry to break this up girls," Detective Kage said from behind me, "but I gotta go."

"So go," Megan told him. "Leave Jory, one of us will take him home."

His hands were suddenly on my shoulders. "Nope, he's gotta go with me."

They were sadder for me to leave than him.

As I said my goodnight, receiving kisses from the women and handshakes and shoulder pats from the men, I was surprised when Detective Kage grabbed my bicep and hauled me out of the apartment in front of him. As we started down the stairs to the front door of the building, other people were coming up. Instead of stepping in front of me, he stepped behind and let me lead the way. Outside on the street, I was distracted by the man's closeness and so completely missed the bike messenger until he was flying by my face. I had the arm locked across my chest to thank for not being hit.

"Thanks," I said, reaching up to close my hands on his forearm. "I totally missed that."

"'Cause you don't pay attention," he growled close to my ear, which sent a shiver down my spine. I was certain every inch of my skin was covered in goose bumps.

I nodded.

"It's gonna get you in trouble one of these days."

"Yes, detective."

"You need to be really observant and vigilant right now."

"Sure."

"You hafta be careful."

"I know."

"Okay."

I was trying to catch my breath.

"Are you cold?"

"No," I managed to get out, my voice low and throaty.

“The messenger startled you,” he said, his arm tightening, drawing me back a fraction more.

I closed my eyes and went for it, leaning back into him, seeing what he’d do. I had nothing to lose and I had to know what he’d allow.

“You’re shaking.”

I was barely breathing.

“Come on.” He patted my chest gently. “Let’s go.”

Without his body heat I was freezing in the street. I watched him move around the SUV and get in. I was frozen to my spot, not wanting to go anywhere else with him, knowing that my attraction was mine alone. I was his witness, nothing more.

The window made the whirring noise and lowered as he leaned across the passenger seat. “Get in the car stupid before you freeze your ass off.”

Nice.

I trudged over to the car and climbed into the seat.

“What the hell were you waiting for?”

“A written invitation obviously,” I said sarcastically.

“God you’re an idiot,” he grumbled before he pulled the car into the street.

He had no idea.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT I decided to take my friend Tony up on his drinking and dancing offer. Nothing else was working. I still felt like I was in a dream, like I was outside my body watching. It made sense that maybe if I went to bed with someone that I would have to actually be engaged and if I were maybe I would be me again. It was a theory that I tried to explain to Tony. He had no idea what I was talking about but he was a good sport about listening. And that in and of itself was amazing since his attention span was practically nonexistent. He even mostly maintained eye contact.

It became immediately evident that dancing was not a good idea. I didn't want to be groped or mauled or grabbed. I wasn't in the mood to be put up against the wall in the bathroom. Drinking on the other hand had real possibilities. So while my friends danced like spawning fish, I sat at the bar and drank. I watched them gyrating and twisting, bumping and grinding and whenever they called out to me, I waved and smiled. Every guy that sent me a drink, I sent back. Every time I was leaned into, I shoved whoever it was off me. I elbowed one guy in the ribs because he wouldn't take no for an answer. But after a few hours of drinking, the alcohol finally did the trick and unwound me. Feeling good, I slipped through the crowd to join my friends on the dance floor. I saw that more people I knew had joined them and my friend Ben in particular was there. I could always count on him to be funny and upbeat.

As usual, as soon as Ben saw me he was across the floor really fast. His hands were all over me as he grabbed me and hugged me tight.

"Jory.... I missed you."

I smiled at him as he stepped back and looked at me.

"Let's get this off," he said, stripping me out of my t-shirt, pulling it up over my head.

I grabbed it back from him, tucking one end down into my pocket before I stepped in close and pressed my groin into his. I was just fooling around but it was fun and in minutes his hands were tight on my hips and his face was buried in my shoulder.

"You're such a cocktease, Jory," he groaned, licking a line up my throat as his hands squeezed my ass though my jeans.

"I know." I laughed, rubbing against him to the catcalls and whistles of our friends.

"Oh fuck this," he half-yelled, suddenly grabbing the back of my hair, and yanking me off the dance floor, dragging me back to the bar. Once there, he whirled me around to face him. "Go home Jory before I make a big mistake and ruin our—"

I put a hand around the back of his neck, pulled him close and kissed him. It wasn't my best, there was really not a lot of effort put into it but it accomplished my goal. His mouth opened and he

shoved his tongue down my throat. One of his hands was on my neck, the other on the Button-Fly of my jeans. His fingers were working fast to get it open enough to shove his hand down inside.

“Come home with me.”

“Let’s just go in the back.”

He jerked away from me, his eyes on mine. “What are you talking about?”

I smiled slowly. “You’ve never fucked in the back room?”

“Yeah I’ve fucked in the back room,” he snapped at me. “But I don’t wanna do that with you. I wanna take you home with me.”

I shook my head; put a hand on his belt buckle. “Come on, you know you want it.”

He shoved me back away from him. “I do want it that’s the problem. I want you Jory, I always have, all of you.”

I stared at him, understanding finally sinking into my alcohol soaked brain. “So you want what?”

“I want you to come home with me.”

“And do what?”

He looked confused. “You’re not just some trick Jory or a one night stand.... that’s not what I want from you. You know that.”

I did, since when?

“Come home with me.” He smiled, his eyes soft.

Funny that it was what I told myself I wanted. I had stopped seeing Kevin because he didn’t want to be with me but here was my friend Ben suddenly confessing that he wanted me and Doctor Nick, who called continuously, also wanted me. People were ready to make commitments to me and I was hesitating.

“Christ, I’m messed up.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “I gotta go man. I’ll call ya all right.”

“No just wait.” He forced a smile. “I’ll go in the back with you, who can say no to those eyes just...lemme get you another drink first.”

But I was already turning to walk away. He couldn't take back what he'd said anymore than I could pretend that he hadn't said it. I had offered sex and he wanted commitment and that was all there was to it.

"Jory," he said, catching up to me, hand on my shoulder. "Please stay.... please."

I leaned in and kissed his cheek before patting it gently. I left him on the side of the dance floor.

Outside on the street, I was pulling on my t-shirt when it was suddenly yanked down over my head fast and rough. I looked up and found Detective Kage.

"Oh...hi."

"Hi," he said snidely like it was the lamest greeting ever. "I can't wait to hear this."

I pointed into the club. "I was in there dancing and I came out because—"

"What part of laying low don't you get?"

"I just wanted to have fun."

"And are you?"

There was no snappy comeback for that.

"Did you take something?"

"No why?"

"Your eyes are all glassy."

"I just drank a lot."

"A lot? Like how much can you drink before you're wasted?"

"You'd be surprised."

He looked me up and down. "What do you weigh like a hundred pounds dripping wet?"

"More like one forty."

"I'll believe one twenty."

I shrugged. "I'm heavier than that, I'm all muscle."

He laughed and the sound sent hot blood straight to my groin.

“I am.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose before giving me all his attention again. “C’mon, I’ll drive you home before you freeze to death out here.”

“That’s okay.” I shook my head. “I’m kinda hungry. I’m gonna eat and then I’ll go home.”

“You should let me take you home.”

I shook my head, shoving my hands down in my pockets, walking around him to head toward the diner on the next corner.

“Jory.”

I stopped walking but didn’t turn.

“Don’t be a dumbass. I’ll take you to eat.”

Which made me smile in spite of myself. “Where’s the car?”

His hand closed on the back of my neck and I closed my eyes so I could concentrate on the pressure of his fingers and the feel of his warm skin on my own chilled flesh.

“You’re gonna freeze out here.”

The trembling had nothing to do with anything but him.

“Get in the car.”

He usually just barked at me and walked around the car, not waiting while I got in. So I was surprised when he reached around me and opened the door, holding it ajar from the top as I climbed up into the passenger seat. I leaned across the driver’s seat to unlock his door. When he slid in behind the wheel, he immediately turned the car on and got the heater blowing full blast.

“So what do you wanna eat?”

“Italian?”

He smiled at me. “Okay I know a place. You’re gonna like it.”

Just the fact that he cared that I would or not was good enough for me.

“You got your phone on you?”

“Yeah why?”

“I want you to have my number and my partners’ just in case you need to call us.”

I would have liked it better if he’d wanted me to have just his number but I pressed buttons as he gave them to me and didn’t say another word.

As I sat through dinner I wondered about my reaction to Detective Kage. As a rule straight men did not appeal to me at all. I wasn’t one of those gay men that thought that any straight man given the right circumstances, like enough alcohol, could be persuaded to try a walk on the wild side. I truly believed that you were born either heterosexual or homosexual and there was no fighting it whichever way you were. Sometimes realization came later in life but everyone knew the truth in his or her heart. So it was weird that every second I spent with Detective Kage made me want to strip off all his clothes that much more. But no good could come out of my infatuation so it was best to cut it off before I made a fool of myself.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Sorry.” I forced a smile. “No.”

“I asked if you liked the lasagne.”

“Yeah.” I sighed, taking a deep gulp of my water. “It’s great.”

“What’s the matter with you? You’re usually a lot noisier.”

I wasn’t fun or interesting, just noisy. This was getting better and better.

“Why aren’t you talking?”

I shrugged.

“If you’re worried about the case I can—”

“No,” I said, cutting him off, getting up. “I just gotta go to the bathroom.”

“So go, no one’s stopping you.”

“Where is it?”

He pointed over his shoulder.

I decided on my way back to the table that I would thank him for dinner and get out of there. He didn’t need to drive me home; I could get there myself. And it looked like it would be even easier to slip away when I noticed the other four men crowded into the booth. I didn’t want to walk over there so instead I went right out the front door. I called him from the street.

“Where are you?”

“I left.”

“You left?”

“I saw your friends, I didn’t wanna put a cramp in you night so I bailed.”

“Wait, you—”

“Thanks for dinner; it’ll be my treat next time.”

“Whatever,” he said and hung up.

And there was no reason for me to be hurt or frustrated since we had a professional relationship and nothing more. But I couldn’t help it, I thought seeing him was more than a coincidence, like he was purposely showing up where I was. It would be romantic that way. But romance and Detective Kage had never been introduced. I was living in my fantasy world alone.

My phone rang and it was my friend Wade, calling to get me to join him and some others at a club downtown. It was still relatively early, not even midnight, so I told him I’d be there and caught a cab. It made little sense to leave a gay club to go to a straight one since I was, after all, gay, but I didn’t really care and it didn’t really matter. I needed to put some space between Ben and me, and Detective Kage and me, and being across town from both of them sounded like just the greatest idea ever.

I didn’t feel like dancing, I really was not good company, but I sat with my friends Eddie and Parker and the three of us watched Wade and Gretchen dance while we drank. And drank. My only interest was in getting as much alcohol into my system as was humanly possible and my friends were in complete agreement with me.

An hour later I was passed the point where I could walk and talk and do anything but lean my head in my hand and people watch. I squinted really hard when I saw Detective Kage weaving through the crowd behind a line of people. I closed one eye, opened it, and then tried the other; just to make sure I wasn’t seeing things. What the hell was he doing at a club?

He saw me, turned to lean in close to the women beside him before crossing the room to my table. It looked like he yelled when he stopped to stand over me but I couldn’t hear a word over the pounding remix of a song I knew but couldn’t name. I waved up at him and the scowl was instant. That he could maintain his level of intensity was amazing, the energy it took more than I could fathom. I put my head down in my folded arms.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asked, his breath warm in my ear, his knee bumping mine before his thigh as he slid into the booth beside me.

I didn’t answer.

“Put your head up and look at me.”

I rolled it sideways but didn't lift it up.

"Tell me what you're doing here."

"You first."

He growled which sent a flush of heat over my skin. "My friends wanted to go dancing."

This was by far the biggest revelation of the night. "Do you know how?"

And I thought the look couldn't get any darker.

I chuckled. "Sorry you better go."

"I want you to go home."

I shrugged. "Somebody'll take me home detective, don't you worry."

He stared at me a long minute before he got up.

"Jory!"

I lifted my head then so I could see my friend Eddie.

"Jory c'mon Wade's gettin' his ass kicked in the bathroom."

"Only at a straight club," I muttered as I got up slowly to follow him. "This kinda shit never happens at a gay club."

I trailed after Eddie, zigzagging through the crowd, keeping up a running commentary about how if we were in a gay club the word "bitch" would have been volleyed back and forth and then everyone would have walked away. At straight clubs however fists flew instead of insults about what you were wearing.

Eddie went through the door but before I could follow, a heavy hand was clamped down on my shoulder. When I turned my head, Detective Kage was there.

"Lemme go I gotta—"

"And you're gonna do what?" he snapped at me, shoving me aside, pinning me to the wall. "Don't move."

"Wait, I gotta help my—"

He pressed his hand hard against my chest and I could feel the cold cement through the thin fabric of my spandex t-shirt. "He'll be right out. Don't you fuckin' move."

I nodded and he threw open the door and disappeared inside. Not even a minute later Eddie came out trailed by Wade and finally Detective Kage.

“Thank you.” Wade sighed, pressing some paper towels against his bottom lip as he stared at the police officer. “Really.”

He nodded before his eyes flicked to me.

“Jory.” Eddie laughed nervously. “You didn’t tell me you brought back-up.”

“I didn’t know I had.”

“Detective Kage scared the shit outta those guys!”

“They deserve it,” Wade grouched, balling up the bloody paper towel in his hand. “That asshole’s been hittin’ on Gretchen all night and he saw she was with me- what the hell?”

“Never follow a guy into a bathroom,” Detective Kage warned him.

“Unless you’re in a gay club,” I countered. “And you’re invited.”

“Because,” he said loudly, trying to keep the conversation serious. “You never know where his friends are. There were four other guys in there.”

Wade nodded. “I’ll keep it in mind detective.”

“Thanks again,” Eddie said quickly.

“Yeah thanks man,” Wade chorused, grabbing hold of the front of my t-shirt and tugging me after him. “Let’s go get something to eat and-”

But I was yanked backwards out of my friend’s grip. I felt like a rag doll pulled in two directions at once.

“Jory ate already; I’ll take him home you guys go ahead.”

They would have argued with me. They didn’t argue with Detective Kage. They both hugged me good night, I got the guy clench times two, and then they were gone. I stood motionless as Detective Kage walked around in front of me.

“Thank you for saving Wade.”

He didn’t say a word, just stared down at me.

“You don’t hafta take me home.”

“Clearly I do if I want to make sure you get there in one piece.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t get hurt.”

“But you would have.”

And maybe I would have but I would never admit to it.

“Come with me.”

I followed him back out into the crowded club and we found the table where the rest of his friends were. There were three guys counting him and five women. I had no idea what the dynamics were, who was with whom, or if they had just met out, or if the guys had just attached themselves to the women, I didn’t know but I definitely didn’t want to intrude.

“Sit,” Detective Kage ordered me after he sat down on the long sectional.

I obediently took a seat beside him. He didn’t introduce me, it would have been impossible anyway as loud as it was, and when drinks were ordered I got a mineral water. He was hilarious.

Sitting there I got to do more people watching, which I always enjoyed. Two of the women at the table tried to get Detective Kage to dance without success. The woman on the other side of him was more subtle than the others, she leaned close to him to talk, slid her hand over the sleeve of his shirt, touching him to emphasize whatever point she was making. But when he moved to make room for the others coming back from the dance floor, he ended up closer to me, plastered to my side from shoulder to knee.

“You cold?”

I shook my head. I had to quit trembling every time he touched me.

“Then what?”

I had to think of something quick. “Nothing I was just thinking... doesn’t the way we’re sitting remind you of one of those horrible high school dances?”

He shook his head, slouching down on the seat.

We were at eye level when I turned to look at him. “Never a wallflower?” I teased, smiling.

“No.”

I nodded. “Big jock huh?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Football? Lineman maybe?”

“Left tackle.”

“Whatever that is.” I chuckled, crossing my arms. “You were popular so you didn’t have to work at it like the rest of us.”

“And how long’ve you been out of high school, Jory?”

I squinted at him. “I’m twenty-two...I told you that.”

He grunted.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-four.”

“You’re young to be a detective aren’t you?”

“Not really.”

“Yeah but don’t you—”

“Sammy dance with me!” A woman yelled as she took a seat on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and straddling his hips. It was a neat trick considering she had a dress on.

“Oh-kay,” I stood up, not wanting her knees on me, or the Mojito she was holding to get dumped in my lap. “I think I’m gonna go.”

He just looked at me. Just that much distance made it too hard to hear.

I walked around him to get to the ear she wasn’t blowing in and leaned down close to him. “I’m gonna go. I hafta work in the morning.”

He reached up and fisted his hand on the neck of my t-shirt. “I’ll take you.”

“But,” I gestured at the woman in his lap. “Hello.”

I actually got a grin before he yanked me down beside him.

“Sit.”

“You know I really—”

“Shut-up.”

I felt my brows furrow as he lifted the woman from his lap and set her on the couch to his left. He moved her like she weighed nothing at all. I was smaller than her; he could carry me wherever he wanted.

“Let’s go.”

It was agony to spend another minute with him but there was no way to leave without a scene. So I allowed myself to be steered, once again, out of yet another club to the street. Before I could even shiver, I was wrapped up in a cocoon of warmth.

“Keep that on ‘til we get to the car.”

His pea coat swallowed me, falling to my knees, hanging long over my hands but as he had been leaning back against it for more than an hour in the club, it had absorbed all his body heat. It smelled like him too. I sighed deeply.

“See,” he grumbled at me. “You need to carry a damn coat.”

Or get an even better accessory, a man that had a coat.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes detective, I heard you.”

In front of my apartment a half an hour later, I was standing in the street, shivering as I had given back his coat, leaning against the driver’s side door.

“Thank you so much,” I told him, my hands squeezing both the outside metal of the door and the leather interior. “You were great with my friends and I really appreciated dinner.”

He nodded.

I smiled at him. “Maybe tomorrow you can have the night off from seeing me. That’d be good huh?”

He let out a deep sigh, his eyes locked on mine. “You’re exhausting.”

“Yeah I know. My boss says that too.”

“Speaking of which—it’s like three in the morning—how are you even gonna get up for work?”

“I just will because if I don’t Dane Harcourt will murder me.”

“That would save me a lot of work.”

I leaned back from the car. “I’m sure but still.... thank you.”

He moved so fast I didn't even realize he had my wrist for a second. "You need a leash."

"Whatever you want detective," I assured him breathlessly.

He shoved me back and drove away without another word. I wondered what he was thinking.

CHAPTER SIX

THERE WAS JUST ENOUGH caffeine to carry me through my day. It helped that Dane had errands for me to do from the time I got in; to the time I went home. I was in perpetual motion, running so I never sat down long enough to fall asleep. But on the train, I drifted off and ended up two stops from where I was supposed to be. I had left my wallet at home that morning, as well as put on two different coloured socks, so I had no money to get a cab. But walking was fine in the crisp autumn air. I liked the smell of fall and the chill revived me. Flipping the collar up on my cashmere trench coat, I darted across the street toward home. I had been invited out to dinner by Nick but had turned him down. Kevin had called three times, Ben five and Wade and Eddie wanted to have a “thank you for saving our ass dinner” for me. Nothing sounded appealing besides eating cereal and falling asleep in front of my TV. But it was not to be.

Halfway home I got a call from my friend, Jenna, reminding me that I was supposed to be at her boyfriend Tim’s birthday party in an hour. They were having it at a pool hall just like he wanted, and I had better not even think about blowing her off, since I was in charge of bringing the cake. She reminded me that I had volunteered over a month ago. And I was certain that a month ago it had sounded good, sounded like it would be no big deal. But now it was a huge deal, practically horrifying in its detail. The hoops I would need to jump through at this late hour to accomplish my task were beyond all imagining. Like changing and catching a cab and carrying and balancing something awkward. It was whiny and petty but I was tired. I swore all the way home.

Fortunately, Dane had caterers all over the city that loved him and would do anything for him, day or night, whenever he asked. Dropping his name was cheating but I told myself it was okay since it was for a good cause. When I showed up at The Stick House an hour later, Jenna was mad for a second before she saw the cake. All was forgiven as she looked at how intricately it was decorated and saw the many layers. I got a lot of praise lavished on me by everyone. I appreciated it even as I found a barstool against the wall. Shaking my head no, I declined the many offers to play pool and instead just sat and people watched. I crossed my arms and relaxed, meaning to only close my eyes for a second.

The shaking woke me because it wasn’t gentle. I opened one eye before tilting my head back, finding myself looking up at the jaw of Detective Kage.

“Shit,” I groaned, straightening up too fast, throwing myself off balance. I would have pitched forward to the floor if he hadn’t put his arm across me to bump me back into the wall. He did it like you do when you’re in the car and you stop suddenly, putting your arm in front of the other person like that action will save their lives, keeping them from flying through the windshield.

“Are you even awake?” he asked me irritably.

“Yes,” I snapped at him, annoyed that he was there. I had told myself that I would stop fantasizing about him and so had wanted to put a lot of time and distance between us. The fact that he had materialized out of thin air was unnerving. “Why are you here?”

"I'm with my friends."

"Then go be with them."

He ignored me completely. "You were sliding down the wall when I came over here."

I didn't want to talk to him.

"You were passed out next to me."

I hopped down off the barstool, nearly falling until he steadied me with a hand on my arm.

"Careful."

I rolled my shoulder so he'd have to let go and walked away.

I found Jenna and kissed her goodbye, surprised Tim by kissing him as well before walking out of the pool hall. I was debating whether to get a cab or take the train when I heard someone calling me. I turned around as Detective Kage jogged up in front of me.

"I should take you home."

"No you shouldn't," I said irritably, angry for no good reason. "Go back in and hang with your friends. I'm not some damn charity case."

"Okay," he agreed like he could have cared less and then turned around and left me.

I was really happy and really sad at the exact same time. Because even though I knew that logically he needed to go away, I still wished he had stuck around.

I stood there in front of the pool hall raking my fingers through my hair and just breathed. I was restless and tired and hungry. My emotions were all over the place and the best thing for me to do was be alone. But I didn't want to be alone. I wanted company. Soothe my nerves company. I tried to think of someone to call.

"What are you doing?"

I turned my head to look at Detective Kage. He was back.

"I asked you a question."

I let out a long exhale of breath. "I'm thinking."

"Jesus don't start now."

"You're hilarious. You should do stand-up."

He smirked at me. "I thought you were going home."

"I never said I was going home."

"So what are you doing?"

"I told you....I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"Who to call."

"Who to call for what?"

"Company."

He squinted at me. "Why call anyone? I'm offering you a ride home."

"But I'm hungry."

"I'll feed you."

I scoffed, smiling at him. "No wonder you wanted me to go into the witness protection program. Feeding us people has got to be expensive on a policeman's salary."

"You're the only witness I've ever fed."

I just looked at him.

"Don't read anything into it."

"I wouldn't dream of it detective."

His brows furrowed as the muscle in his jaw twitched.

"I'm gonna let you get back to your friends," I breathed out; brushing passed him, starting across the parking lot, heading toward the street.

He grabbed me fast, whirling me around to face him. "You're tired so you're way over sensitive. Why don't we eat and then I'll drive you home."

"No I don't need your—"

"C'mon." He smiled at me, slowly drawing me closer to him. "Please."

"You just wanna make sure nobody shoots me in the head."

He chuckled. "There is that."

I let out a deep breath as he grabbed the front of my heavy wool fisherman sweater. "Okay."

"Good," he said softly, pulling me after him.

I was comfortable in his monster car; the smells were familiar, the dashboard and the view from the top of the world.

"What about your friends?"

"Duty calls, they get that."

I was a duty then, how very flattering.

"Try and stay awake okay?"

I nodded. I would really try.

Chinese food sounded the best so we stopped at a good place in Oak Park. He talked about his day and I told him how many errands I had run for Dane in one eight hour period. It was nice just swapping information that wasn't so much vital as just banter. I was getting used to him, to having him around and as much as I knew it was a mistake to get attached, I was having a lot of trouble not doing so.

"What are you thinking now?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"Lot of sighing and watering eyes for thinking about nothing."

"My eyes are watering because I'm yawning and tired no other reason."

"You're really a piece of work," he said, exasperated.

"Whatever."

"Get up, let's go."

Back in the car I was wide-awake, getting my second wind. I was silent though, not wanting to fight with him, afraid that I would for no good reason other than to keep him there. It was juvenile so I clammed up in hopes that he would just drop me off and drive away. When he stopped in front of my apartment, I muttered out a thank you and grabbed the door handle. But the hand on my shoulder stopped me and I turned my eyes back to him.

He cleared his throat. “You know what? I think maybe I should go in and check your place out to make sure it’s secure and all.”

“Sure,” I said quickly, my mind racing all over again. Did he want to come in to just come in, or did he want to come in and get in my bed?

“Are you all right?”

It was just stupid wishful thinking although why not check out my place a week ago? “Yeah I’m just a little out of it.”

He nodded like he agreed and I climbed down out of the car.

“Where are you going?” he asked me as we started across the lawn together.

“What?”

“Something wrong with the front door?”

I pointed to the side. Obviously he’d never stayed and watched me go in. I’d wondered about that. “I can’t get to my apartment that way.”

He shot me a look.

“What?”

“Are you kidding?”

I walked around the side behind the house and started up the wooden stairs.

“Wait,” he said like he was exhausted.

I stopped moving.

“Lemme get this straight,” he said quickly, his voice strained. “You walk behind the house in the dark up these stairs to the top where you can’t see shit?”

I turned around to look down at him. “Yeah.”

“Move,” he ordered gruffly, sliding around me so he could go first. “For crissakes Jory.”

He sounded more exasperated than mad. I didn’t see the problem. “How stupid are you?”

What was the correct response to that?

He went up in front of me, took my keys and opened the door. “Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” he asked when the door swung open to reveal a wall and stairs to the left.

“Why? What now?”

He stepped sideways to look at me. “You can’t even see up these.”

My studio apartment that I’d lived in for the past two years had been originally converted from an attic to a residence. To make a separate entrance the owner had basically made a hole in the side of the wall leading up to the very top floor under the roof. There was however no room for a door to open *in* so it opened *out* like a giant cabinet. The first thing you saw, because it was all that could fit, was a coat rack. There were eight stairs to the left that hugged the wall and emptied out into my small living room.

It was basically a small space where my TV and coffee table were against one wall and the kitchen sink was on the other. I could wash dishes under a small round window that looked out on the back yard, the stove had only one burner and there was no shelf inside the oven. My tiny microwave sat on the only piece of counter space in the apartment and the one cupboard was above that. My kitchen table was a card table and the two chairs that went with it my friend Ilise had sponge painted over the flat black with gold. It looked odd but I liked it. My queen size mattress and box spring sat on the floor instead of in a bed frame so I was constantly lining them back up when they moved. A bed frame was near the top of my list of things to buy. The down comforter had been my Christmas present to myself and just looking at it made me want to change and get under it.

“Okay I get it,” Detective Kage breathed out. “You live on your own.”

“Yeah,” I said flippantly. “What was your first clue?”

And he launched into me about how I would never know if someone was coming up the inside stairs let alone those on the outside. I made the mistake of rolling my eyes and he grabbed a hold of my sweater and yanked me forward so we were face-to-face.

“This place is a joke Jory. Anybody with a paperclip could get in here.”

“I disagree.”

“You disagree?” He raised his eyebrows. “Because you know everything about breaking and entering.”

“Calm down,” I told him. “Have some tea.”

“I don’t want any fuckin’ tea, I want—”

“Why have you been following me around?”

“What?” He barked at me but already I was getting hopeful again. He obviously liked me, didn’t mind my company and was purposely baiting me to stay and argue.

“You heard me.”

“You’re my goddamn witness you fuckin’ idiot.”

I nodded. “Sit down and stop swearing.”

“I don’t wanna sit down! I don’t want tea...” he trailed off.

I smiled at him because I knew I was right. He might not know what he wanted but I did. “Sit. I’ll make the tea.”

“I don’t want tea,” he repeated for the third time before sitting.

I filled the kettle with water but left it on top of the microwave before I walked back to stand over him. He looked up slowly and when I stepped between his legs he didn’t say a word. I sank to my knees in front of him and my hands went to his belt buckle. I checked once to make sure I was right and I saw him swallow hard, take the trembling breath. When I tugged him forward, he let me move him, sliding down so that his muscular thighs were on both sides of me. When I pushed his shirt up I leaned over and kissed the six-pack abs, my lips brushing over his navel. He shivered hard and I smiled because if there had been a time to protest it was over now.

I unbuckled his belt and when I unzipped his jeans I realized how hard he was. As soon as I pulled down his briefs I reached into my pocket for the condom there. He shivered once when he heard me tear open the foil wrapper and I realized that he’d been waiting for this moment. He could have run if I didn’t have protection, this then his last credible excuse for flight. No going back when he was safe under the cover of latex. He watched my hands on him, gentle but firm without a hint of hesitancy. When his eyes came up, locked on mine I saw how clouded they were, how steeped in need. I smiled before I lowered my mouth over him and he slipped inside the wet heat of my mouth. I loved what I was doing, liked it with everyone, enjoyed it, the power it gave me, the way they looked when I did it. But it was different for once because of the man. It had to be perfect for him, perfect for Detective Kage who, for whatever reason, trusted me with this, his first time with a man. So I gave myself over completely to his pleasure, drawing it all out for long minutes as his panting began. It felt good; I knew it did because I’d been told often enough that my mouth was amazing. As I stroked and caressed him I heard the sounds tear out of him.

Head back, eyes closed, his bottom lip quivering, I took a second to drink in the sight of him lost in what I was doing to him. It was gratifying to know that I could make him feel like that. His breath came in gasps, his hips rocking forward and after a few more seconds he groaned, his fingers tangled tight in my hair. I was there, unyielding, my rhythm unchanging until he swore, cried out, his back bowed as he arched up into me. I waited for his breathing to even out before I moved slowly away, careful not to spook him as I rose from my knees between his legs.

“Let me help you all right?” I said gently, waiting for the slight nod.

He watched every move I made as I grabbed the box of Kleenex off the coffee table. He looked drugged with his heavy-lidded eyes and languid recline.

When all evidence was gone I put my hands on my hips and waited.

“I’m not sick,” he drawled out.

There were several ways to take that. I decided to clarify. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that condom was a waste of time.”

Oh. “I always use one.”

“Whaddya need not to, a note?”

Weird conversation. “Yeah.”

He nodded and then suddenly realized he was sitting there naked from the waist down. Standing quickly, he got his underwear and jeans back on, fiddling with his belt, fumbling around, making the buckle jingle.

I decided to take pity on him and allow him the clean getaway. “I’m having tea,” I announced in the suffocating silence. “You better get home Detective.”

He just stood there looking at me.

I had no idea what he wanted and it didn’t seem like he did either. I turned to go to the stove.

He moved so fast, grabbing a fistful of my hair and yanking me back up against him. His arm snaked around my neck so I couldn’t move.

“Oh-kay,” I breathed out because this I could work with.

“I don’t know what to...if you were a... I don’t know what to do!” His voice was raw and hoarse.

“Whatever you want,” I said softly as he pulled my head back, every inch of my skin hot, ready to be touched. “Just... it’s okay, whatever you do. You’re not gonna hurt me.”

His hand went under the collar of my shirt, sliding over my throat, my collarbone, down my chest. I couldn’t breathe.

I felt him shiver before his other hand slid up my abdomen, pulling first the sweater free of my pants and then the sweater, slipping underneath to touch my skin.

“What do you want?”

But I couldn't speak.

He pulled the sweater roughly up over my head and then shoved me down on the bed. It was a rush to get me naked and he tugged and ripped until I was. I was forced facedown onto my mattress and pulled to the edge. I heard his buckle go and a second later he was against me.

"Tell me what to do," he said, his voice deep, barely there.

I drew his arm down then curled his hand around me and let him feel the length of me sliding through his fingers, how hard I was, how silky the skin. "See how good you make me feel?"

He leaned over and I felt his mouth on my shoulder before he bit down. It hurt and made me gasp at the same time

"Oh you like that," he said, leaning into me.

"I do," I said, showing him how to stroke me. "Now fuck me."

"But I... what if—"

"I'm clean and you were trying to tell me you are too weren't you?"

"Yes."

"I never bareback detective believe me you're safe." He shouldn't have believed me but I was telling the truth. No one ever got near me without a condom. What I was offering him was a gift.

"I...Jesus I don't—"

"We're both good, just do it."

"I don't wanna hurt—"

"You won't," I promised as I pointed at my nightstand. "There's lube in there. Get it."

He did as he was told and when he had the small bottle in his hand his eyes locked on mine. "Come here." I was gentle, moving slowly because he was watching so intently as my hands slid over his skin. When his eyes finally lifted to mine, they were heavy-lidded as he lengthened in my hand, his breath shaky. I turned and bent over the bed and I felt his hands sliding over my ass, opening me up before he eased inside. I brought his slick hand back to me and he stroked me at the same time for as long as he could.

"Jesus you're so tight."

"I feel good."

“So good,” he groaned, his hands moving to my hips, holding me there.

It didn’t take long before he called my name, his hips snapping forward before he pinned me under him to the bed.

“Holy shit,” he gasped, careful as he slid out of me, caring now that he could think again.

I rolled over on my back and was ready to take care of myself when he stopped me. I smiled slowly. “You gotta let me do this,” I panted, my laughter forced. “I could die from...”

“I’ll do it. I want to.”

I shook my head. “No I’ll—”

But he was insistent to reciprocate, pulling my hands away, moving between my legs and taking me into his mouth. He had no idea what he was doing but it still felt like heaven and the fact that he wanted to coupled with his eyes locked on mine, checking to make sure it was good for me, took me right to the edge. I warned him to stop and he moved, watching me finish. When my eyes slowly drifted back open, I was surprised to find him staring at my face.

“What?”

“I made you feel good.” It was a statement.

“Yes.”

He nodded slowly.

“Are you okay?” I asked him gently, smoothing the hair back from his forehead. The way he was looking at me made my stomach hurt, so trusting and peaceful.

“Yes,” he nodded as I got up off the bed.

I took longer in the bathroom than I needed, giving him time to escape, allowing for the clean getaway. I was surprised to find him unmoved, still on his back staring at the ceiling, when I finally emerged. I was halfway to the loveseat when he spoke and stopped me.

“Come back to bed.”

I went to the opposite side close to the wall and lay face down. I was trying to figure out what to do next when I felt his fingers slide slowly down my spine.

“I never did that before.”

And I was going to tease him but the moment was precious even if there was only ever this one. “I know.”

“How did you know? Was it bad?”

“No.”

“I wanted it to be.”

“But it wasn’t.” *I made sure.*

“No.”

Long silence.

“I didn’t...I didn’t know it would be like that.”

“Like what?”

He ignored my question. “We were good right?” Like he needed his own assurance.

“Yes,” I agreed.

He cleared his throat before he pressed his hand against the small of my back. “Do you... do guys...can you make it so you can be on your back?”

“Yes,” I exhaled slowly. “I just thought maybe you wanted it so you couldn’t see my face.”

“No if we could, when you can I...when you’re ready I’d like to see.”

“Get up.”

He did what I told him without question and he had the bottle of lube before I could say a word. I had him move to the edge of the bed and then lift my legs and rest them on his shoulders. He ran his hands from my thighs, up my calves to my ankles; first gently then harder, his fingers clenched the knuckles white. He was going to leave bruises on my skin.

“I’m sorry I bit you.”

“I’m not,” I said, directing him, giving him permission to do what he wanted. He caught his breath, his eyes locked on mine as he pushed himself inside me,

The pain was white hot for the instant before it wasn’t. It felt so good I cried out.

“I hurt you,” he whispered, trying to move away.

“No...and yes,” I breathed out, keeping him still, tightening my muscles. “But that’s how it always is.”

“You should see your eyes.”

I smiled up at him, telling him how he should move, slowly then faster, pushing in deeply so I could feel him. His hands and mouth on my body were rough and hard and when I let the moan rise up out of me he lifted me off the bed and sat. I put my knees on either side of his thighs and lowered myself onto him.

“Jory,” my name sounded like a prayer.

Like the easy rise and fall of a wave, I was fluid in his arms, his fingers tracing down my spine, his hands moving over my hips, my ass, and his mouth sucking and licking down my chest. The way he was looking up at me, like I was a revelation, a gift. But there were crazy boundaries that sometimes couldn’t be crossed. Like fuck but don’t kiss.

“Open your eyes.”

I didn’t remember closing them. Gazing into the silvery blue, I realized he wasn’t rushing me or trying to get away. He wanted everything slow.

“Jory...kiss me,” he breathed out, hands sliding up my throat, cupping my face in his hands, touching my hair. When my mouth covered his he parted his lips for me and I kissed him deeply, thoroughly, exploring his mouth, sliding my tongue over every inch of his, tasting him, devouring him. I heard the catch of breath as I pulled back.

“Detective,” I began. “I—”

“Sam,” he corrected me.

“Sam,” I said slowly, liking the sound of his name on my lips.

“You’re brand new,” he said to me and I understood what he meant. To him it was whole new world of discovery, my body just waiting for him. “Come here.”

The man knew how to kiss; I felt his craving and heat. He laid claim to me; I was bruised, my lips mauled and chewed. Easily the most desired and needed I had ever been. I arched my back and let my head fall back in his hands. He had me; I wouldn’t fall, his arm around my waist anchoring me down.

* * * *

I WOKE UP BECAUSE I couldn’t move. When I lifted my head I realized the reason. Sam had one heavy granite thigh draped over my legs and his arm around my waist. I waited for the panic to come. And waited. And waited. When it didn’t come after several minutes the truth finally sunk in. Being pinned under the man felt right, natural, and that was a revelation both terrifying and overwhelming at the same time. What was it about Sam Kage that brought all my walls crumbling

down? And even though I had no idea I did know that I had to be alone to figure it out. I needed the man out of my bed. When I pushed against him he rolled off of me but the arm that had been under my cheek curled around my shoulder and brought me over on top of him. He tucked my head under his chin before smoothing his hand down my spine.

“Are you awake?”

“No,” he growled, his voice full of gravel, patting my ass a minute before he pulled the comforter up and covered us both. His arm around my back left me unable to move as he rubbed his thigh between my legs.

“Sam you gotta go. I don’t sleep with—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised, his voice soft, hoarse, half asleep.

“You can’t—”

He kissed my forehead and then my nose. “Close your eyes.”

And I thought that there was no way I could, but his big hard body was so warm and the beat of his heart so strong and steady and his fingers sliding through my hair... it was all too much. I couldn’t have kept my eyes open if my life depended on it.

“You’re safe with me,” he said softly. “I promise.”

“Sam I—”

“Go to sleep. I’m here now. I’ll take care of you.”

And even though I thought it was the last thing I wanted, it was still nice to hear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THERE WAS LIGHT FROM the windows in the room, and I turned my head to look out at the overcast sky. It was going to be another grey day in Chicago. I loved the dark days with the smell of rain in the air and the sky a comforting shade of clay. The sun always assaulted me. I liked the slower pace of a storm-washed sky. Turning, I laid my head back down on Sam's chest and listened to his slow in and out breaths and the steady rhythm of his heart. I had never been this close to anyone for such an extended period of time. His arms wrapped around me and he pulled me up, rubbing his chin in my hair. My face buried now in the hollow of his throat, my mouth resting on the warm skin of his neck. I didn't want to move because I didn't want the day to begin.

"Hey."

I tried to raise myself up off him, but the hand on the back of my neck kept me there, close.

"Jory."

I looked up at him as he yawned and stretched under me. He gave me a lopsided grin before leaning close to kiss me.

"You should see your face." He smiled lazily, rolling over on top of me, pinning me to the bed. "You should see how you're lookin' at me."

I could only stare at him. Unbelievable that he was there. I never expected him to be there in the morning. I had expected him to run.

"Your eyes are...something."

He wasn't used to talking, to saying what he was thinking.

"Oh shit that's what time it is," he yelled suddenly having glanced at the alarm clock on my nightstand. He scrambled out of bed, almost doing a face plant when he got tangled up in the sheets. He was a whirlwind of activity, running around my apartment, grabbing his belt off the couch, his shoes from under the bed, untangling his shirt from the down comforter. I sat up and watched him dart around before he took the stairs and I heard the door slam as he went out. It was weird to go from all that noise to dead silence. Seconds later the door creaked back open and he was crossing my floor to flop back down in front of me.

"You didn't even lock the door idiot. What if I was trying to kill you?"

I just stared at him.

"Don't look at me like I'm crazy. I'm not crazy."

I only nodded, squinting at him.

He leaned in and kissed me hard and fast before standing up and looking down at me. “What time do you get off work tonight?”

“Why?”

“I’m gonna come and get you.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why you wanna get me?”

“I’m gonna feed you.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Dinner’s on me.”

“Why?”

“Cause I wanna make sure you’re safe. Is that all right?”

“Yeah that’s all right.”

“Okay then,” he said, looking into my eyes. “Come walk me to the door and lock it behind me.”

I trailed after him wrapped in a sheet. At the door he reached out, put a hand around the back of my neck and leaned in to kiss me, parting my lips with his tongue. The kiss was very hot and left me breathless.

“What time?”

“What?” I had no idea what we were even talking about.

His smile was wicked and smug at the same time. “What time is work over?”

“Six.”

“Good. I’ll be there. Wait for me.”

I nodded.

“And lock the goddamn door,” he growled, walking out of it. “I don’t want anybody in here with you.”

After he left I stood there for a long time trying to figure out how I felt before I gave up and went to take a shower. After much deliberation I decided that the one thing I knew for sure was that I was really looking forward to seeing him. And that was a miracle in itself since I couldn't remember the last time I cared at all.

* * * *

AT EIGHT THAT NIGHT as I emerged from the elevator on the ground floor, I got a call.

"Jory."

"Yeah."

"Hey it's Sam. I'm real sorry I didn't show up but I got kind of roped into something."

"Sure."

"You didn't wait around did you?"

"Nope. Six fifteen I was out of there."

"Oh. So you waited a whole fifteen minutes huh?" He sounded irritable.

"Yep."

"Okay."

"Okay."

I hung up and stopped walking for a minute. When had I become one of these loser guys that equated great sex with anything more than a one-night stand? I knew better. When my phone rang again I answered it as I crossed the street.

"Jory."

"I'm just leaving work now," I confessed because it didn't really matter if he thought I was a loser or not. We were done anyway. "I waited for you all this time. Just so ya know."

"Oh," Sam cleared his throat. "I'm glad."

"You're glad?"

"Yeah."

“Okay whatever,” I grunted. “Bye.” I made sure I put it on vibrate before I walked toward the curb to get a cab home.

“Excuse me.”

When I turned to the guy standing beside me I realized he was studying my face. “Yeah?”

“Are you Jory Keyes?”

I yawned. “Yeah.”

Big smile suddenly. “I’m Caleb Reid.”

I groaned and turned to go.

“No-no wait,” he chuckled, grabbing my shoulder, holding on so I couldn’t leave. “C’mon, I swear even though your boss thinks I’m crazy I’m not.”

I squinted at him.

“Lemme feed you.” His arm went over my shoulder, pulling me close.

I continued to stare.

“I just want to talk to you so maybe—just maybe— you can talk to him.”

Heavy sigh as I agreed. I was just too curious to know what my boss was hiding to turn him down. And besides, I had nothing else to do.

* * * *

CALEB REID LOOKED LIKE a farm boy even though he had grown up in the big city of Dallas, in the even bigger state of Texas. Between the warm trace of an accent and his big blue eyes, I was intrigued.

“You’re wondering what in the world this has to do with your boss.”

“Pretty much,” I nodded, shovelling the French toast into my mouth.

“Well, see it turns out that his folks are my folks.”

I paused in mid bite to stare at him. “I’m sorry?”

Quick sigh. “My mother is his mother. My father is his father.”

“How is that even possible?”

“My mom, she got pregnant in high school and put him up for adoption. She never thought for a second that she’d end up meeting her high school sweetheart again years later and falling in love with him all over again.”

“Wait. What?”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “I mean here are these two kids that both run like hell from their hometown and end up meeting a world away.”

“You’re going way too fast,” I told him. “Pretend I’m drunk.”

He laughed at me. “You’re really funny.”

I gave him a fake laugh. “Just back up.”

So he explained it slowly for the impaired. Suzie Pomeroy and Danny Reid had been high school sweethearts. Halfway through their senior year she had gotten pregnant. She never told Daniel she just disappeared. Her mother, Lynn Pomeroy, who did not believe in abortion, sent Suzie to live with her sister in Atlanta for the duration of the pregnancy. When the baby was born, he was put up for adoption. Suzie finished high school there and went on to college. Daniel went to college on a football scholarship. Both of them wanted to save the world and so both joined the Peace Corps. They met again in Somalia, digging ditches, doing relief work. Their chemistry was rekindled almost instantly and they reunited as though they’d never parted.

I nodded after several minutes. “It’s a good story.”

“I know it’s totally a *Lifetime* original movie.”

I smiled at him. He was funny too. “How does it end?”

“They moved back to their hometown to open a solar paneling company.”

“Okay.”

“They also put up windmills and we raise our own food and...what?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“You look like you’re ready to throw up.”

“No.”

He smiled at me. “So anyway...my Mom,” he took a deep breath. “Like six months ago she alluva sudden calls a family meeting and just brings out all these papers and lays the news on my Dad and the rest of us that she gave up her son for adoption.”

I stared at him.

“And my Dad felt sorry for her until she told him the baby was his.”

“Oh.” I exhaled.

“Yeah. He took it really hard. And if you knew him you’d get it. I mean his family... nothing’s as important as us ya know? He just...it almost killed him to think that his son was out in the world without him. He was just sick thinking that maybe Dane had been hurt and there was no one there to protect him.”

I nodded. “Well they gotta know that wasn’t the case. His parent’s... they adored him.”

“Sure.”

“He turned out all right. Everything turned out all right.”

“Yeah they know. Turns out my Mom knew everything about Dane. It was an open adoption because that was the only way she would consent.”

“So she should be okay.”

“Yeah but she’s not and either is the old man. They gotta see him.”

“So they should just come and see him.”

“I know they should, but Jory but he won’t even see me let alone them.”

“And you told him all this that you told me?”

“Yes.”

“And what’d he say?”

“He thanked me for coming and told me that he wished me and my family well.”

Ouch. “That sounds like him.” I forced a smile. “He’s just not a real sentimental guy.”

“Yeah but even if he’s pissed at my Mom...my Dad didn’t even know about him. He should want to at least see my Dad.”

“Again...you don’t know Dane. He’s just not real,” I searched for the best word, thinking. “Warm. He’s private and he doesn’t trust very many people and to him this would be something that’s done and over.”

“That’s not normal. Most people would want to meet them and talk.”

“He’s not most people.”

“But that creates a problem for me.”

I nodded. “Cause your folks really wanna see him huh?”

“Exactly. I mean they’re eventually going to get sick of me stalling them and then they’ll just hop on a plane and come confront him.”

“That’d be bad.”

“I know. If my reception is any indication of theirs...it would be very bad.”

I sighed heavily. “So what’s your plan?”

He leaned forward on the table. “You’re my plan.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Jory, I have spent the last two weeks watching Dane Harcourt and I can say with certainty that beyond a small circle of close friends, you are the only other person he allows access to his life.”

“His girlfriend is—”

“I see him dating a lot of women but I did not see a girlfriend.”

I shrugged.

“And like I said...he’s got a super tight circle but trying to talk to the bank manager or the lawyer or the CEO... I mean forget it. No one but you is gonna give me the time of day.”

I stared into his pale blue eyes.

“But you...I see the way he looks at you and he cares about what you think.”

“You’re confused. He does exactly as he wants.”

“I followed you guys down to the Miracle Mile last week.”

“So?”

“All he did was follow you around.”

“That’s ‘cause shopping’s my deal not his.”

He gave me a look.

“What?”

“If you could see how he is with you.... really see...I think you’d be surprised. It seems like he sort of relaxes when he’s yelling at you.”

I gave him the grunt of agreement. “Well that I believe.”

“It seems to me he’s just himself.”

But I knew what he was talking about. People mistook my ability to finish my boss’s sentences as something more than it was. The fact that I picked up his dry cleaning, bought his vitamins, scheduled his medical check-ups, knew exactly what to order him at any restaurant, and bought gifts for him to give that all he did was sign the card, was not indicative of a deeper relationship. I was his guy Friday. I was like a butler that didn’t live in. Caleb was trying to make more of it than it really was.

“Jory please—”

“Lookit,” I began, leaning back in the booth. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow all right?”

Deep sigh as he smiled at me. “That’d be great.”

“Listen don’t get all excited. He’s not gonna care what—”

“He will,” he nodded. “You’ll see.”

But I wasn’t convinced.

After dinner I was walking toward the curb to call a cab when Caleb called out to me.

“So you’ll call me tomorrow?”

I smiled at him. “If I haven’t been murdered I will but don’t—”

“Jory!”

He was running toward me and I turned around to see what was there. I saw a man and I saw his fist and when he hit me it felt like my right eye exploded. I saw the other guy behind him and I saw the gun. I scrambled to my feet but I fell back down when everything swung left. Arm around my neck as I was pulled backwards. Caleb was standing with his hands up asking the guy to please not

hurt me. I saw spots and everything got really dim even as I realized I was being pulled into a car. Instantly I remembered everything my friend Tiffany had ever said in her self-defence classes. Never let anyone put you in a car. If you end up in a car get out as quick as you can. So I fought, I bit and kicked and the hands all over me just couldn't quite find their grip.

"For crissakes just fuckin' shoot him!"

"In the car? Shoot him in the car?"

"He's what eighty pounds? Break his neck!"

"I'm trying I just can't get—"

"Pull over," another voice. "I'll get back there with him."

"Pull over where? We're in the middle of the goddamn expressway!"

"Fuck he's bleeding all over me!"

I squirmed free and caught his head with my knee as the car pulled over. The door opened and I saw the gun. I kicked out as hard as I could and he moved just a little. And for the first time in my life I was glad to be small. Detective Kage's shoulders would have never cleared the space between the man and the car door. I threw myself out and hit the gravel hard. I heard the first gunshot and got my legs under me. It felt like I was running like I did in my dreams, like treading through caramel. I seemed like it took forever to get moving.

The second gunshot and my arm went numb before I was back down in the gravel. When I heard the car I got back up and ran. It was either run down the side of the road or take a left and cut across the expressway. The chances of dying were about the same, and at least if I got hit by a car I wouldn't suffer. Being killed was one thing...I would pass on the whole torture scene. So I veered into oncoming traffic and ran, darting toward the median as it started to rain.

When my hands touched the cold concrete I turned to look over my shoulder. These were not thugs from a movie, they were not mindless flunkies, and so it was not surprising that they didn't come after me. They didn't shoot at me either, the three of them just whipped out their cell phones at the same time. I wasn't about to wait for the cars to thin out and have them come after me. I hopped the centre divider and started running down the other side. As soon as I saw a break in the traffic I dashed across the expressway and fell down on the other side. I couldn't catch my breath so I decided to sit down for a minute. It ended up more of a fall. And it was weird but the gravel had hurt before. This time the ground just felt solid and that was good since I felt like I was lying in the middle of a roulette wheel. That was my last thought as the spinning got too fast and I everything went black.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I STARTED AND JERKED awake.

“Whoa-whoa-whoa,” the voice said gently, hand on my chest. “Just settle down you’re all right. We’ve got you. Open your eyes- look at me.”

I thought my eyes were open.

“Can you hear me buddy?”

I let out a deep breath and his voice was miles away before there was no sound at all.

* * * *

BRIGHT LIGHT. I BLINKED so I could see something. Hospital. I was in the hospital and the IV bag; the bed, the beeping machines and white coats were a dead giveaway in case I missed the nurses.

“Crap,” I groaned.

“Jory can you hear me?” someone asked me.

“Yeah,” I groaned, trying to sit up. “Shit.”

“No-no-no,” one of the doctors said gently, hand on my shoulder as she looked at me. “Just stay down until we get you all checked out here all right?”

Heavy sigh. “Okay.”

“Anyone I should call Jory?”

I was having trouble focusing.

“He’s got a business card for Dane Harcourt in here,” another voice said.

“There’s one for a Detective Kage as well.”

“Wait,” I gasped out. “Please don’t call anybody. Please.”

“Jory can you—”

But I didn’t hear the rest because the room did a sharp tilt to the left and I slid into darkness.

* * * *

I WAS FREEZING AND WHEN I opened my eyes there was a curtain pulled around the bed so even though I could hear a lot of noise, no one could see me. I was hooked up to an IV bag but I had seen enough movies to know that the needle came out just the same way it went in. It hurt more than I thought but I pressed down and it only bled for a second. It took a few tries to sit up without being too dizzy and then to stand, but I was tenacious because I wanted out. At first the nausea was like a wave that sucked all the air out of my body but it all calmed down, receded, and I was able to stand and breathe and then walk. I hated hospitals...all the smells, the freezing temperature as well as the colour of the walls and the fluorescent lighting...it was all just vile. I needed to get out fast.

It's easy to get out of a crowded, busy emergency room. I slipped out with everyone else coming in and out. I had my cell, my wallet and my keys so I was set. And as I started home I thought how the next time someone said my jeans were too tight I was going to bring up my night. The point was that if you were wrestling for your life in the back of a Lincoln Town car that it sure came in handy to have jeans that fit like a second skin. That way you made sure you didn't drop anything.

My phone startled me when it rang. I was still a little on edge. "Hello?"

"Where the fuck are you?"

"Who is this?" I asked even though I knew exactly who it was.

"You know damn well who the fuck this is!"

"Oh," I sighed. "Sam. Whaddya want?"

"What do I want? I want to know where the fuck you are!"

"I'm going home. I hate hospitals."

"Hospitals?"

"Yeah."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"I was in the hospital."

"When?"

"I dunno, like five minutes ago." I said as I took a left in front of the hospital and started down the street.

"What? How long were you there?"

"I have no idea I was passed out."

"Passed out?"

"Yeah."

"Jory, what the hell happened?" He yelled at me.

"I dunno, I think one of those guys maybe hit me harder than I thought."

"Hit you?" His voice got even louder.

My head couldn't take the yelling. I hung up and stopped walking so I could figure out where I was. When I saw the stairs that led up to track for the subway I started up. I answered my phone on the fifth ring.

"What?" I whined. My head hurt.

"Where are you?" Very controlled voice, but I could hear him talking through clenched teeth.

"On my way home."

"What hospital were you at?"

"I have no idea. Leave me alone okay," I muttered as I hung up on him.

As I sat on the subway I had a vision of him sitting outside of my place in his monster car waiting there so he could yell at me. That idea kept me in my seat five stops beyond where I was supposed to get off. As I sat on the steps trying not to freeze I realized that my exodus from the hospital had been poorly planned. I wasn't sure who to call since it was three in the morning. When my phone rang I answered because it was a distraction I needed.

"Jory?"

"Oh hey Ben." I sighed because this was not who I needed.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the gym," I lied because it was easy.

"Oh, well I just wanted to make sure we were okay from the other night."

"Course."

"Yeah? You're not freaked out?"

“No, flattered is what I was.”

“Okay good.”

“But I gotta let you go okay? I’ll call ya.”

“You do that.”

I hung up and immediately my phone rang again.

“Yeah?”

“Jory goddamn it where the hell are you?”

I groaned. “I’d rather die of hypothermia then tell you.”

“Very dramatic. Answer the goddamn question.”

I grunted.

“You were at County you idiot,” he snarled into the phone. “They told me you have a mild concussion and you’re all beat up and—”

“I’m fine.” I shivered hard, my teeth chattering. “I just don’t wanna go home unless you promise you won’t be there.”

“I am here.”

I sighed deeply. “I knew it.”

“You’re not coming home on purpose?”

“Yep.”

“Jory you do understand that you were kidnapped and assaulted and...”

“Yeah I know.”

“You know? That’s all you have to say?”

“Yeah pretty much.”

“Jesus you’re an idiot! Jory they are not going to stop trying to kill you!”

I sighed heavily. “I gotta go to work. What time is it?”

“Work? Are you fuckin’ kidding me? Jory your ass is going into protective custody today!”

“Yeah no.” I yawned, shivering again, my teeth making the clicking noise that I was powerless to stop. “I’ve got a lot of shit to do and I need to talk to my boss about something important because I think he’s making a big—”

“Jory! Where are you?”

“Why’ dya blow me off? Were you on a date?”

There was a beat of silence. “What the fuck are you talking about?” he asked me, his voice quiet but filled with force at the same time.

“You were weren’t you? Your buddies or whatever...you had to go on some date with some woman and so you couldn’t come see me.”

“This is what this is about? A date?”

“Go to hell.”

“Are you on drugs? Did they shoot you full of shit at the hospital?”

“You know what I don’t even care. Just leave me alone,” I said and hung up on him again.

When it rang again I saw that the number was different.

“Hello?”

“Jory baby where are you?”

“Hey Nick.” I sighed deeply. For whatever reason his voice was soothing.

“I saw your name on the board when I came in but honey where are you?”

“I left.”

“Obviously. Do you know you can’t just take out an IV and walk out of a hospital?”

“Oh no?”

“Jory, baby, you’re—”

“I’m fine.”

“Jory, you’re hurt worse than you think honey. You can’t be alone right now. Tell me where you are? Are you home?”

No I wasn't home I thought and wanted to yell it at him. Because for whatever reason, as it always did, his voice had gone from sounding sultry and sexy to whiny and needy in a heartbeat. And it wasn't Nick, I knew it wasn't Nick... it was me. I just didn't respond well to begging or pleading or anything that sounded weak or clinging. I responded to power and dominance and demands for my time and my body. The gentle sensitive guy did nothing for me. I was a mess but realizing it did nothing to prevent it.

"Jory...honey...can I come pick you up?"

"No," I said as I started shaking. I was so cold. "I'm gonna call somebody Nicky don't worry."

"But I do worry. You have a concussion and a bullet grazed your shoulder and I have to..."

"But I'm all right."

"Honey I'm afraid you're gonna pass out and—"

"I'll be okay," I assured him. "I'll call ya later."

"No-no-no-Jory, baby, just tell me where you are, I'll pick you up and you can come home with me and—"

"How 'bout I call you tomorrow."

"Jory, whatever you're mixed up in I can handle it. Please baby let me take care of you."

"Nick I—"

"Jory," he sighed deeply. "I am crazy about you. I think about you all the time."

"You do?"

"Yes, God yes. I just, you need to give me some of your time. I know I'm not as exciting as whatever else is going on in your life, but Jory I'm good for you. I want to be with you."

It was hard to breathe suddenly, partly because I was turning into a Popsicle and the rest because brutal honesty wasn't usually my gig. I favoured the disappearing act in most cases. "You know Nick," I began quickly because it was better to do it like pulling off a Band-Aid, just really fast. "We've got no chemistry at all. You know we don't."

"Is that right?"

"You know it is." I winced; this was just as painful to say, as it was to hear.

"Well I think you need to give me another chance to impress you. Because if we're being honest being in bed with you was amazing."

“Thanks.”

“I’m not flattering you it’s a fact. I didn’t want it to end.”

“That’s nice.”

“Nice? Jesus.” He laughed dryly.

I chuckled because he sounded so deflated.

“Listen Jory I’m starting my life ya know? I’m an attending now at the hospital, I bought my first place and I’m ready for the guy, the one guy that’s gonna be my partner and build my future with me. I don’t mean to scare you but when I met you I had a feeling that you were the guy.”

The man had definitely confused so-so sex with love.

“Jory?”

“Nicky, you think maybe you just needed to get laid?”

“You know I’m gonna forgive you for being a total prick since you’re in shock right now and probably getting frost bite.”

“Sorry,” I breathed out. “That was a shitty thing to say.”

“Yes it was.”

“Nick I—”

“No just shut up and listen. Do you know you never listen?”

It was true I didn’t.

“Jory, I can get laid any night of the week. What I want is to be in bed with someone that I can see a future with and not just a one-night stand. I’m not some trick J...I wanna be your guy.”

“Why do you even care? Why not just call it a day with me?”

“No. We’re not gonna do that.”

“Why?”

“Because I am crazy about you, I told you already.”

“But why?”

He chuckled. "You're fishing."

"I'm confused," I assured him.

"Jory, you're funny and smart and those big dark eyes of yours are...and you told me my sunglasses were ugly."

"They were ugly."

His exhale of breath was long. "Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are?"

"Nick—"

"It's your lips, they drive me nuts," he said and I could hear the smile in his voice. "I never wanted to stop kissing you."

He was just the nicest guy that did nothing for me.

"I really..." His voice was hoarse. "Hey do me a favour. Look up at the street sign where you are and read it to me. I'm heading for my car."

"No, I'll call ya tomorrow I swear."

"Jory you need to sleep and you need somebody to take care of you. I want to be that somebody. Besides, who's better than a doctor?"

I smiled into the phone and promised to call the next day after work. I hung up with him begging to tell him where I was. The phone rang and I realized I had missed 11 calls while I was talking to Nick.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?"

"Sam I—"

"So help me God if you don't tell me where you are right this second I will shoot you myself as soon as I find your scrawny ass."

I chuckled. "I thought you liked my ass."

No answer.

"Is that not right Detective?"

"You cocky piece of shit. You're gonna throw that up in my face now?"

“Actually I’m not gonna do anything at all to you or with you or...shit...” I was really tired suddenly. The very last of my adrenaline was gone. I wanted somebody to take care of me. “Just have the other officer call me all right. I don’t wanna see you anymore. I gotta go; I gotta call somebody to...”

“Don’t you dare hang up on me again or I will...I...oh look at that.” He said at the same time I heard the sharp squeal of brakes.

My head came up and I saw him double-parked on the street. He slammed his door and was coming around the front of his SUV. I didn’t even try to stand. I leaned my head against the pole instead, everything hurt and I was cold down inside my bones.

“Jory I’m gonna—”

“God,” I groaned. “What do you want?”

When he didn’t say anything I looked up into his face. His jaw was clenched and his dark eyes were locked on mine.

“I think I...” There was a ringing in my ears and I felt like someone had shoved an ice pick into my skull between my eyes. “Oh shit.”

His hands moved to my face as I rode out the pain. When it receded, I stared into his eyes as he knelt down in front of me.

“Jory your lips are blue,” he groaned before the quick exhale. “Christ. Can you walk?”

I shook my head.

He crushed me in his arms and the warmth was instant and amazing. “I’m taking you home with me so wrap your brain around it.”

“Okay.”

When he stood up my head hit his shoulder and he rubbed his chin in my hair. My feet left the ground and as everything spun I was lifted into the seat. In the SUV he stroked my hair as I closed my eyes. He had the heater up on high and all I heard was the sound of the blower. I didn’t remember the rest of the drive.

* * * *

I WAS WARM AND every single part of me felt heavy. I rolled over and realized that I was under a sheet and several blankets in a huge bed.

“You awake?”

I looked up and Sam stepped away from the window where he was standing. “Kind of.”

He took a breath. “Good.”

“Thanks.”

“You want something?”

I shook my head.

“So this is my place obviously. I live here alone so—”

“What am I doing here?”

“You passed out in my car I had to do something.”

“Why didn’t you take me back to the hospital?”

His jaw clenched. “’Cause you just have a concussion. I know all about those.”

I smiled at him before I looked around the room. “Is it okay if I take a shower?”

“Sure,” he said, walking over to the bed. “You need help getting up?”

“No,” I answered but didn’t move.

He nodded, staring down at me.

I arched an eyebrow.

“Okay, well, it’s right through there.” He pointed to the right. “I’ll bring you some sweats okay?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

When he left I threw back the covers and got up in pieces. First sitting up, then my legs over the side of the bed, moving next to my bare feet on the floor. I was so glad I wasn’t dizzy. I didn’t want to do a face plant onto his Navajo patterned throw rug and even more...I didn’t want to need him.

I stood in the shower under the hot water until it ran cold. When I got out I went through his medicine cabinet and found only the essentials. There was none of my cocoa butter lotion, my hair products, my moisturizer or my lip balm. I was completely addicted to lip balm and applied it all day every day. There was a gentle knock on the door after a few minutes. I hadn’t heard the first few times he’d tapped since I was busy scrutinizing my black eye and the bruises on my throat.

“Yeah?”

“I put the sweats out here on the bed.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yep.”

“Okay.”

I waited a few minutes to let him leave the room before I went out. I didn’t want to talk to him I just wanted to rest.

The sweats were neatly folded on the bed and when I put them on I had to roll the bottoms like six times, pull the drawstring really tight and roll the top over before they would even stay on my hips. I would definitely not be borrowing any more of Sam Kage’s clothes. I climbed back into his bed and lay down. I was exhausted just with the effort a shower took.

“Hey,” he said, walking into the bedroom. “You feel better?”

I bunched one of his pillows up behind my head, getting comfortable. It was raining outside, really hard from what I could hear and I knew it was cold. But I was warm and cozy in bed

“You look very content.”

“Cause I am.” I smiled, looking around the room, letting out a deep sigh.

“Ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Who’s Nick Sullivan?”

“Doctor I date.”

“Oh okay.”

“He’s very nice.”

“Oh yeah? Very nice?”

I grunted because I wasn’t really listening.

“Very nice is the kiss of death,” he chuckled, and I felt the bed dip as he took a seat beside me. “Right?”

“Pretty much.”

“He’s into you huh?”

I glanced up at him, gave him a half grin.

“He must because he’s called like a dozen times. I turned your phone off ‘cause I got sick of hearing it.”

“He likes my scrawny ass,” I teased him, smiling.

“I like it too.”

I opened my eyes as he ran the back of his fingers up my throat.

“At least you’re not freezing anymore.”

The noise I made was halfway between a moan and sigh. I was glad I was under so many blankets so he couldn’t tell I was excited.

“You sound like you’re purring.”

I smiled and his hand went around my throat.

“I wanted to strangle you when I called and you told me you were in the hospital... I mean Jesus Jory you were almost killed tonight.”

I closed my eyes again, rolling over away from his touch. “Can you get me some water?”

“Yeah,” he said gruffly and left.

I wasn’t awake when he came back.

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN I OPENED MY eyes it was still raining, but it wasn't dark like night but dark like morning. It was very early on a grey rainy day. The kind of day best spent under the covers watching TV.

"I called your boss and told him you weren't coming in so don't freak out."

I looked up at his face as he sipped coffee from a plain black mug.

"Can I have some of that?" I asked, squinting at him.

I heard his long exhale. "Sure. How do you take it?"

"Just cream, no sugar. It needs to be blonde like me."

"Okay," he said gently, the corner of his lip curling. "Be right back."

But before he could get far I stopped him with my voice. "Last night you were worried about me huh? That's how you get when you're scared maybe...you yell," I said softly, beginning to understand the inner workings of Detective Kage. "'Cause you were terrified that I was hurt weren't you?"

He just stared down at me.

"Tell me."

"You scared the shit outta me."

"Were you worried about me or your case?"

"You."

"How come?"

The furrowed brows, the way his eyes looked...I felt my stomach twist into a knot. "I don't know because mostly I just wanna kill you."

I smiled up at him. "What'd my boss say?"

"He said you need to call him by ten."

"Okay."

"What's the deal with him; he doesn't treat you like a boss."

“No,” I agreed. “I get treated like we’re family.”

He stared at me, his gaze never wavering. It made me uneasy.

“Do I look that bad?”

He shook his head.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. You look like somebody roughed you up.”

I smiled lazily, my eyes narrowing as I looked up at him. “You wanna rough me up?”

The muscle in his jaw jerked tight and he swallowed hard, his eyes on my mouth. “Yes.”

My heart was in my throat. His eyes were so dark, so intense, just locked on mine. “Come kiss me then.”

He slowly, gently, like he was concentrating very hard, put the mug down. His hands were on my face as he leaned in for the kiss. I lifted my chin to meet him and felt the tips of his fingers slide over my jaw.

“Jory,” he breathed against my mouth, his lips hovering over mine.

I tried so hard not to make a sound but the whimper came up out of me and I instantly felt the change as a surge of desire rolled through him. Tender was replaced with the thrust of his tongue between my parted lips. He ground his mouth down over mine; kissing me hard and deep. I arched up against him and his hands were hot on my skin.

“I don’t wanna hurt you,” he rasped, panting, his mouth devouring my lips, sucking and licking, his tongue tangled with mine.

“You won’t.”

“I want you so bad.”

“Good.”

He got up and grabbed my thighs, yanking me to the edge of the bed. He had the sweats off me in seconds, reaching into the top drawer of his nightstand at the same time he pulled up my knees. I saw the tube and couldn’t contain my laughter. He froze, staring down at me.

“What?”

“You got lube?” I raised my eyebrows. “For me?”

He looked pained and it was both endearing and adorable at the same time.

“You’re a mess,” I assured him gently, motioning him close.

He wrapped me in his arms and deepened the kiss, shifting to bear down on me, his mouth slanting over mine, so possessively, so urgently that I whimpered some more

“Jesus,” he groaned, his mouth on my throat, kissing me. “I wanna fuckin’ eat you.”

It was a confession from his soul since his brain was turned off, so I put my hands on his face and kissed him back, sucking, biting, and making sure my tongue missed no part of his mouth. I gave as good as I got and felt the deep shiver that came with his surrender.

I trembled in his arms and he made a noise like he was dying.

“Shit something’s wrong with me.”

“No,” I soothed him, kissing his eyes, his cheeks, his brows, and the bridge of his nose.

“I’m all twisted up,” he grumbled under his breath “I fuckin’ hate this.”

“It’s okay,” I told him, smiling slowly. “I’ll take care of you.”

He eased back and looked down into my eyes. “You can’t even take care of yourself.”

I felt like I could fly. “But I could make your life so nice.”

“The hell you can,” he almost shouted at me, rough as he rolled me onto my stomach, his hand in my hair, knee between my legs to spread them.

I arched my back like a cat, up into him and his mouth grazed my skin. The strangled sound that came out of him made me smile.

“Jory.”

I slid out of his grip and rolled over on my back, lifting my knees, holding out my arms for him. “You’re fighting so hard,” I sighed. “Just stop, just breathe.”

He took a shuddering breath before he gathered me close, holding me tight, pressing me along the length of him. His hands slid down my body and when his mouth followed I begged him. The change in him in one day was staggering, the understanding of what I wanted and his confidence in what he could do...I didn’t need to offer any more instruction. The mechanics no longer a mystery, his hands, his mouth, moved expertly over my skin as he chanted my name.

* * * *

THE RAIN WOKE ME with the steady drum on the window. I smiled as warm hands moved down my rib cage then over my stomach, kneading, caressing, gentle and arousing at the same time.

“Don’t you hafta go to work,” I teased him, surprised at myself for all the sleeping I was doing. Sex had never worn me out before.

“I can’t leave you alone.” His voice was husky, slicing right through me, causing the shiver.

Stretching languidly, I rolled over onto the sculpted chest, my head on his heart.

“Fuck.”

I lifted my head to look up into his eyes.

“What?” he asked gruffly.

“I dunno,” I stared into his eyes. “You’re the one swearing,”

He put his hand in my hair and massaged my scalp, easing my head back down on his chest.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothin’s wrong that’s the goddamn problem.”

And that made no sense but I let it go, enjoying his hands on me too much to question him.

“Shit.”

I slid my leg between his and he lifted my chin with a gentle hand. His mouth was on mine and I was rolled onto my back and kissed tenderly, slowly, taking his time, this time, to taste me. He worked his way down my throat to my chest; my nipples suckled each in turn before the hot wet mouth slid over my flat stomach to my cock. He took me in slowly, drawing out and then back, his tongue swirling over my skin before he took me in deeper, licking me with long strokes of his tongue, sucking hard, his hands digging into my thighs and calves. I hoped he would leave bruises because I craved his mark on me. When I felt the clenching inside, the tingling I told him to stop. I felt like my heart was going to burst. His eyes never left mine and I cried his name as I shuddered in his hands and he swallowed all I had. Afterwards he rose and pinned me to the bed under him.

“I love the noises you make when you’re happy.”

I only grunted because my brain wasn’t working yet, my body boneless and liquid under his...ready to melt into him.

“Your eyes get so dark and when you say my name... I have never wanted anyone like I want you Jory. I don’t even think people are supposed to feel like this. I think—”

“Shhh.” I said pushing against him so I could roll him over on his back.

“No,” he said, his voice cracking, filled with emotion, arms wrapping around me, stilling my movement. “I don’t want you to, I don’t need ...just lay here with me.”

I was quiet, revelling in the difference between the boys I had slept with and the man who now held me in his arms. All my other lovers expected a quick return for any gift given but Sam’s desire ran to pleasuring me simply because it made him happy to do so.

“Sam I—”

“Listen I don’t want you seeing the doctor and you’re sure as hell not going out of town with him.”

“How’d you know I—”

“I listened to your messages.”

“Oh.” I shifted onto my side and he immediately spooned around me, his thighs against my ass. I didn’t want him to see me smile. “He bought me a plane ticket.”

“I don’t care if he bought you a fuckin’ pony,” he assured me, the annoyance clear in his voice. “You go nowhere with him.”

“Yes sir detective.”

“I already went and packed up all your clothes so—”

“What?” I tried to move, to turn so I could see his face but he wasn’t having it. He was so much stronger than me that if he wanted me down, I was down. If he wanted me immobile in his arms, that’s what I would be doing. “You packed what?”

“You heard me,” he said gruffly, almost growling. “I got every stitch of clothing you own. It’s all in my guest bedroom. I put your laptop in the living room and I grabbed your iPod and some of your books. You don’t have much stuff.”

“No.”

“I got your comforter too ‘cause I figured you liked it.”

“I do like it but—”

“You can’t stay in your apartment...I mean I went there without a key and got your stuff. Think about it.”

“Yeah but—”

"I want you to be safe," he said as his mouth closed on my shoulder. The man could not keep his hands or his mouth off me.

"I'm not five, Sam."

"No but...you need looking after."

"But what are you going to—"

"For now you're here 'because I gotta watch you. That's all anybody needs to know."

"Okay," I was thinking. "So as soon as the case is over I'll pack my stuff and..."

"Listen to me," he said slowly, kissing the back of my neck. "Let's just worry about things as they come."

"Easy for you to say...I've got rent to pay and—"

"No," he cut me off. "I talked to your landlord and until he replaces the door and puts decent deadbolts in that place he gets nothing. I told him he was lucky that you never asked him to do shit around that place."

"Great," I muttered. "Now he's gonna hate me."

"I'm surprised no one else ever said anything about your locks."

"Well Nick did say that—"

He bit my shoulder before he sucked it hard. "I don't wanna hear about the doctor."

I chuckled. "Okay."

"And your dancing days are over."

I smiled wide but he couldn't see it.

"Do I hafta mention the doctor again?"

I cleared my throat. "It's not fair if you date and I—"

"I won't."

"Uh-huh," I nodded. "So where were you last night Detective when you were supposed to be picking me up for dinner?"

Deep sigh as he clutched me tight, stroking my hip, nuzzling his face into my hair. “On a double-date.”

“I knew it.”

“It was planned weeks ago. No way to get out of it but when I’m with you my brain short circuits so I completely forgot until my buddy reminded me.”

“Okay, so that’s what I’m saying. You’re single and straight so all your friends are gonna...”

“I’ll take care of it.” He rubbed a stubbled cheek against the bare skin of my shoulder. It sent a shiver right through me.

“If you screw some girl while I’m—”

“Then fair’s fair,” he said, his voice husky, so sexy. “You can sleep with a girl too baby.”

“I love women,” I assured him. “I just don’t *love* women ya know?”

He chuckled before rising over me, propping himself up on his elbow to look down into my face. “Do people tell you all the time how beautiful you are?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.” He smiled evilly, his eyes sparkling. “Look at you, you’re gorgeous.”

He thought I was beautiful, it was all I heard. I felt the heat race across my skin as he ran his thumb over my bottom lip, leaning into me.

I moaned, almost whimpering and his mouth touched mine. I felt his hand slide down over my hip as his tongue slid between my barely parted lips. It was too much for me. I closed my eyes for just a minute.

“Jory Keyes,” he said softly, his fingertips smoothing over my eyebrows. “What if I missed you?”

My body was back to being heavy and I felt myself sinking down into the bed, the warm mass of muscle and bone engulfing me.

“Go to sleep baby,” he soothed me, his lips on my eyelids. “I’m here.”

It was the last thing I heard.

CHAPTER TEN

SAM HAD LEFT ME an hour later with orders to stay inside his apartment and not to leave for any reason. I wasn't even awake enough to argue. I was back asleep in seconds with him rubbing circles on my back. When my phone rang I was surprised because I thought I was calling Dane not the other way around.

"You're in trouble," he said flatly. "I talked to Detective Kage and he said you're in protective custody. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what's going on with you right now."

So even though I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say, I spilled it all. "I don't wanna put any of you guys in danger by coming in."

"We have a security guard in our building that checks everyone in and out Jory. I'll expect you back here Monday morning."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. When have you ever known me to say something I didn't mean?"

Never.

"Okay then. I'll see ya Monday."

"Actually I'm having dinner at Adagio's tonight at six-thirty," he said crisply. "Come by briefly so I can look at you all right?"

"What's with the early dinner?"

"Theatre tickets if you must know," he said curtly.

"Oh."

"I'll expect you."

He just wanted to see me with his own eyes and make sure I was in one piece.

"Okay. Thanks boss."

He hung up and I rolled over and went back to sleep.

I was woken up from my second nap of the day with a call from Caleb Reid. He told me that he was the one that had called the police, after watching me get stuffed into the car the night before. He'd gone in and filed a report at the police station and then been visited by Detective Kage an hour ago.

"You know I've never talked to a detective before but it was kinda intense."

I chuckled. "I have no doubt."

"Are you okay?"

And I was, so I told him so before thanking him for calling the police.. He asked me what I was mixed up in but I returned the subject to Dane. Immediately he wanted to know if I was well enough to talk to him. I told him I would try when I saw my boss later. When he hung up I got out of bed and made coffee before looking for something to have for breakfast. There was only a box of kids' cereal and I wondered how a grown man had Lucky Charms in his cabinet. When I heard the keys rattling in the lock I was expecting Sam but found a stunning red haired older woman instead. When she looked up from her grocery bags I was speechless as I recognized her instantly.

"Ohmygod you're Regina Rappaport," I breathed out, standing there, staring, open-mouthed.

Her smile was breathtaking. "Yes I am. And you watch way too many old movies."

"Holy shit." I smiled wide. "You're even more beautiful in person."

"So charming," she chuckled, putting down the grocery bags and holding out her arms. "Come here."

I dashed over to give her a hug and she patted my back and stroked my hair. She smelled faintly like vanilla with a trace of rain. I was surprised at how tight she held me.

When she pushed out to arm's length she smiled warmly. "Who are you?"

"Jory Keyes. Sam's watching me for a little while. I'm his witness."

"Mmmm-hmmm," she eyed me, looking me over as I stood there in a t-shirt, sweats and a pair of Sam's fuzzy white sweat socks. "Well my darling every week I bring groceries for my two unmarried sons to make sure they don't starve. My son Michael, the architect, eats a little better than my son Samuel, the policeman, but not by much. For instance the last time I was here there was only a fossilized stick of butter, a box of Lucky Charms and very old milk. I will not be surprised if he's eaten everything I brought and only those three items again remain."

I smiled and nodded.

"Help me with these."

So I grabbed four bags of groceries and helped her carry them to the kitchen. She didn't want any help unpacking so I sat on one of the barstools and watched her.

"Jory sweetheart are you hungry?" She asked absently, still putting things away.

"Yes ma'am."

She turned and looked at me and her eyes sparkled. "Really?"

I nodded and she patted my hand before she pulled down a frying pan from those hanging above her head on hooks. She was dying to take care of me and I was more than willing to let her.

"How about an omelette?"

"That'd be great."

She stayed for three hours and in that time she told me all about Hollywood in the seventies, how being beautiful wasn't as much help as having talent and how she'd met and fallen in love with a fireman from Chicago. He'd swept her off her feet to motherhood and suburbia and there she'd discovered what she loved more than being in front of a camera. Being a mother. I listened and ate and told her how I'd been raised by my grandmother and how I'd come to Chicago and where I worked. She'd heard of Dane Harcourt, was very impressed and I told her all about Brian Minor and my friend Anna and how I had met her son.

"You know Jory you are just beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I bet people tell you all the time that you're simply luminous."

I knew I wasn't ugly but luminous was an exaggeration. Still, it was nice to hear.

"Why don't you change and I'll take you to Delvecchio's for some pie."

I nodded, smiling and she caught her breath.

"You really are stunning Mr. Keyes."

"Right backatcha."

Her laughter was deep and throaty as she told me to hurry up.

When I emerged in my tight jeans, crisp white shirt under my v-neck cashmere pullover, she smiled wide. I was glad Sam had brought everything from my bathroom as well as all my clothes. I smelled like me again and I would have died without all my hair products.

“People are going to think I’m a cougar with my boy toy.”

I froze where I was and she burst into laughter.

“What?”

“I just didn’t think you’d know what a cougar was?”

“Because I’ve been what living under a rock all these years? Hello, honey, I have daughters.”

I smiled at her and she took my arm and led me out of the apartment. As the door closed she passed me her key for Sam’s apartment.

“You keep this set doll, I have another at home.”

I pocketed them and followed her down the stairs and out to her car that was parked in front of the eight floor apartment building. I liked her silver Lexus infinitely more than Sam’s SUV and told her so.

“I know,” she agreed. “It’s a tank not a car.”

The bakery was small and intimate, warm inside with little red and white-checkered curtains and the same type of window valances. There was a bell on the front door when you walked in and the whole place smelled like freshly baked cookies. I loved it and made a mental note to pick up baklava for Dane the next time I came. It was his favourite.

She had a slice of Lemon Meringue and I had Pumpkin Custard. We talked about her family, about her daughters, her son Michael, and about how much trouble she was having finding a girl for Sam. Once I recovered from almost choking to death on my milk, I told her not to worry about him. When the right person came along he’d know. She prayed I was right.

When she dropped me off back at his apartment after two hours of food shopping, she told me to be sure I came for Sunday dinner. She’d expect me at six with Sam. She invited him every week but he never went-always too busy. She was counting on me to get him there. I promised her I wouldn’t let her down. Her hand stayed on my cheek for several minutes before I got out of the car with all my bags and she drove away. It had been a very nice day.

* * * *

EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT MY boss had dinner out. He always took at least eight people with him as well as his current date. This week, as he’d told me, it was Adagio’s, a very good Italian restaurant and the flavour of the week was a cardiologist named Kensie Beckman. When I was shown to his table, she did not seem pleased to see me. At least she was still polite. The others, his friends the doctors and the lawyers, did not seem annoyed at all to find me there among them.

“Hi-hi,” I greeted everyone, letting out a deep sigh as I turned to look at my boss. “Could I talk to you for one minute please?”

“Did you eat?”

“No, not yet,” I stammered. “But listen, could I please just—”

“Sit down and eat,” he ordered me. “You look past.” There was a pause as he looked at me like he had thought of something. “Should you even be out of the hospital?”

“Yeah I’m fine.”

“So Monday morning you’ll be back at work?”

“I said I would.”

He shot me a look.

“Sorry. I’ll be in.”

“Good. Nothing gets done when you’re not there. That girl...what’s her name?”

“Who?”

“The receptionist.”

“You know her name.” I scowled at him.

“Do I?”

“It’s Piper.”

He snapped his fingers. “Piper. That’s right.”

“Quit?”

He smiled evilly. “Anyway, she puts everyone through to me. It’s a nightmare.”

“I will be there on Monday.”

“Thank God.”

I smiled at him.

“Sit down and eat,” he ordered me, standing up to motion for the waiter.

“No I just need to—”

“He’s not going to let it go Jory,” Jude Coughlin said to me, a huge smile on his face as he took the chair the waiter brought for me and put it down on the other side of Dane. “Just sit.”

I sat down and Dane turned to look at me, concerned, his dark grey eyes so warm. I hated putting him in a bad mood when he was in a good one.

“What do you want?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“No. What do you want to eat?”

“Eat?”

“Yes, eat.”

“I don’t want to eat.”

“Yes you do.”

“No I don’t.” I insisted, looking nervously around the table. They were all looking at us.

“Never mind,” he shook his head suddenly, turned and gestured for the waiter. “I know what to get you.”

I shed my pea coat and settled myself into the chair. When I looked up I found all eyes still on me. “Hey, sorry about this everybody.”

“No, sweetie, it’s fine,” Marilyn Castro, told me, reaching out to pat my arm. “You’re always welcome. You’re more his little brother than anything else.”

I wondered if that was true even as Jude nodded his agreement.

“So talk to me about the cop.”

I looked back at Dane. “What about him?”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re doing what with him?”

“How is that your business?”

“You’re my business.”

I scowled at him. “I have to testify.”

“And so you’re staying with him until then?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“I see so then you can work?”

“I already said yes.”

He nodded. “And if you can’t? Will you quit?”

It was asked very casually but I could tell from his eyes that my answer was important.

“Do you want me to quit?”

“Maybe the detective will want you to.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“Do you want to?”

“Do you want me to?” I repeated, leaning toward him just a little.

“You’re being evasive.”

“You’re being three.”

“Do you want to?” he asked me again, pressing for the answer.

“I refuse to answer before you.”

He smiled slowly, his eyes firing. I was amusing him so much at that moment. I had to grin back, there was no way not to respond when he was teasing me. “No,” he answered quietly, his voice low. “I don’t want you to quit.”

“Then I won’t.” I smiled smugly, very pleased, straightening up in my seat.

He leaned back away from me and started up a conversation with Kensie and another woman at the table. I sat there chatting with Rebecca Stoler and Marilyn. They were all so very nice even if none of them could seem to do anything else but watch and listen when Dane and I talked.

The food came and I waited while Dane moved things back and forth between our plates. Onions off both our plates, mushrooms on mine, cucumbers on his, carrots on mine, potatoes on his, and he split his steak and my chicken so we both had a little of each.

“Wow,” Marilyn smiled at me. “That was quite the production.”

“Well,” I shrugged. “I mean we eat together every day. He knows what I’ll eat.”

“I know what he’ll eat,” he echoed me, and then looked at my plate. “And that looks okay.”

I still didn’t have much of an appetite but I picked at the chicken.

“You look better than I thought you would,” Dane said; looking into my eyes, hand on my chin turning my head back and forth. “The shiner’s a nice touch though.”

“Thanks,” I said, pushing the plate away from me, draining my ice tea.

“The new typist is a hundred and twenty years old,” he muttered.

I smiled wide. “Well that makes sense.”

“I guess,” he said; arm around the back of my chair. “Are you safe at the detective’s place?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“All right.”

After awhile I tapped his shoulder gently.

“What?”

“Can I talk to you a second?”

“About?”

“Caleb Reid.”

“What about him?” he asked casually, but I could tell from the look in the dark eyes that I was in trouble.

“I think you should do what he wants and go see her.”

"I think you chose this setting to speak to me about his because you knew I couldn't kill you in public," he said pointedly.

"I think you're right."

He smiled and turned so he was facing me. "And when did you become informed of the specifics of this situation?"

"Last night. I had dinner with him."

"And you spoke to him after you said you wouldn't?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it was about you and you know I just had to know."

"Okay."

"So I'll go with you."

"Go where?" Kensie asked from the other side of him.

"Oh you will, will you?" he asked me, completely ignoring her.

"You know I will."

"It's far from here."

"I know, Texas. I can go there."

"And Detective Kage would think what about that?"

"He wouldn't care."

"No?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"He knows you're my boss. He knows I'd be safe with you."

"Does he?"

I looked at him hard. “Yeah. Course.”

“All right,” he decided. “I’ll go next Friday.”

“You mean we.”

“I mean I.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s no one’s business but mine.”

“I thought I would go with you.” I said quickly, trying to not let him hear the disappointment.

He smiled as he surveyed the restaurant. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“There’s no reason for it.”

“No?”

“No,” he said flatly, turning to look at me.

“You don’t need me to go?” I asked hopefully.

“No,” he said sternly, trying to force me with his tone to quit.

“You’re sure?”

“Very sure. Now drop it.”

I sighed heavily. “I’ll call Mr. Reid.”

“I will call Mr. Reid. You’re done with it.”

I was about to savour my negotiation skills when I suddenly turned and looked at him. The grin was obvious and his eyes were twinkling. “You played me. You were already going to go.”

“I was mulling it over.”

“But?”

“But now when it’s a horror I have you to blame.” He grinned evilly.

Crap.

“So where are you off too?” Kensie asked, her hand on his chin, turning his eyes to her.

I excused myself another ten minutes later and stood up to leave.

“Where’re you going?” Dane asked, rising from his chair to stand in front of me.

“Home.” I yawned, smiling up at him. “I’ve interrupted enough for one night.”

His hand squeezed my shoulder gently. “You haven’t done anything.”

I held his gaze.

“Come on,” he said gruffly, hand on the back of my neck, leading me from the table.

“Goodnight!” I called back over my shoulder.

Dane walked me out to wait for the cab.

“Do you want to come along to the theatre? I can get you a ticket?”

“No thanks,” I said, as I buttoned up my coat. “I don’t wanna die.”

“What are you talking about now?”

“Your date’ll kill me. She’s already royally pissed off.”

“She’s not.”

“Oh trust me, she is.”

“I care.” He sighed heavily, breathing in the crisp air.

I looked up at him a minute, studying the classic profile. “Why are you out with her then?”

He gave me a look like I was clearly out of my mind. “When I’m ready to discuss my personal life with you I’ll let you know.” He opened the door of the cab that had been hailed by the valet and I climbed in.

“I can’t wait!” I said cheerfully, smiling widely as he closed the door. I waved hard as the cab pulled away from the curb just to try and annoy him a little.

* * * *

I MADE IT BACK to the apartment about ten minutes before Sam, and had his stereo blasting when he walked in the door.

“Hey!” he called out to me as he came into the living room. “What are you doing?”

It was perfectly obvious that I was dancing. On his hard wood floors in my socks, I was sliding around pretty well. He stood and watched me, his smile wide. I sang along at the top of my lungs and he motioned me to him after a few minutes. I slid across the floor to him and he grabbed the front of my sweater and pulled me close.

“I’ll shower and we can go get something to eat all right?”

More food. “Sure.”

He put his hands on my face. “You look better today.”

“Yeah?” I asked, stepping closer to him, leaning my cheek in his hand.

“Somebody needs a little attention.”

I lifted my chin, stretching my neck toward him. His hands were instantly on my throat.

“Huh J? You need somethin’?”

I nodded and he eased me close and kissed me. Funny that in the span of four days the man was kissing me like he owned me. He was very possessive whether he knew it or not.

“Keep dancing J,” he teased me, pulling back, kissing the end of my nose. “I’ll be right out.”

I rolled my eyes as he jogged out of the room and turned off the music.

I heard the knocking on the front door so I went to see who it was. The man on the other side of the door looked stunned when I answered.

“Hi.” I smiled brightly.

“Hi,” he said slowly, clearly confused. “Is Sam here?”

“Yeah,” I answered as two women joined him in the hall. “Did you want to come in?” I asked them all, stepping back, holding the door open.

I closed the door behind the three and noticed that the blonde was carrying a large casserole dish. It was covered in tin foil and she was carrying it with potholders.

“Oh geez.” I smiled at her, “here, bring that in the kitchen and put it down. I’m so sorry; I didn’t see you were holding anything.”

She smiled wanly and followed me through the living room to the kitchen. I moved the teakettle off the burner so she could put the food down.

“Thank you,” she said quickly, and her voice was beautiful. Round tones like she’d been to boarding school or something. Lots of diction classes. “It’s hot and it was getting very heavy.”

“What is it?”

“Veal Piccata.”

“Mmmm,” I nodded. Eww, so not a fan of veal, I try not to eat baby anything. “Yummy.” I held out my hand to her then. “Hi, I’m Jory Keyes.”

“Oh, well, it’s lovely to meet you Jory. I’m Christine Montero and out there in the other room are my brother Jeff and my friend Donna Norton.”

“Great,” I nodded. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Well,” she grimaced. “I think we’re supposed to be having dinner.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, um, my brother made a dinner date with Sam about a week ago. I was supposed to cook my specialty that my brother’s apparently been bragging about and Sam was going to supply the salad and the wine.” She clarified for me. “That was the plan anyway.”

“Oh,” I said, completely unsure of what I was supposed to do at that point. How awkward was this. Worse was that this had been so inconsequential to Sam that he had seemingly not even remembered it. “I see. Well let’s ask him if he made it to the store.”

She followed me back out to the living room.

“Jeff,” Christine smiled uneasily at him. “I think perhaps this sort of slipped Sam’s mind.”

“What?”

“I told you to call him and confirm,” she said crisply, her tone almost sharp.

“No,” Jeff shook his head, giving me a quick look. “He’s not like that, he’s got this covered.”

It took everything in me not to smile. The man so did not have this covered.

“Hi,” the other woman leaned forward to offer me her hand. “I’m Donna Norton, and you are?”

“Jory.” I smiled at her. “Good to meet you,” I said, looking over at Jeff.

“Hey,” he smiled tightly. “Jeffrey Montero. I live down the hall there in 5G.”

“Oh, neighbours,” I blurted. “Great.”

“J?” Sam called from the bedroom. “Why don’t you come in here and—”

“I’m in the living room,” I cut him off and because I knew he just got out of the shower I was kind instead of the bitchy I felt. “And you have guests.”

“What?” He came around the corner half naked, all the rippling muscles there on display, the sculpted chest and the washboard abs. The jeans rode low on his tapered hips, top button open to reveal the white of the briefs underneath. He should have been on a billboard somewhere the man was that mouth-watering. His smile as soon as he saw everyone was huge. “Oh, hey,” he chuckled, pointing back to the bedroom. “Just gimme a sec.”

It took an excruciatingly long time for him to find a t-shirt because the silence was oppressive. Jeff was downright glaring at me and Donna just looked like she was going to burst into laughter at any second. Christine had her arms crossed over her chest. Her face was unreadable.

“Hey, sorry,” Sam apologized coming back into the room. He walked to my side and put a hand on my shoulder. “What’s up?”

“Dinner,” I told him, tuning to look up into his face. “You told Christine—”

“No, he told Jeff,” Christine corrected me, smiling at Sam, moving to stand a little closer to him.

“Oh,” I said, stepping away from Sam so his hand dropped off of me. “Sorry. You told Jeff that tonight would be good for dinner. Did you remember to pick up wine and salad on your way home?”

His grin was just out of control, flirtatious and evil at the same time. “You’re pissed.”

“What?”

“You are,” his eyes were sparkling as he turned from me to Jeff. “I’m sorry man I completely forgot about this. With all the shi—stuff going on at work, I just spaced it. Can we reschedule?”

“Christine made her specialty,” I informed him. “It’s on the stove.”

“Oh,” he nodded. “Okay, well then I can run and get something now if you guys aren’t in a big hurry.”

“No, we’re not in any hurry.” Jeff smiled at him. “I’ll go with ya.”

“No-no. It’s freezin’ outside man, stay here and I’ll just run over to Ponti’s. You guys want like antipasto and some Chianti?”

“Sounds great,” Christine said gently. “I can make the run with you; I don’t want you to go alone.”

He turned and looked at me. I shrugged before I said. “It’s veal.” And tilted my head to the side with a snap of my neck. I knew the attitude was just dripping off of me but I didn’t care.

“Veal?” I saw his jaw muscles flex. Apparently he didn’t like to eat babies either.

“Mmmm-hmmm,” I said cheerfully.

“Huh,” he chuckled, turning back to Christine. “Okay, let’s go.”

I was left alone with Jeff and Donna who immediately sort of closed ranks and started talking in low whispers. It was really very rude and even when I offered them each something to drink they just declined and went back to talking. Instead of just standing there getting mad, I walked around the apartment that I’d still not really explored.

Sam lived in Lincoln Park and his apartment was on the fifth floor and had one of those cool old elevators that you had to close two metal grate doors to get going. The apartment itself was very cozy, lots of brown, tan, taupe, black and rust colours everywhere. The black leather couch and chair, American Indian print rug, cherry wood coffee table, and a butcher-block kitchen table with tall, straight-backed chairs flanking it were what the eye saw immediately. It was a clean clutter-free space.

In his bedroom there was a sleigh bed in cherry and the matching armoire, a leather weave rug and a down comforter. Paintings of the desert adorned the walls and there was nothing—no knick-knacks or little dishes to hold stuff like a watch or a ring, anywhere in his place. His home exuded a masculine vibe without lacking details like candles or scattered pieces of art. In the second bedroom was his computer, weights, and a day bed covered in brick and burnt orange coloured pillows. In the living room the TV, the DVD player, the *Wii*, the *Playstation* and stereo were all housed in a huge cherry wood entertainment centre that was flush against the wall. There were assorted shelves on the walls beside it and I walked over to those and looked at the faces of strangers who were all apparently dear to him.

I gazed at a wedding picture, another of some men at a firehouse, a black and white studio picture of his parents, his mother a vision, his father very dashing, and more wedding photos and one of he and all his buddies from days spent in the Marine Corps. There were a lot of framed shots and I found that I liked that there were all these people in his life that loved him

“So Jory how do you know Sam?” Jeff asked, walking over to me.

I looked up at him. “We go way back,” I lied.

“How far back can you go?” Donna winked at me, stepping around the other side of me. “What are you all of eighteen?”

“Twenty-two,” I corrected her.

“Oooh that’s ancient,” she teased me.

I looked at her. “Why? How old are you?”

“Sacrilege,” she laughed.

I liked her. “You wanna drink now that you’re done being bitchy?”

“I would love one,” she sighed, looking me up and down. “What happened to your eye?”

“I walked into a door.”

“I see,” she nodded, clearly not believing a word of it. “What do you do for a living Jory?”

“I’m an office assistant.”

“Really. You don’t model?”

I scoffed.

She gave me a knowing smile. “Darling with your skin and those big dark eyes and that body you could model. I work for Pulse Magazine, believe me I know what I’m talking about.”

I looked at her as she stepped forward, brushing my hair back from my face. “How do you get blond hair and brown eyes? That’s amazing.”

“Hey we’re home,” Sam announced as he came through the door.

I turned and looked at him. I was so happy he was back.

“What?” he asked, glancing at Jeff, his brows furrowing. The look suggested he was annoyed.

“Sam you should tell your friend over here to let me introduce him to some photographers I know. I think he could model if he wanted.”

“Oh yeah?” The smile came instantly as he dropped the takeout and wine on the couch and strode over to me. His fingers slid under my chin as he raised it to look down into my eyes. “You wanna do that J?”

I trembled under his touch and stopped breathing.

“No?” He was speaking to Donna but his eyes never left my face. “He’s not really model material.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“‘Cause I said so.”

“And you’re the boss of him are you?”

He looked back down into my eyes and stroked his fingers up my throat to my jaw. “Yep. He’s mine.”

And that basically ended any plans that Christine Montero had for she and Sam Kage.

“What would possess you to say that?” I asked him fifteen minutes later as we stood in the kitchen with salad and Chianti, the veal having left with Christine.

“Say what?”

“Are you kidding? You basically outed yourself in front of those people.”

“Why do you care?”

“‘Cause you tell me you’re not gay and then you go and announce to those people that you are and—”

“I didn’t tell those people I was gay.”

“Yeah ya pretty much did.”

He shrugged broad shoulders. “So what?”

I was floored.

“Why’re you lookin’ at me like that?”

“You’re amazing.”

The smile was wicked and brought out his dimples. “Thanks.”

“It’s not a compliment,” I clarified for him.

He laughed at me and I realized how much he was enjoying this.

I hoped my scowl was as dark as I was trying for. “And it was a really crappy thing to do to Christine.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She liked you idiot.”

He shook his head, putting antipasto on two plates. I was sitting on the counter watching him, the bottle of wine between my legs, trying to work the opener.

“What?”

“You’re crazy.” He smiled at me, his eyes firing, the laugh lines deepening.

“C’mon Detective, did you see how upset she was? She is totally pissed off my friend.”

“Whatever.”

“And Jeff. I hope he’s not like a good friend or nothing.”

“He’s not.”

“Good.”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t that was just way harsh is all.”

“What was?”

“That for whatever reason, Jeff thought you wanted to meet his sister. What did you say to him?”

“I have no idea.”

“When did you set this dinner date up?”

“Again, no clue.”

“And do you regularly eat veal?” I asked the disgust clear in my voice.

“No never.”

“Huh so Jeff’s over here and—”

“Talking about her I guess.”

“And you said what? Yeah, cool, bring her on by?”

He chuckled deeply. “Seriously, I couldn’t recount our conversation if my life depended on it.”

“Oh?”

He smiled at me wickedly. “You’re jealous and I’m diggin’ it.”

“I am not jealous.”

“Oh no?”

“No.”

“I see.” He continued to smile as he took the bottle from me and easily pulled out the cork. He stepped between my legs. “So you weren’t completely bent that she was here?”

“I thought you didn’t realize she liked you.”

“I didn’t, but you did and so I’m thinking you were rattled.”

“As if.”

He put his hands down on either side of me and looked at me hard. “Really?”

I was lost in his smoky blue eyes and so I sighed deeply and came clean. “Of course I was jealous you moron. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No need,” he assured me, leaning in.

Food forgotten, wine forgotten, too busy kissing him, his hands on my thighs as he yanked me forward on the counter and into his arms.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he said his voice like full of gravel, deep and low.

I did as I was asked and he carried me to the bedroom, an arm wrapped around my waist, his hand caressing my ass. He nuzzled my throat as I stretched it out for him.

“I love your ass,” he whispered against my ear.

“It’s all yours,” I promised him.

And when I heard his breath catch I had to smile. It seemed that maybe Detective Kage liked having me around as much as I liked being around. It was a small miracle.

* * * *

IT WAS LATE WHEN I woke up in his bed. I had both my arms wrapped around him and a leg over his hip. I was pressed tight against his chest.

“Sorry,” I said softly, shifting away from him. I knew it had to be hard for him to sleep with me like that. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Stop.” He put an arm around my back, holding me against him.

“What were you doing?” I asked drowsily, realizing he hadn’t been asleep.

“Watching you sleep.”

“That’s weird. Close your eyes.”

“I’m just having trouble wrapping my mind around this.”

“What?” I was groggy, not totally awake yet.

“You being here in my bed.”

“Do you want me out of it? Should I go sleep in the guest room?”

“No. That’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean then?”

“Even if I explain it you won’t understand.”

“Why?”

“It just won’t make sense to you is all.”

“Because?”

“Because you’ve always been gay.”

I moved away from him, looking at his profile in the dark.

“You’re the first and only man I have ever been in bed with.”

“I know.”

“It’s something lemme tell you.”

I let out a long breath. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Stupid question. It’s all I want.”

“How come?”

“Cause being in bed with you it’s different.”

“How different?”

“Like I always figured it was supposed to feel,” he said, staring into my eyes.

I felt the tremor run through me and curl my toes.

“I didn’t know it would be like this.”

I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow.

“What’re you doing?”

“I have a confession.” I smiled, my voice muffled.

“Oh yeah what’s that?” he asked, yanking the pillow away so he could hear me.

“I left the apartment today.”

“You what?”

“I left,” I said, turning my face to look at him, smiling lazily. “With your mother.”

“What?” He looked confused.

I just stared at him until he got it.

“Oh shit,” he groaned suddenly, hands in his hair, lying back on his pillow. “It’s Friday I forgot all about...oh fuck me,” he half-yelled before he reached out and pulled me over on top of him. His hands went to my face, his fingers smoothing over my eyebrows, pushing the hair out of my eyes. “I’m so sorry J, did she give you the third degree and tell you—”

“She was an angel,” I told him, sliding my hand across his chest, just wanting to touch him. “She made me breakfast and we talked for like hours and then she took me for pie.”

He reached out and turned on the light on the nightstand.

“What?”

“I wanna see your face.”

I smiled down at him. “Are you okay?”

“She fed you?”

“Yeah.”

“My mother fed you?”

“Yes.”

“And she took you for pie?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “And you know what, if Regina Rappaport was my mother I’d have t-shirts made.”

“You knew who my mother was?”

“Yeah of course. Everybody knows.”

“You’d be surprised who doesn’t know.”

“She’s so beautiful,” I told him.

“You’re beautiful,” he assured me, fingers lightly tracing my black eye. “Even beat up, I know women that aren’t as pretty as you.”

“I don’t think—”

He chuckled and I had to smile in spite of myself. “I know you don’t baby.”

I shoved his hands away and he laughed as I tried to smother him with my pillow.

“We had a good time,” I told him as I scooted away from him to the cold part of the bed. “She invited me for Sunday dinner.”

“Did she?”

“Yessir.”

“You with my entire family, I don’t fuckin’ think so.”

“Why?”

“Well because I don’t feel like explaining you being gay to everybody right now.”

“And why would you? I didn’t tell her. I told her you had to take care of me. That’s all you gotta say.”

“That simple.”

“Sure.”

“Come here,” he said softly, reaching for me, tucking me back against his side, his hand moving to the small of my back. “Don’t move unless I tell you.”

Sam liked being the one in charge, he was a very demanding lover and being with him was heaven for me because of it.

“Look at me.”

I lifted my chin and he leaned and kissed me. It was slow, sensual, and I felt the heat roll through me.

“You can’t get enough of me,” he said arrogantly pleased.

I didn’t need to answer.

“What’re you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I’m lucky,” I answered, shifting, rising over him.

“Yeah you are lucky. You oh...oh Goddamn.”

Head back, body rigid, hands weaved through my hair as he called my name; I smiled before I took him in my mouth again. The look in his eyes when our eyes met, full of me, full of trust and surrender, made my heart hurt.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I WAS LYING ON the couch the following evening answering Dane's emails and building his schedule for the following week when Sam came out and sat on the couch behind me.

"J?"

I looked over my shoulder at him. "You all right? You got all quiet after the Farmer's Market this afternoon." It had been weird. He was fine in the car on the way over but while we were there he had slowly withdrawn until he finally went silent. I had racked my brain thinking of what I could have done. "Did I do something?"

"No, sorry."

"You don't hafta be sorry. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I just have to meet my buddies out and there's nothing I can do about it. We go every weekend."

"That's fine, I can entertain myself." I yawned, going back to my Excel spreadsheet. "Besides, I got a ton of shit to do."

"But I don't want you out at some—"

"No," I cut him off. "I'll call a few friends and catch a movie or something if I get done." I leaned back between his legs and kissed the inside of his thigh. "I'll be good."

"Okay," he said, getting up. "Thanks."

"No problem." I yawned again, realizing that I had booked two appointments for the same day. "Crap."

It had been a cold, wet frigid day and the night was no different. As I sat there on the thick rug with my hot cup of tea, the roaring fire, in a really old pair of jeans, socks and t-shirt, I was feeling very cozy. I was ordering Chinese when he walked back into the room.

"What's going on? I thought you were going out?"

I shook my head as I hung up the phone. "Nah. I'm gonna have Hot and Sour Soup and Muu Shu Pork instead. I don't feel like goin' out at all."

"You don't?"

I looked up at him. "No. Hey you look nice."

“Oh yeah?”

The faded Levi 501's were hugging his legs like a second skin; the thick turtleneck was bulky but still gave you the idea that the chest and shoulders were massive underneath. He pulled on his black leather jacket and adjusted it as he stared at me.

“Yeah. You look great.”

“Okay...so you have a nice night J. Don't wait up.”

“Nope.” I smiled at him before returning my attention to my laptop. “See ya later.”

I heard the door close and I got up to lock it as I went to get a refill on my tea.

Dane's schedule took forever and I by the time my food came I still wasn't even halfway through it. The email he had sent me the day before also said he wanted me to work up the anticipated revenue for the coming quarter. I could do it but it always took me a little longer to do the formulas.

* * * *

THE BUMP WOKE ME and I jerked hard to the left, hitting the floor so hard that I knocked the wind out of myself. I had rolled off the couch and had ended up more under it than beside it. The TV was off, the room silent, bathed in blue shadows and moonlight. The fire had died without attention and it was really cold. There was a scrape and the jingle of keys and the door opened. I leaned sideways and saw the couple in silhouette from the hall light for a moment before the door was closed with a rattle of unhooked chain. Wrapped in each other's arms, kissing ferociously, neither of them taking a breath, together looking like the picture of raging passion. There were grunts; moans and whimpers and then her coat hit the floor followed by the high heel that came to rest inches from where I was hiding.

“I missed you.”

The sultry voiced confession was low and husky and I saw then again for a moment, shadows moving in the soft glow of the streetlight, man and woman tangled up in heat. They were pulling and yanking at each other, spilling into the darkness before he suddenly threw her over his shoulder like firemen do and carried her off toward his bedroom, the giggling and squealing echoing down the short hallway.

I rolled out from where I was, stood up and waited. Waited to see if I was wrong. Waited to wake up. Waited for something to tell me that this was not reality and I was only dreaming. Nothing happened except the slamming of the bedroom door. When I moved I realized that unlike my place, his floorboards did not creak. So I was able to walk in my socks on his hardwood floors and stand outside his door without making a sound. Frozen there, feeling like a stalker, I listened outside his bedroom. I heard the moaning and stood there frozen, torn between throwing open the door and exposing his lie, cracking it just a sliver to see, to make sure and confirm what I knew anyway, or just

walk away. I had to know for sure, at the same time my flight response was screaming in my head. Stupid, but I had to see, to make sure, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Sam Kage was screwing some woman in the same bed I had been in the night before. I shivered hard and reached for the door handle as the lights went on.

I turned as Sam closed the front door, tossed his keys on the table beside the loveseat and dumped his jacket on the couch.

“Hey.” He yawned before he smiled at me. “You’re home.”

I stared at him, at the door and back at him. “I never left.”

“Yeah I know you said that but...c’mere.”

I was rooted to the spot. I had to get my brain around him not being in the bedroom.

He scowled at me. “What’s wrong with you?”

I pointed at the bedroom door. “There are two people screwing in your bed.” Which wasn’t as eloquent an explanation as it could have been but it did make my point.

“What?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I thought it was you.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I thought you brought some woman home and took her to bed.”

The look was dark, half scowl/half anger. “You had my word on that.”

“I don’t know you. What’s your word worth to me?”

“My word is good. If I say it I mean it.”

I shrugged. “Okay. I didn’t know, now I do.”

“If you don’t believe me or what I say maybe you should go.”

“Maybe I should.”

We stared at each other a long time before he suddenly barked at me. “I’m not even in there and I’m in fuckin’ trouble. How is that fuckin’ fair?” He had become exasperated in minutes. It was funny.

“I dunno but could ya stop swearing please?”

He growled at me as he crossed the room, stopping close enough that I had to step back and tilt my head up to meet his gaze. He was so much taller than me, the top of my head coming only to his shoulder.

“Am I staying or am I going?” I asked him softly, trembling suddenly.

“This isn’t working,” he muttered, sounding miserable.

“What? Me?” I asked, staring up into his eyes. “Do you want me to go?”

“No me. I gotta go.”

That made no sense at all. “What are you talking about? Do you even know?”

His eyes were locked on mine. “You live here J. You’re comfortable here in my place, in your skin...I’m the one having a goddamn mental breakdown.”

I smiled suddenly and leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his waist, squeezing tight. “It’s good you’re home. I missed you.” My voice was husky and cracked on the last. “And I’m so glad you’re not in bed with some woman.”

He stroked my hair and I heard the deep sigh as he tilted my head back so he could see my eyes. “I didn’t wanna go. I wanted to sit on the couch and watch you do your computer shit.”

“Then you should’ve stayed home with me,” I said, wetting my lips, drawing his attention there. “Cause I missed you.”

Slowly he bent forward and we both heard the giggle from the other side of the door. “What the hell?” he said before he grabbed the handle and threw open the door. There was a quick scream from the darkness as he flipped on the lights. “Oh fuck me,” he groaned loudly.

I peeked around the corner and there was a man that actually looked nothing like Detective Kage sitting in bed beside a woman who kind of did. She was clutching my comforter to her breast. When she saw me her eyes got even bigger.

“What the fuck is going on?” Sam roared at them.

“Sammy it’s not what ya think,” the woman said gently.

“Oh no? Well I think that my married sister is screwing her husband’s best friend in my bed. That’s what I fuckin’ think. Tell me if I’m missing something Jen.”

She bit her bottom lip and I went from curious and confused to nurturing and concerned. She looked so sad sitting there with the tears in her eyes, trembling, that I slipped into the room, grabbed the Kleenex off the chest of drawers and walked the box over to her.

Her eyes flicked up to mine. “Thank you.”

I smiled gently and she shivered hard.

“Who’re you?”

“I’m Jory,” I said and when she reached for my hand I gave it to her, squeezing back. “I’ll make you some tea.”

“No tea!” Sam yelled again. “Just get the fuck out of my bed! Get outta my house!”

I patted her hand when she tried to pull it away. “It’s okay,” I soothed her. “He’s just loud; you must know that by now.”

“I don’t know what to—”

“It’s okay,” I said, squeezing her hand again gently.

“J,” Sam began, the warning there in his voice. “Don’t start with me or—”

I gave him a look.

“You and your goddamn tea!” he snapped at me. “You know you—”

“Stop screaming like an idiot. We can all hear you.”

“I want them—”

“Just stop,” I said quietly, staring at him. “This is not what we need right now.”

“Jory.” She breathed out my name.

I looked back at her and saw her mouth open, eyes huge as she stared up at me.

“Tea good?”

She nodded slowly, uncertain.

I turned and left the room, scowling at him as I passed him.

“Why are you lookin’ at me like that?”

I went to the kitchen that I had reorganized the day before and filled the kettle with bottled water before I put it on the stove to boil.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he roared at me as he walked into the kitchen.

“I’m making tea.”

“I know you’re making fuckin’ tea. Why?”

“Because your sister needs to talk Sam. She’s really hurting can’t you tell?”

“I don’t give a shit J. She’s been fuckin’ her husband’s best friend in my bed for who knows how long. She’s a goddamn whore!”

“Stop yelling at me.”

He glared at me and I gave that look right back to him.

“You have no right to—”

“You’re being an ass.”

“Jory—”

“She’s your sister and you’re being a real jerk right now instead of what she needs.”

“What?”

“You need to show a little compassion.”

“Compassion?” He was indignant.

“Yes. Compassion. Pass me the tin in the left cabinet.”

He moved right.

“Your other left.”

He gave me a scalding look and opened the next cabinet. After he passed me the tin he looked back at the shelves and the contents. “What the fuck is all this shit?”

“I went grocery shopping with your mother.”

“When?” He looked at me.

“After the bakery. We needed some more stuff.”

“You bought all this stuff?”

“Yes.”

“How can you afford—”

“I’m not some starving college student detective. I have a decent job ya know.”

He moved to another cabinet and then the refrigerator. “There’s a lot of food in here.”

“Like you’d know.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You eat like a frat boy. I’m changing your diet.”

“Like hell you are.”

“Pass me the vanilla creamer out of the fridge.”

He yanked open the door and everything that was glass inside jingled.

“Try not to break anything.”

“I don’t have any...oh,” he grunted, and passed me the bottle.

I got out spoons and a dishtowel from another drawer, some cinnamon and a lemon. I wasn’t sure what his sister and her lover took in their tea.

“You moved all my shit around.”

“The way you had it set up made no sense,” I said getting out the small chopping board I had picked up at *Crate and Barrel*, along with a paring knife.

“I don’t care how you think I should—”

“Pots and pans go next to the stove because you cook with them,” I explained, educating him. “Tupperware goes next to the fridge ‘cause once it’s filled that’s where it goes. Everything has a place but apparently you never got that memo.”

“What are you doing?”

It was obvious that I was cutting up a lemon. “Am I really expected to answer that?”

He made a noise and muttered under his breath that his sister was not staying.

“Oh no?”

“No,” he assured me, his voice rising again.

I smiled lazily and finished cutting the lemon in quarters before getting out the teapot and filling the holder with leaves to put inside.

“What are you wearing?” he asked out of the blue.

I stopped and looked down at my jeans before I looked back at him. “I was wearing these when you left.”

“You were?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled.

“You don’t wear those things out do ya?”

My jeans were faded almost white, old and threadbare with more holes than fabric but they fit like a soft second skin. “Sure,” I teased him, lying.

“You know you should really be more careful of me. I could hurt you when she leaves.”

“Is that a promise?” I smiled at him, arching a brow for his benefit.

“Come here.”

And I would have if his sister’s voice hadn’t stopped me.

“Sammy.”

We both turned to her as she leaned on the counter.

“I just—”

“Tell me something,” Sam sighed deeply, raking his hands through his hair. “Tell me this is new, tell me this is the first fuckin’ time and please tell me I haven’t been sleeping on the same sheets you guys have been fuckin’ on for like months now.”

I saw the guy standing in the background. He was unsure whether to go or stay.

“Sam we—”

“You have kids Jen,” he said to his sister, his voice hollow. “So do you Kurt,” he looked passed her to her lover. “What the fuck?”

“Sammy we—” His sister began.

“Jesus Christ Jen you need to—”

“Can you reach those for me?” I interrupted him.

He looked at me and saw where I was pointing up to the new teacups I had bought at the Farmer’s Market earlier in the day. They were hand painted, the kind you used at a Chinese restaurant with no handles except they were larger. When he didn’t move I asked again.

“Please.”

He rolled his eyes but got the cups down.

“I’m sorry what did you say your name was?”

I looked at his sister and smiled. “Jory.”

She nodded. “Jory. It’s a real pleasure to meet you.”

I smiled at her and motioned Kurt over. “Take a seat.”

He gave Sam a tentative look before he moved to the counter and took a seat on one of the barstools. We were all silent and when the kettle whistled, Jen’s whole body jerked like she was startled. I took her hand briefly before I filled the teapot with the boiling water. I rattled on about how everyone liked something different. I myself preferred Oolong this late at night, but had gone with Chamomile since it was universally liked. Both Jen and Kurt nodded.

“What do you like in it?” I asked her.

After several moments of her just staring at me, she asked me for the creamer, Kurt the cinnamon. I poured mine and added nothing. Sam just scowled at me when I asked him if he wanted any.

“You’re the guy my Mom took to the bakery yesterday,” Jen said suddenly, really studying my face.

“Yes.”

“She had a great time.”

“I did too.”

She nodded slowly and I reached out for her hand.

“Are you okay?”

Another nod as her eyes filled again.

I came around the counter quickly and she reached for me as I opened up my arms.

“For crissakes J,” Sam groaned. “Can’t they just get the fuck out?”

“I could—” Kurt began.

“Just never mind him,” I soothed Kurt, clutching Jen tight as she buried her face in my shoulder and sobbed. “You guys need to talk to somebody. Carrying this around has gotta be just awful.”

Jen pulled back to look up into my face. “How do you know?”

“‘Cause keeping secrets is a killer and guilt is even worse.”

“Yes it is.”

“So tell me,” I urged my voice soft as I wiped away her tears, my fingers feather light on her cheeks.

Her smile through the tears was breathtaking. “Okay.”

Jennifer Levine was madly in love with Kurt Pratt and he with her. They had known each other for seventeen years but had just discovered that their friendly banter and constant chemistry was rooted in more than the fact that she was the wife of Kurt’s best friend. They were more than simply extensions of Mitch Levine; they were two people crazy about each other. Between them they had seven kids and spouses that loved them. They had decided to just leave it as a fling so that no one got hurt but quickly it had taken the turn from passion to affection to love.

“People are gonna be hurt Jen,” Sam assured her as he paced back and forth through the living room.

“Mitch is gonna be crushed and I know Rita,” he told Kurt. “Man she’ll lose her mind.”

Kurt nodded, sipping the tea I had put in front of him. “I know.”

“What’s your plan?” he asked his sister, his attention back on her.

“I have no idea.” She laughed hollowly. “This was the plan. Every Saturday night but...” She looked at Kurt. “I find myself living for this day, waiting all week. I’m useless except for this.”

I watched Kurt’s eyes; saw the same misery there.

“We usually just talk.” His smile was bittersweet as his hand tangled with hers. “Don’t we baby?”

She nodded. “And sometimes we don’t.”

“Did you use Mom’s keys to get in here?” Sam asked her.

“Yes. She had two sets; she’s going to wonder where the last one is since I guess she gave a set to Jory yesterday.” Her eyes were locked on him.

“I’ll give her back a set.”

“I left them on the nightstand.”

He nodded.

“What’re you guys gonna do?” I asked her.

“I have no idea.” She smiled at me through her tears.

She had the same beautiful eyes as her brother, the same mouth with the full bottom lip and the thin upper one, his nose was long and straight, his profile belonged on coins, her nose was small, upturned at the end. They had the same golden brown hair, the bronze, copper and wheat highlights in it, thick and wavy. She was the kind of woman men would watch walk by on the street with her hourglass figure, flawless skin and flashing eyes. I appreciated her beauty even though Sam was the one who had me mesmerized.

“Hey,” I said softly.

Sam looked at me.

“Could you get the fire going again? It’s getting cold in here.”

“The radiator’s on.”

“Like I said.” I smiled at him. “It’s cold. Make it happen Kage.”

Exasperated sigh as he crossed the room to the fireplace.

“Jory.”

I looked back at Jennifer.

“Who are you again?”

“Just a friend.”

She nodded, glanced over at Sam and then back at me. “Will I see you at the house tomorrow for Sunday dinner?” Her eyes were absorbing me and I had no idea why.

“I dunno.”

“You should come. You really should.”

“We’ll see,” I said, reaching for her hand. “What can I do right now?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. We’re gonna leave and you and Sam are going to keep our secret.”

Sam stayed busy with the fire and didn’t turn around to look at her.

“Okay Sammy?”

“Whatever you say.”

I hugged her tight and then she walked over to Sam and put her hand on his back. Because he didn’t move I cleared my throat. His exhale was loud; I heard it across the room before he rose and stood in front of her.

“I’m sorry Sammy.”

He nodded, just staring into her eyes. I watched her tremble, knew what she needed. I coughed and he looked over at me.

I widened my eyes and I saw the muscle in his jaw working before he suddenly grabbed his sister into a bone-crushing hug. Instantly, she was clutching him just as tight, burying her face in his shoulder, sobbing.

“I’m so glad you were here,” Kurt whispered; hand on my shoulder from behind, gently squeezing.

I looked over my shoulder at him and he nodded at me, smiling just slightly. My heart went out to him, and to her, to both of them because it had to just be miserable where they were.

When they left, Sam walked them to the door and dead bolted the lock after them. He went immediately to the bedroom and I cleaned up the kitchen. Everything had to be back in its place. I found him minutes later sitting on the floor beside the washing machine, the sheets from the bed piled beside him.

“What’s wrong?”

“That should be fairly obvious.”

I moved to his side, crouching down, looking into his eyes. “I’m sorry about your sister but I’m sure she and Kurt will—”

“Not that,” he cut me off. “I’m all twisted up and you—”

I leaned forward, cupped his face in my palm, and kissed him. He tried to lift his head away but as soon as I ran my tongue over the seam of his lips he parted them for me. I tilted his head up so I

could bear down on him, plunging my tongue deep into his mouth, tasting him as I manoeuvred into his lap, my knees on either side of his thighs, straddling his hips.

The moan that came out of him made me smile before he pushed me back, breaking the kiss.

“What?”

“Stop I gotta tell you something.”

“What?” I panted, staring into his eyes, worried.

He ran his thumb over my bottom lip before he lifted his head and pulled me down to kiss me breathless. I wrapped my arms around his neck and devoured him. I kissed him like he belonged to me and I had all the time in the world. The hand that gripped my hair and yanked my head back made me cry out.

“At the market today I wanted to touch you but I couldn’t. People would’ve looked and...and I’ve been bitched at before by girls I’ve been with, ‘cause I’m not a guy that likes to be touched a lot and I don’t do the whole hand holding and all that shit...but today with you...you drive me crazy and I gotta have my hands on you all the fuckin’ time and it scares the shit outta me. I don’t...I mean there I was dying to grab you and I couldn’t. I couldn’t...”

“It’s okay.” I smiled down at him, shifting in his lap, feeling how hard he was under me. “You can touch me now. You can do whatever you want to me now.”

The groan made me smile. “Get up.”

I rose up off of him and he grabbed me as Kurt had grabbed Jen earlier, throwing me over his shoulder, carrying me back to the couch. He lifted the coffee table out of the way and threw one of the neatly folded Afghans at the end of the couch into the middle of the floor, in front of the fire. I opened it up and spread it where he wanted, as he stripped in the light of the flickering flames. He looked like some bronzed god and I couldn’t help the gasp that came out of me.

“Go get the stuff. Hurry up.”

I ran to get the lube from the bedroom, not worrying if my scrambling and frantic movement made me look too eager. I didn’t care if he knew how much I wanted him and wanted to please him. When I returned he was on the floor, stretched out, relaxed, and waiting. I let my eyes wander all over the powerful frame, not an ounce of fat on the man anywhere, just rippling muscle and sleek skin.

“Come here.”

I moved slowly, making him wait, stripping out of my jeans and shirt as he watched me with hungry eyes. The gaze was all heat and I shivered seeing that he wanted me.

“Jesus J you look like you’re made outta gold.”

Voice gone, all I could do was stare at him.

His breath was coming in stuttering bursts as his hands reached for me, pulling me down beside him, cupping my face to bring my mouth to his. “You’re killing me.”

I smiled against his lips; letting him roll me over on my stomach and pin me to the floor. His mouth was on my shoulder, one hand under me, stroking me, the other clutching my hip as he spread my legs with his knee. I had no idea what kind of a lover Sam Kage was before me. I couldn’t speak to his prowess with women, but with me, he was everything I craved, physically demanding, rough, possessive and absolutely in control. I was there to be manhandled and ravaged and I was more than willing to be submissive to him. It was amazing to me that anyone that had ever been in bed with him before would let him go.

The second time we made it to his bed and he stared into my eyes the entire time. That had never happened to me before. I had never had anyone care enough to watch me, to make sure that I was sated along with them. He was a ravenous lover and I was more than willing to be devoured.

Later as I trailed my fingers up and down the deep groove of his back, I heard his breathing even out. If I stayed there I wouldn’t be able to keep from touching him and kissing him. He needed his rest so I got up and went out into the living room to watch TV. I must have dozed off because the room was dark when I felt the warm hand on my back and then lips right behind my ear.

“Love the purring,” his voice was soft. “Get up and come to bed.”

“Why are you up?” I whispered, not really awake, shivering in the cold, barely able to see him in the darkness of the room.

“‘Cause I couldn’t find you,” he said, lightly kissing the side of my neck. “And I woke up and needed you.”

I smiled because I liked the attention I was getting, his hand on my ass, kneading and squeezing before he gently slapped it.

“So is it me you want or my ass?”

He chuckled close to my ear, which put goose bumps all over my body. “Both. Come to bed.”

“Can’t sleep without me huh?” I teased him, groggy as I got up and staggered to the bedroom, his hands on my shoulders, steering me there.

“No I can’t,” he told me before he shoved me down on the bed.

“You’re getting used to having me around.”

“Just shut-up,” he grumbled, “and lay down.”

But I was right, no matter what he said, I was habit forming.

“God you’re freezing,” he muttered, getting into bed beside me, covering us both with the sheet and blanket.

I snuggled in tight against him. “And you’re so warm.”

He groaned loudly, tucking my head under his chin as I wrapped my arms around his chest, slipping my leg between his.

“You need me.”

“Apparently,” he grumbled, rubbing his face in my hair. “Now go to sleep already.”

And I felt like it so I did.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WE PARKED AROUND THE block because there was no room on the street anywhere near his parents' house. He put a hand on my shoulder and led me down the alley that ran behind the two-story A-frame, redbrick home. When we came in through the back door into the kitchen I heard my name called.

"Jory!"

Regina was on me instantly, her arms open to receive me and as we hugged each other tight. I heard Sam's grunt of approval from behind me.

"I brought Jory, Mom, if that's okay," he laughed softly.

She pulled back to smile into my face. "Since I called you this morning and demanded you bring him with you...yes Sammy its okay. How are you my darling?"

"I'm good." I smiled into her eyes.

We stared a few minutes before she let me go and grabbed my hand, dragging me over to where she was chopping potatoes and onions.

"I'm going to teach you how to make Hungarian goulash."

It sounded scary but I was game. "Okay."

Sam left me and I heard the shouts of his name as the swinging door closed behind him.

I stayed in the kitchen and helped his mother with dinner, alternating between preparations and dish washing and listening to her talk. When his sisters showed up with their husbands and kids, I was introduced to everyone. Jen came with her husband Mitch and gave me a big hug when she pretended to meet me for the first time.

"Jesus Jen," he chuckled, shaking my hand afterwards. "Don't crush the kid."

"He's not a kid," she said as she stared into my eyes. "He's got a very old soul."

"Oh does he," Mitch teased her, pulling her sideways to kiss her temple. "You're adorable."

And I saw her flinch like every kindness was painful. The guilt was smothering her. "You wanna help me?" I asked her, trying to give her some relief.

"Yes," she breathed out, taking off her coat and gloves, shoving them both at her husband. "I'd love to."

I was introduced to her daughters, Ally and Carla, and they both wanted to hug me. Carla touched my hair and told me how much she wanted gold hair instead of brown. I explained how much better brown was than gold. She gave me a look as she twirled her fingers in my hair.

“How come it’s so long?”

“‘Cause I need a haircut?” I answered, realizing that my hair now hit my shoulders.

“It’s too pretty to cut Jory,” Jen told me. “I would kill for your highlights.”

“Yes,” Regina echoed her daughter. “You have beautiful thick hair, leave it alone.”

I shrugged and put Carla down in the counter so I could go back to cooking. I told her she could help me and pass me ingredients. It was cute how she scooted around, getting comfortable and then looked up at me expectantly. Her sister, being only two, had more interest in walking around the kitchen opening drawers and peering inside.

Sam came in the kitchen a half hour later with two other guys and his father. Amazing how much he looked like Thomas Kage. They were both big, tall men but while Sam was covered in thick, hard, rippling muscle, his father had grown a little softer in the face and around his middle.

“I just think we should sell it Dad and get out money out of it. Who the fuck cares what these assholes want? They don’t give a shit about you.”

“Samuel Thomas Kage,” Regina snapped at him. “It’s the Lord’s Day.”

“Mother—”

“What’s going on?” I asked quickly.

He looked over at me and I waited.

“My Dad and I have a piece of property in Naperville that we need to sell.”

“And?”

He tipped his head at the other two men. “These two have been saying they’re gonna buy it for like three months but nothing’s happening. I’m sick of holding onto it so I wanna sell it.”

“I see,” I nodded, looking over at Mr. Kage. “What do you think sir?”

“I’m sorry, who are you?” he asked me jovially.

“This is Sam’s friend Jory,” Regina explained.

He nodded, as he looked me over. "I see. Well Jory I think that I want to wait for my nephews Levi and Joseph to buy it."

I looked back at Sam. "If your Dad wants to wait why're you arguing with him?"

"Because it's crap, half of its mine and I wanna get rid of it. We could wait for years before these two jerks get enough money to—"

"Okay." I yawned. "Here's whatcha do. Let your Dad win this argument this time and you got dibs on the next one. Better to not be an ass where your family's concerned right?"

"I'm being an ass?"

I gestured at his cousins. "Well yeah. I mean who cares how long it takes them? They're your cousins. Wait forever if you can help them out. What do you need the money for anyway?"

He glowered at me and I arched a brow for him as we shared a long look.

"Fine." He threw up his hands, stalking to the refrigerator for a beer. "I don't give a shit," he said before he left the room.

I shrugged and looked at his mother. "I think he enjoys the complaining more than anything."

"I would agree," she said quietly, nodding. "I think you've got him pegged right."

I went back to the dishes until I felt the hand on my back.

"Jory."

His Dad was next to me, looking at my face.

"Yessir?"

"How long have you known Sam?"

"Not too long," I told him. "I actually got in a little trouble and he's helping me out."

"I see." He smiled warmly. "Well thank you for speaking up. He actually owns fifty-one percent to my forty-nine so if he wanted to he could sell it."

"He won't if you don't want him to," I assured him. "But you know that."

"Do I?" He indulged me. "I don't know about that Jory."

"I don't either," one of the men moved over to hold out his hand. "Joe Kage man, good to meet you. This is my brother Levi."

I shook his hand and then his brother's. "Good to meet you both."

Levi smiled, as he looked me straight in the eye. "And you Jory."

The door swung open suddenly and Rachel, Sam's oldest sister came in. "Oh Mother how could you let your son bring that woman back over here after the last time."

Regina chuckled. "Do you mean Alexandra?"

Her moan made everyone laugh. "Oh God yes. Could she be any more condescending or conceited or...ohmygod mother she's such a bitch."

She laughed out loud. "Rachel!"

"Mother," Rachel said sharply, pointing out into the other room. "Do you have any idea what she just said to me?"

"No," she giggled, unable to stop.

"She said it was wonderful that I could throw away all my dreams to stay home and raise children. You're lucky I didn't smack her right there!"

"She's young dear and—"

"Rach," a guy began as he walked into the room. "Why're you being such a jerk to Alex?"

"Ohmygod Mike, did you hear what she said to me?"

Michael Kage looked a lot like his brother but where Sam's features were fine, chiselled perfection, his were blunt and unfinished. He was still handsome, as far as I could tell all the Kage men were, but not one of them was as drop dead gorgeous as Detective Sam Kage.

"Yeah I heard Rach and she was only responding to you asking her if she wanted kids. I mean could you be any more obvious? Just because I'm ready to settle down and get married and start a family doesn't mean she is. We've only been going out for three months. For crissakes could ya lay off her?"

"I—"

"So she's different from you and Jen and all your friends. Give her a break."

"Oh so what? I'm the wicked witch because I chose to be a housewife?"

"That's not what I said. You just gotta—"

"C'mon Mike," she huffed at him. "She's a prissy, snooty little—"

But she shut up instantly as the door opened and a woman walked into the kitchen. The lady in question was stunning but far too immaculately dressed with perfect make-up and designer shoes for a simple Sunday dinner in the suburbs.

“Hi,” she said softly, her eyes glancing around the room. “I just—Jory?”

I forced the smile. “Hello Miss Ralston.”

She came into the kitchen, her entire focus on me. “How are you?”

“Good thank you. And you?”

“I’m well,” she said, her stiletto sling backs clicking across the linoleum floor as she reached me. She brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes, all the rest of it pulled up into a French twist. If Barbie could come to life she would look like Alexandra Ralston. But not like *Malibu Barbie* or something simple like that. Alexandra would be the expensive kind, the one you never took out of the box. She was a collector’s item, flawless, perfect, with beauty that was unattainable unless you too were encased in plastic.

“You look well,” I said to be making conversation.

She bit her bottom lip and I saw her take a quick breath. “How is Dane?”

“He’s good.”

“I was hoping to see him at the AIDS benefit.”

What she had hoped was to be the highest bidder at the bachelor auction and thus won the privilege of going to dinner with him. I forgot about her when I was thinking of women that would have paid to be alone with him. He had definitely short changed the charity by just giving them a check for ten grand. He could have easily made them double that amount if he’d just bothered to show up.

“He made a sizable donation,” I told her. “But you know he hates that kind of stuff.”

She nodded even though she had no idea what I was talking about. This then why he had walked away from her. She loved being rich and all the social events that came along with it. Dane did only those things that were necessary. They could not have been more different. “I haven’t seen him in months.”

I smiled, trying not to squirm.

“Will you give him my best when you see him tomorrow?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She turned and left the room and all eyes were on me.

“Jory is it?” Michael asked me as he came closer.

“Yes.”

“You know I met Alexandra Ralston after she came from Harcourt, Brown and Cogan. Do you work for Dane Harcourt?”

“Yes.”

“Are you his assistant?”

“Yes. Are you an architect too?”

“Yes I am, though not in Dane Harcourt’s league.”

“I’m sure you’re brilliant.” I gave him my automatic response because people complemented my boss all the time.

“Well thank you but your boss is amazing. I actually tried to get a job there but he said my sketches were rudimentary and unimaginative.”

I squinted at him. “Were you there before lunch?”

“Pardon me?” I had surprised him. It was not the answer he’d been expecting.

“Lunch. Did you come say around ten-thirty?”

“I don’t—”

“‘Cause he’s kind of worthless before lunch. If he’s eaten and his blood sugar is balanced out he’s way nicer,” I assured him, smiling.

“I’ll keep it in mind for next time.”

“Good,” I nodded.

“Maybe I’ll have you talk to him for me. Being his assistant you must have quite a lot of pull.”

“Yeah right,” I scoffed as my phone rang. “Speak of the devil. Excuse me,” I said as I moved away from the others. “Hey boss.”

“Is my schedule done for next week?”

“Of course. I emailed it this morning didn’t you see it?”

“No.”

“Did you check?”

“No.”

“Well that could be the problem.”

“Don’t be flip.”

“No sir.”

“Did you leave Friday open for my trip to Dallas?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes,” he corrected me.

“Yes.”

“I need to have a dinner party for a client tomorrow night. You need to coordinate that for me now.”

“Sure,” I said quickly. “How many for dinner boss?”

“Fifteen. I want to have a very intimate meal so get the best all right?”

“Of course.”

“And I want you there understand?”

“Aren’t I always?”

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yessir.”

“Jory.”

“What?”

“Don’t say what.”

I made a noise before I said, “yes?”

“Better.”

I groaned.

“Now I forgot what I was going to say,” he said irritably.

“Hey guess who I just saw?”

“I’m sure I have no idea.”

“Alexandra Ralston,” I teased him. “She said to give you her best.”

“Uh-huh.” He could not have sounded any more bored.

“So I’ll see ya in the morning.”

“Good. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.”

“All right. Good night.”

I clicked off my phone and then entered the party in on the calendar on the touch screen on my phone. “You are the man to call Jory,” Michael teased me. “Put me on the guest list.”

I smiled at him and once I was done with my entry I asked Regina what she wanted me to do next. She wanted to show me her house, so I followed her through it.

We had a good time looking at old movie posters and I looked at scrapbooks and photo albums. I never tire of looking at other people’s history since I have none of my own.

Dinner was a loud undertaking with kids running all over, lots of talking that I thought bordered on arguing and conversation about a thousand things I knew nothing about like raising children and baseball. I concentrated on eating until the doorbell rang. We all looked up when Rachel returned in no time with an older couple and a younger woman. There was a loud yell from the table as both Thomas and Regina got up to greet them.

“Oh my goodness look who it is.” Michael beamed, getting up to go around the table.

I leaned in next to Jen. “Who’re they?”

She put her arm around my shoulders and whispered to me. “The Gordons, they’re old friends of my folks. Their daughter Nora and Sammy used to date back in high school. I had no idea she was back from California.”

I nodded; feeling like the air was being sucked out of the room. “How long has she been gone?”

“I dunno, years.”

“Why’d she leave?”

“She went to school out there.”

I nodded, leaning back in my chair.

Sam stood up and Nora moved fast, coming around the table to fill his arms. She pressed herself in tight against him, her breasts crushed to his chest as she kissed his cheek and his jaw. He looked at me, directly into my eyes, and I turned all my attention to my food. I heard his rumbling laugh and felt my face get hot.

I was first up to help clear the table but I went out the back door to stand around the side of the house instead of starting the dishes. It was cold outside in just my shirt and cardigan but I needed the moment alone. Hard to sit and watch her put her hands all over him and do nothing. When I heard the yell from the kitchen, since I was under the window, I decided to go back in.

Sam was standing in the kitchen yelling while Michael held onto him. Nora was begging him to calm down while one of his other cousins stood on the other side of the room with Levi holding onto him. Regina stood at the sink with Jen who was pressing a paper towel to her nose. It was bleeding and when the door swung open and Mitch came in followed by Thomas I saw him lunge toward the same guy Sam was yelling at.

“You drunk asshole!” he yelled as Thomas grabbed him, arm around his neck and another across his chest. “Get the hell outta here!”

“Oh fuck you Mitchie, I could kill you man. I didn’t mean to fuckin’ hit Jen I meant to bitch slap Michael not her.”

“I told you not to invite him,” Michael yelled across the room. “But you never listen Mom. Jesus Christ! You know he’s a total deadbeat and you invite him anyway.”

I saw her eyes fill as she held Jen’s head back.

“Shut the fuck up,” Sam yelled at Michael, shaking him off, striding across the floor toward the guy trying to twist out of Levi’s grasp. “Mom wants to help...let her fuckin’ help. But we deal with this shit right now. This bullshit is gonna—”

“Sam!” Nora shouted at him. “Don’t be such a mindless brute. We don’t just beat people.”

“Watch me,” he said, shoving Levi off, grabbing the guy around the throat.

“Sam!” Thomas barked at him.

“Sam!” his mother yelled at him. “That’s your cousin leave him alone!”

“Hey,” I called over to him.

He stopped and looked over his shoulder at me.

“You’re gonna end some guy in your Mom’s kitchen?”

His eyes locked on mine.

“Maybe we just put him in a cab huh?” I smiled at him.

You could hear a pin drop in the room. I saw the look on the guy’s face, the terror there, knowing how close he was to being put on the floor.

“Fine,” Sam growled, shoving the guy hard away from him before he went to check on his sister. “Call a cab Mike.”

His brother pulled out his cell phone and was on it seconds later. I leaned back against the door as everyone scrambled around the kitchen. When Regina moved Jen over to the small table in the kitchen to sit down, I took my place back at the sink to start the dinner clean up.

“Hello.”

I looked sideways and found Nora. “Hi.”

“I didn’t meet you yet.”

“I’m Jory.”

“Well Jory it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Usually when Sam’s that mad we don’t get him back. I remember once a guy cut us off in traffic and he followed him all the way home with me in the car no less, and beat the crap out of him.”

I shrugged.

“How long have you and Sam been friends?”

“Not long,” I told her as someone turned up the radio and suddenly Jen was beside me. “Hey you,” I smiled at her. “You all right.”

“I am now that Sammy didn’t kill poor Charlie. It was an accident.”

“I’m thinking he shouldn’t have been trying to touch Mike either.”

She chuckled and it sounded nasally from the blood in her nose. "True. Can I help you?"

"Only if you sing along with me."

She heard the beginnings of the Dionne Warwick song. "Jory we're both too young to know this song."

I started singing *Then Came You* and she laughed at me before she joined in, singing along with me at the top of her lungs. When I dried my hands on my jeans and held out my hand to her she took it and we were moving around the kitchen together. I saw Regina smiling and Thomas's deep breath as he calmed. I surrendered her to Mitch when the song changed and returned to my dishes. Rachel and Regina sang along with Aretha Franklin and me as they helped.

"Ooh Jory look at you move honey," Rachel cooed, watching me dance next to the sink. "Somebody's missing out."

I arched a brow for her and she smacked my ass.

"Hey."

I turned at his voice and Sam was standing at the back door.

"Can you come here for a second?"

"Yeah," I said quickly. "Excuse me ladies."

When I was within reach he grabbed a handful of my sweater and pulled me close. "I wanna go now okay?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Why?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Cause I just realized something."

"What's that?"

His jaw clenched. "I'm better at home."

"You are home."

"No *our* home."

Our home? God the things that came out of the man's mouth. "Okay."

He put his hand on the side of my neck and leaned his forehead against mine. “Thanks for keeping me grounded today. I have trouble when I’m here. My family expects me to be one way and so I am.”

I had no idea what that meant. His family wanted him to be a hot head? That made no sense.

“It’s hard to be here sometimes.”

I just took a deep breath, my eyes closing, enjoying his closeness and how he didn’t seem to want to move away from me.

He bumped my jaw with his nose, tilting my head as he buried his face in the side of my neck, inhaling me. “You’re definitely good for me.”

I trembled because I couldn’t help it

As he pulled back, he rubbed his cheek along mine. “I’ll get your coat all right?”

“Yessir.”

“Say goodbye to my Mom.”

“Yessir.”

“Knock it off. What time do I need to drop you off at work in the morning?”

I shook my head. “I can take the train no worries.”

“No idiot. I will drive you so nobody kills you on your way to work. What time does your boss get in?”

“Eight.”

He grunted.

“And tomorrow night he’s got an event so you’re gonna hafta fend for yourself at dinner.”

“Maybe I’ll bring ya some food and eat with ya.”

I scoffed. “Yeah right.”

His fingers threaded fast through my hair and he yanked me back to him hard, his breath warm across my face. “You doubt me?”

I smiled wide, laughing softly. “No sir Detective.”

Another grunt before he shoved me away and left the room. I looked back at the two women and found them both staring open mouthed at me.

“What?”

“Jory,” Regina breathed out. “Sam...he...oh... how long are you staying with Sam?”

“Just until the end of the court case like I told you. Why?”

She nodded slowly and her mouth made a slow *O* as she dragged in a breath.

“What case?” Rachel asked her mother.

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Jory honey we all just love you,” Regina said quickly and I smiled at her.

“Thank you.”

Her eyes were absorbing me.

“I promise you it’s usually not so eventful around here.” Rachel gave me a big fake smile, lying through her teeth.

I shrugged. “It’s okay. Sometimes families fight right? No big. But hey I’m sorry I can’t finish up the dishes but Sam’s ready to jet.”

“Honey you helped enough already,” Regina said quietly. “I was going to tell you to go sit down and watch some football with the men anyway.”

“Like I didn’t enjoy every minute of it.” I grinned lazily. “I had a great time.”

“Well you fit in just perfect,” she assured me. “So don’t be a stranger.”

I darted across the kitchen and hugged first Regina and then her daughter. “Thanks guys.”

Sam came back into the room and they both stared at him.

“What?” he asked irritably.

His mother just shook her head.

“Okay then,” he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek and then Rachel’s. “I’ll see ya.”

I took my coat as he held it out for me and reminded him that we needed to stop at the store on the way home because we needed cereal for the morning and *Tide* so I could finish the laundry.

“Whatever.” He yawned, the exasperation not lost on me.

I glared at him and the smile I got back was huge.

“Jesus you’re a pain in the ass,” he grumbled, shoving me out the back door in front of him.

As we walked around the side of the house, he draped an arm around my neck and pulled me tight against him.

“What’re you doing?” I snapped at him, trying to push him off me.

“You were so jealous.”

“What?”

“What?” He repeated. “You’re so fulla shit. I saw the way you were lookin’ at me and Nora.”

“If I was looking at you in any one way I can assure you it was entirely—”

His laughter cut me off, rumbling and deep.

“Screw you,” I groused at him, trying to move away.

He wrapped both arms around my neck and leaned down to talk in my ear, his breath warm, and his voice husky before he bit my earlobe gently. “J it’s so hot to see you all worked up. I promise to fuck all this worry right out of you as soon as we get home.”

I shivered hard, leaning back against him, letting his hands run all over me.

“Yeah that’s what I thought,” he said, kissing the side of my neck as I tipped my head to give him better access. “Come with me.”

We both heard the call from the front door as we got to the sidewalk.

“Sam!” His father called from the porch. “Nora needs a ride home. She’s close to you.”

“Like hell she is,” I said under my breath, which made Sam smile wide. “Let her parents take her.”

“Actually I’ve got a lot of stops to make,” he yelled back as Nora joined his Dad outside.

“I can go along,” Nora smiled at him. “Come on Sammy!”

“You know what,” I began but Sam suddenly grabbed me as he had the night before, throwing me over his shoulder and slapping my ass hard. The indignant gasp came out before I could stop it. “Put me down. Your gonna freak out your Dad.”

“Sorry,” he yelled back. “Gotta go!”

When he turned I saw his Dad laughing and the wave of relief nearly undid me. The man was clueless and that was good for me. Nora’s expression was dark.

We were both silent in the car until I reached over and put my hand on his thigh. I felt the muscles tense under my hand and looked at his profile.

“It was harder than I thought being there.”

“Why?”

“I don’t wanna go places where I can’t touch ya if I want.”

“You can do whatever you want Sam, you just gotta tell people first so they expect it.”

“Tell my folks I’m gonna be all over you. Yeah that’ll be the day.”

“It might not be as bad as you think.”

“No it’ll be worse.”

“You’ll hafta do it someday.”

“Do what someday?”

“Tell your family you’re gay.”

“Why would I do that?”

The warning light went off in my head but I ignored it and ploughed on. “Because when I’m still around in like two-three years they’re gonna start to get suspicious.”

He chuckled. “Who says you will be?”

I went to move my hand but he covered it with his, holding it in place, his fingers sliding between mine. “Don’t get all defensive just hear me out. I’m a cop for starters. If I’m gay I might as well quit right now. It’s not even possible for any of the guys I know to ever get passed it. And my folks, my family, are you kidding? There’s no way. Did you see how excited my Mom got when Nora came over? She wants me married with kids not screwing around with you.”

“So that’s it. Just like I said before.” I yanked free of his grip and plastered myself against my door. “Once the case is over I’m outta your house and your life.”

“Well yeah...what’d you think?”

I had thought all kinds of ridiculous things. I had been thinking forever because I had fallen for him so fast. I was ready to wrap my life around his.

“J?”

I could stick around and try to win him over, try to make him love me so much that he could never let me go. He would get a new and better job; his parents would completely change their perspective and want me for their son and all his friends would be crazy about me. We would live happily ever after. And as soon as I thought it I realized how insane it was. I was the one who was an idiot, not him. He couldn’t change; I was the only one who could.

“Hey,” he said softly and I looked at him. “You weren’t thinking I was gonna—”

“No.” I cleared my throat, looking at the dashboard through swimming eyes. “I was just being stupid.”

“Cause I never told you this was gonna be a forever thing J.”

“No you didn’t.”

“I want to have kids. I want exactly what my folks have I just gotta find the right girl.”

A girl with a dick I thought but didn’t say it. “Sure.”

He laughed at me. “But you don’t care. You’re not serious here either. I’ve seen your phone—there are more guys calling than my sisters ever had all put together.”

“Right.”

“You just wanna have fun.”

“Sure.”

“Just like I said though—while you’re in my house I’m the only one you understand?”

I heard it loud and clear. When the experiment was over I would go on my way and he would go back to sleeping with girls, auditioning the mother of his children. I was an interlude, intermission—all the *I* words applied here. Even if I made myself seemingly indispensable, even if I thought he could not live without me—in the end he would live without me because it was not what he wanted. His heart was not connected to his dick. He could sleep with me from now until he died and still not love me because he was not hardwired that way. Men loved women not

other men. This was a truth like any other for him. Rain fell, the sun shone, men loved women. Period. I was wasting my time thinking it could ever be anything more...

When his phone rang and he was on it all the way to the grocery store, he let me go in alone. I didn't even care but I got what we needed and came out. He told me how sorry he was but he had to go to work. There were some things he had to do, no way out of it. He'd drop me at home and be back as soon as he could.

"I'll put you up against the wall when I get home J," he smiled at me, his hand on my throat.

And I shivered because it was suddenly just sex with nothing attached. I felt hollow inside and as he drove away, I watched the SUV for as long as I could, letting it get smaller and smaller until he turned the corner and disappeared. When I was ready I took a deep breath and went upstairs to pack. I called my boss on the way up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A YEAR AGO WHEN my boss had to drop me at my place one night I had invited him in. He walked around my apartment and in the minute and a half that it took him he had nodded several times. When he was done he faced me and asked when I wanted to move out. I had frowned at him as he explained that he owned a place downtown near Rush Street, very small at five hundred square feet, in an old brick building with all original moulding.

It was a tiny apartment but clean and very tastefully furnished. The windows could be opened wide and without screens you could lean out into the sky and listen to the music from the jazz piano bar across the street. In the summer there was only the moist breeze through the windows and in the winter just one radiator in the whole place. He told me to wear socks and I'd be fine.

The building had an outer door that a resident needed a key for or a visitor could be buzzed through. The inner door locked automatically and you either stepped instantly to the apartment door to the right or went up the five stairs to the second floor. I would be on the fourth and when I called my boss from the cab after gathering all my possessions from Sam's place, I asked him if he still owned it. He did. I then asked if anyone was living in it. No one was. I asked if I could and he said yes, very fast. He told me that he would send movers to my old place in Oak Park first thing the following morning to get my mattress and box spring. I would have to sleep on the couch the first night. He would meet me there in a half an hour to give me the keys.

"Don't you even want to know why I'm finally taking you up on your offer?"

"I don't care. I just want you out of the hovel you currently live in."

"You never said how much you hated it."

"It wasn't my place to let my sentiments be known...until now."

I sighed. "Listen, I don't want charity boss. I can hire my own movers."

"No you can't," he assured me. "My movers will clean up your place so you can get your deposit back after they bring over your bed. Do you have anything else left over there at all?"

"Some cottage cheese that used to be milk in the fridge and a few granola bars."

"That's not what I meant."

"I have a lava lamp."

He ignored my comment. "You have your laptop and all your clothes?"

"Yes."

“Good. I’ll see you in a few minutes. Wait for me on the front stoop.”

He was in his Sunday afternoon clothes, cashmere trench coat and a charcoal suit with a navy polo underneath, his boots clipped the pavement as he walked toward me.

“Sorry,” I called over to him.

I got just barely a smile, the curl of his lip at the corner. “You exhaust me,” he said softly, the voice husky and deep. “But I seem to enjoy it.”

I smiled as my phone rang and I saw Sam’s number flash on my display.

“Shall I?” he asked me, holding out his hand.

I traded him my phone for the keys.

“Detective Kage,” he said curtly. “This is Dane Harcourt, Jory’s boss. Yes, very well thank you. Uh-huh, yes...yes he is. No I don’t think that will be necessary. I have decided that I can’t in good conscience have Jory stay with you a moment longer. It would be too great a burden for you as your lifestyles are nothing alike. So I’ve moved him into an apartment of mine that I can assure you is very secure and quite tucked away. He’ll be safe there and safe at work, so you give us a call when you’re ready for him to show up at court.” He listened a moment. “Sorry? Oh no-no it’s no trouble at all. I mean let’s be blunt, once the trial is over you would have been sending him back home anyway. This way he can move now and get settled into a new life, a new routine. I mean you didn’t really want to be saddled with him anyway did you?”

I waited, straining to hear.

“There see I didn’t think so,” he said nonchalantly. “Please do call me Detective when you need him.” One perfectly shaped brow arched elegantly. “Because unlike you I have a vested interest in his welfare. I can’t get along without him,” his deep rumbling chuckle. “Thank you Detective, you too.” he said as he hung up, smiling at me.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he grunted. “Now listen to me. There’s a bodega at the end of the street to your right and a Cuban place across the street from here. To your left is a fairly good Chinese restaurant and an exceptionally good record store that still sells vinyl.”

“Thanks boss I’m sure walking around at night in this neighbourhood will be fun.”

“Indeed.”

“We haven’t even talked about the rent yet.”

“I’m not worried about it Jory. I know where you work.”

I smiled at him and he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed tight. “Just rest. Watch some TV, go get some Cuban food...relax. Sit in the window and freeze. Whatever you want.”

I nodded and he lifted his hand to put it down on my shoulder.

“We’ll get you all moved in the morning.”

“Yessir.”

“Get some rest; you’re going to be up late tomorrow.”

I nodded and he squeezed my shoulder gently before he turned and left the apartment. I locked the door behind him and found I instantly liked the feel of the place. It was immaculately clean, didn’t have the cramped oppressiveness of my old apartment simply because of the layout and when I opened the windows, the cool breeze blew through the room. I liked the wooden floors, the overstuffed burlap couch and the tiny kitchenette. My dishes would arrive the following day but in the meantime I would use the circa 1972 set that my boss had left me. It sort of went along with everything else.

Outside there were the noises of the night, people on the street, cars going by, the jazz trumpet and my neighbours coming and going. It was all very comforting as I sat there and cried over Sam Kage. My heart was breaking and the fact that he didn’t call back told me that my drama was too much for him and by leaving I had made a decision final for him. Logically it was for the best but I would miss the presence of him, his strength and dominance. I went and lay down on the couch. I didn’t get back up.

* * * *

IN COLLEGE I HAD to take a fitness class, as one of my requirements and one of the things we learned was that your body doesn’t know the difference between physical pain and emotional pain. That’s why grief, if left unchecked, can eventually kill you. People who are grieving complain that their whole bodies hurt. I never second-guess them, I take that as the truth and do what I can to get them some food or help clean their house. The way I dragged around for the entire week Jill and Celia finally told me to have a funeral for my dead love life and move on. I told them we could go out drinking instead. They were game and we took Piper and hit the Pink Cadillac after work on Friday. After that I took everyone back to my new digs and they oohed and awed over how cute it was inside. We were going to have dinner at the Cuban place and were having more drinks at home before we left. All I had was vodka so I mixed it cranberry juice and Sprite.

“How was Dane’s dinner party on Monday?” Piper giggled around the lip of her glass.

“Oh screw you,” I groaned, sitting down between Jill and Celia, both of them instantly touching me, hands on my shoulder, hands on my thighs.

"I heard it was awesome," Jill chimed in. "But you were there until like two in the morning weren't you?"

"Yeah," I said quickly, nodding which sent them all into peals of laughter.

My boss had fifteen people for dinner and I had it catered at the very last minute. It went off flawlessly but only because I stood in the kitchen and went in and out, checking, making sure the drinks were served and the appetizers then the meal, dessert, coffee and finally nightcaps. I hooked my iPod up to his stereo and played jazz all night and had the tables decorated with roses from my favourite florist, who always came through for me. The emails and thank you notes gushed over an elegant, intimate evening that had been enjoyed by all. I had received my usual "well done" in the manner of a brief nod. He never said thank you he just hired movers and made sure I had a safe place to live. It was like I never got a birthday present but out of the blue, for no reason, he had given me my *iPhone* and on another occasion told me to take the company card and buy new clothes. It was how he worked.

Dane made my new rent seven-fifty a month and even when I argued that such a number was insanity, he just gave me a look like I had passed annoying days ago. Since I was being given a gift, I shut up and accepted his generosity. I had ridden with him to the airport and he had promised to call when he returned on Sunday. I nodded and when he was ready to get out of the car he did that which he always did and put a hand on the back of my neck and squeezed tight.

"I'll be back. Don't fret."

I had squinted at him and the chuckle in return was deep.

"Jory the music is awesome," Celia said suddenly, bringing me back to the present. "Do you get serenaded like this every night?"

I smiled at her and nodded.

"Lucky."

"Let's go eat." Jill yawned loudly. "I'm hungry and I wanna play some pool after."

The walk down the street in the crisp night air was very soothing and Piper's arm in mine felt comfortable and welcome. All three of these women genuinely cared for me and it was relaxing being around them. Later, when we were playing stripes versus solids at the pool hall, Celia finished off her Bloody Mary and looked at me hard.

"What?"

"Thanksgiving is next Thursday. What are you doing this year?"

I bent over the table to take my shot. "I dunno."

“Why don’t you come to my Mom’s with me and Angel? He can use the buffer.”

Her mother and her husband went at it every year. “I dunno...she tears him up.”

“It’s because she doesn’t think online poker is a real job.”

I agreed but I would never tell her that. “I know sweetie. I think I’m gonna pass.”

She shrugged. “Fine then Jilly gets you since Piper had you last year.”

“I’m not five ya know,” I assured her, smiling as I polished off my third Mojito.

“You better slow down.” Piper chuckled, massaging my shoulders. “Or we’ll be carrying you out of here.”

“Not that I would mind,” Jill grinned suggestively. “You know my feelings J. You just haven’t been in bed with the right woman yet.”

I sighed and held open my arms to her. “Come gimme a hug.”

“Oh yeah don’t mind if I do,” she giggled, moving fast to grab me tight.

It was funny but the three of them were all over me, leaning on me, touching me, hugging me, patting my ass, running their fingers through my hair, smoothing fingertips over my eyebrows, my cheeks, down my nose. Always it was like this, the physical attention that was flattering and somehow just sweet. I was adored and it was obvious to anyone that looked at us. As I stood leaning on the bar, having been sent for the fifth round since the waitress was “too damned slow” I saw Nick on the other side of the room. I was a little tipsy or I would have never gone over.

He was playing foosball with a woman and two other guys and even though I was sure he could see me he didn’t acknowledge me even when I was right beside the table.

“Hey Nick.” I smiled wide, happy to see him.

No answer.

I glanced around at the others but only the woman’s eyes flicked to mine. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She gave me just a trace of smile.

I looked back at Nick’s face realizing what, if I had been sober, I would have understood quicker. I was purposely being ignored. He was seemingly absorbed in the ball on the table and couldn’t be bothered to give me the time of day. “Are you even gonna say hello?”

“Sure.” He looked up and his eyes were flat and cold, his tone icy. “What can I do for you?”

It was my fault. He had been open and honest the last time we had spoken and I had blown him off as I had submerged under the wave that was Detective Kage. Basically I was getting a little karmic retaliation. I had been shitty to him, Sam had dumped me and so I had basically reaped what I had sown. Big fat circle of cause and effect that I deserved.

“Nothing,” I said softly, hands in my pockets. “Sorry.”

When I got back to the girls I asked them if they wanted to hit the movies with me. They just stared at me until I volunteered to buy popcorn and M&M’s. That got everybody moving.

On the way out I got my second dose of fun when a hand grabbed me by the back of my shirt and I was suddenly face-to-face with Detective Kage. I stood there frozen in his grip as he let me go, walking by with his buddies in a big, loud group, hand in hand with a beautiful blonde.

“You look like a hustler dressed like that,” he said under his breath as he passed.

I had thought different. I didn’t think jeans; wingtips and a brown dress shirt open at the collar said rent boy. But maybe there was just something about me that looked cheap? As I watched him make his way to the bar, saw him do the guy clenches and hand shaking with the men he was meeting I felt my heart in my throat. I could barely breathe seeing him make the crude gestures with the others over his date. Like she was hot and he was going to tap that later. I was going to be sick. Jill grabbed my hand and yanked me outside to get some air. They all wanted to know who Sam was and what he had said. I explained that it was much too long a story to go into before a movie. When I got the look from Celia I understood that they could have cared less about anything at that moment but hearing me dish some dirt.

We ended up going to the jazz club across the street from my new apartment and I explained all about Detective Kage leaving out the part about people trying to kill me. Only Dane knew that piece of the puzzle. They sat and listened to me until two in the morning at which time we adjourned to a Mom and Pop diner around the corner where we had breakfast at three. Piper said she hadn’t been out so late since college. When Celia asked her what it had been like in the seventies she got smacked really hard on the arm. I laughed so hard milk came out of my nose.

After I put them all in a cab I staggered up the steps to my apartment and passed out on the couch. I didn’t leave again until Sunday night. Between the icy rain, the *Real World* marathon and *VH1* counting down everything from Worst Love Songs to Best Rocker Hair I had no reason to go anywhere. I had enough food; I had tea, both iced and hot and lots of water. Since I felt like sludge, I hit the gym late Sunday night and ran five miles until I was exhausted. Under the hot water I felt the funk start to recede. By the time I was out I was more like me than I had been in over a week. Stupid to give anyone power to make me feel one way or another— except my boss. Only Dane Harcourt got to yank my chain.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I SAT IN THE CHAIR across from Dane and waited. I hoped that my look conveyed how annoyed I was.

“What?” he finally asked, and I could hear the irritation.

“Are you going to tell me or do you want me to beg?”

“Beg.”

“I don’t wanna,” I snapped, pushing out my chair and throwing the files that I had in my lap onto his desk. Since he had walked in the door he had been an ass. I had greeted him and all I got was a grunt. I had been bouncing off the walls to hear about his trip and he was giving me the silent treatment for whatever reason. I wasn’t going to sit there and take it a second longer as I could barely keep from yelling.

“Don’t you dare get up!” he ordered me sharply.

“Or what?” I snapped back.

“Or don’t ever come back.”

I was stunned. “You’re gonna fire me?”

“Yes,” he said in a low-voiced growl

“Huh.”

I considered what he’d said. I sat there not moving, thinking through my options and though telling him to go to hell was tempting, I instead scooted back in. A moment of bravado would kill our friendship for all time. It wasn’t worth it. The fact that he was counting on me to back down so he could save face was annoying beyond words but this was my role. I was the one who gave in; he was the one who pressed. So I replaced the files in my lap and looked over at him. His eyes were like pieces of ice, so cold, so clear.

“Okay, so I’ll wait ‘til you’re ready.”

“And if that’s never.”

God he was really hoping for a knock-down-drag-out fight and I had no idea why. “Then it’s never.” I said simply, shrugging for emphasis. “Whatever you want.”

Dark eyes just stared at me.

He was so flawed. “What happened?”

“I need you to call Glenn Upton for me.”

My sigh could be heard out in the lobby and he was glaring at me after that.

“You have a problem?”

I rolled my eyes dramatically. “No sir. What shall I ask Mr. Upton?”

He stared at me a long moment.

“Well?” I prompted him.

“Nothing. Go back to your desk.”

So I did as I was told and sat there across from Joanna Belian our new typist. She was very nice, easily in her late sixties and had brought along some lovely pictures of her grandchildren.

“Is it Jordan?” she asked me after a moment.

“It’s Jory.” I smiled back, correcting her gently.

“Your boss is quite a looker even though he’s got ice around the edges.”

“Does he?”

“Oh yes dear,” she smiled at me. “Cold is the word I’d use.”

“I think he’s just,” I began but when the office door opened and he leaned out of the doorway I went mute.

“Do you want to know what happened or not?” he asked me irritably.

I threw up my hands. “I have no idea what you even want me to say at this point.”

He gestured for me and I got up and went into his office. When I turned around he walked over to the leather couch and flopped down on it. I couldn’t help scowling.

“What?”

“You’re being so weird.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes.”

“Whatever,” I said dismissively.

He looked up at me for a long minute. “Awfully confident today.”

“Were you serious before? Do you really want me to beg?”

He sighed, before leaning forward, head in his hands. “All right so I took a cab from the airport to their place in Mesquite and the house is huge. I don’t know what I was thinking but for some reason I imagined them poor.” He grinned suddenly. “Go ahead.”

“What?”

“You have questions already.”

“No-no-no.” I waved my hand dismissively, grabbing the chair I’d been sitting in earlier, putting it down in front of him so I could sit. “G’head.”

He nodded. “Well, so I go to the door and Caleb Reid is there and he invites me in. I dump everything in the foyer and—what?” He grumbled at me.

“What?” I looked at him hard.

“You smiled.”

“I smiled?”

“You smiled. What?”

“What?”

“Why are you smiling?”

“I can’t smile?”

“Just, what...why are you smiling?”

I smiled at him again. “You said foyer. You’re the only person I know who would use the word foyer when they were telling a story.”

“Oh for crissakes,” he groaned. “Try and focus for once.”

“Yeah...sorry, go on-go on.”

Quick breath. “All right so I drop my stuff and then I walk into the living room and she’s right there sitting on the couch. There’s no adjustment time or announcement—I’m just suddenly face-to-face with my birth mother.”

“Oh shit.”

“Well said.”

“What did she say?”

“She said hello.”

“And, go on, you’re killing me here.”

“She wanted me to sit by her on the couch and I did. I didn’t want to hold her hand but I could tell she did so I did. I actually thought what would Jory do if he were here?” He smiled suddenly, and his eyes were soft.

And at that moment with the weight of his gaze on me, I got it. In my life he was the constant. Everything else changed but Dane Harcourt remained. When I had been glib the night at the police station, wished them good luck finding anyone I loved, they needed to look no further than my boss. I admired the man, I was devoted to him and his welfare and I just plain old loved him. Not lust, I didn’t want to sleep with him, he was like the big brother I never had and had always wanted. He was my family.

“What’s wrong with you?”

I shook my head.

“So should I keep going?”

“Yeah, yeah go-go.”

“Okay.” He sighed deeply. “Well I held her hand and she starts telling me how much she didn’t want to give me up and blah-blah-blah—”

“Boss!”

“What? It’s the truth. I sort of tuned out. I mean, I didn’t do it intentionally but I shut off the listening because I realized that I really, truly don’t care.”

“How’dya mean?”

“I mean what is she going to say? What do I want her to say? What does it matter? My parents are my parents. She gave birth to me but it doesn’t make her my mother.”

I nodded. "That's right."

"I was polite, I listened to what she said and I did the right thing and told her that none of it mattered and that everything turned out all right."

"Did you meet your father too?"

"I did. He looked terrible."

"I feel real sorry for him. He didn't even get a say in whether to keep you or not."

"No he didn't."

"What did he say?"

"Something very similar to what you just said actually."

"Huh."

"He wants to come here and visit me."

"Oh. That's interesting. What'd you say?"

"I said we would see."

"Do you look like him?"

"Yes."

"He must be gorgeous."

I realized after I'd said it that it sounded like I was coming onto him.

He looked at me hard. "I didn't notice."

"So what else?"

Flashing smile then, eyes firing as he spoke. "Are you embarrassed?"

"Can you just go on before I kill you?"

"Not very friendly."

"Go on," I snapped at him.

“We talked some more and I told them both that if there was anything I could do for either of them that they should not hesitate to call me.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Did you stay for dinner?”

“I didn’t, no.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Since when do you ask me?”

“Okay that’s fair.” I nodded. “Why didn’t you ask your mother why she gave you up?”

“It hardly matters now.”

“I think it matters to you.”

“I think it matters to you,” he said mockingly. “You seem to always believe that you know what’s best for me in every instance.”

“Better than you,” I muttered under my breath.

“Pardon me.”

“Nothing.”

“Jory.”

I crossed my arms and looked over at him with what I hoped was scorn.

“What? Speak,” he commanded.

“I think I know what you should do.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“And what is that?”

“You need to go back and ask all your questions in case you end up not seeing them again.”

"I won't see them again."

"Crap."

"So you see I won't be asking any more questions."

"We could go back."

"Why so you can take notes?"

It wasn't a bad idea. "The sarcasm is not lost on me."

We were silent for several minutes. "Look at me," he finally said.

"I am looking at you."

"No, look at me."

I looked into the dark grey eyes of my boss; saw the flecks of silver like always. "What am I looking for?"

"Do you truly believe that this can mean anything anymore?"

"Maybe."

"Jory, are we friends?"

I looked at him really hard, into the face I knew so well, and saw what I always saw, the absolute rock-like resolve. His strength that I could always depend on, the reason other people were always so drawn to him, because of that strength. He was unmovable. He could be battered, but never broken. It was not often you met people who were unbreakable. It was almost a regal bearing he had, like he should have been a king. Someone you could surrender up your life to, an almost heroic quality. And so because I didn't want him to think I was weak, I found my voice and answered him. "Yes, we're friends."

"Good." He smiled warmly. "I'm glad."

I studied him. "You want me to work for you forever don't you?"

The smile made his eyes shiny. "Forever. Such a time table you choose."

"I need to take care of you." I said it because I felt suddenly brave and because I was feeling vulnerable and because I could. He was the only thing I could point to and say was mine in my life. My boss. I was possessive to a fault. If he was going to belong to me then he had to say the words. "May I?"

He nodded.

It wasn't enough. "That's a yes?" I prodded, wanting to be sure. Wanting him to make this finally solid between us. We had been dancing around it for so long, the commitment of friendship. He needed to make a choice right then and there. To either give me the room I needed to manoeuvre in his life or back away. Truly his friend, able to speak my mind whenever I wanted to on any topic, from his love life to where he worked, to his family, to his friends, to the tie he chose in the morning. He was agreeing to give me a voice in his life and I would be able to weigh in and be counted. And God help him if he agreed because every woman that wanted him from that point on was going to be dealing with me up close and personal. The scrutiny would be unfathomable. "Say it."

"What are you twelve?"

"Say it," I said menacingly. "Say it."

"You're threatening me?"

"I will soon."

"Jory you—"

"Say it!" I demanded. I was going to kill him any second.

"That's a yes."

I caught my breath. I was absolutely stunned. "Really?" I couldn't believe it.

"Yes."

"You're positive?"

"I'm positive."

"Why?"

"Just because."

"And so I get to—"

"You get to." He cut me off, sighing heavily. He looked worn out.

"I'm so happy!"

"I know," he chuckled tiredly. "I can tell."

I couldn't contain myself. I smiled so wide. "I can't get fired anymore?"

“No.”

“Not that I could have before,” I clarified, looking at him hard, daring him to contradict me.

“Not that you could of before,” he agreed, smiling in defeat, shaking his head. “Christ.”

“You know I love you.” I blurted out before I even thought about it.

He looked at me hard.

I held my breath. I had gone and pushed right over the edge, as was my way.

After a minute he said, “I know.”

The look I was getting was pure annoyance and as I watched him scowl at me I had an epiphany. Big word for a simple thing but it takes me longer than other people to reach the same place. “You,” I couldn’t bring myself to say the word so I substituted an easier one, “you like me too huh?”

“Yes.”

“You’re compelled against your better judgment to take care of me.”

“Yes.”

Like I was his brother. “I’m very lucky.”

“Yes you are.”

A thought crossed my mind. “Can we drink our lunch at Boca? I feel like celebrating?”

“Fine.”

“Cool.” I beamed at him, so very pleased.

“Let’s go now.” He yawned loudly.

“Wait.” I had thought of something else. “Are you going back to Texas?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do they want you to go back?”

“Of course.”

“Do you want to?”

“No.”

“But you should.”

“Why should I?”

“Are we okay?” I asked suddenly, checking to make sure.

“We’re okay.”

“And so what about your new family.” I sighed, so relieved that we were over and beginning at the same time. “You have new brothers and sisters.”

“It was for her,” he said, getting up, crossing the room to his desk, to the chair to retrieve his suit jacket. “After this time there is nothing more I can offer. It’s futile to even pursue.”

“But—”

“Jory think—different lives are led to dissolve into what, cards at Christmas? I have that now if I do nothing more. How many people do you want to have to shop for?” He smiled at me, one dark eyebrow arched in a question.

“But they are your family.”

“I had a family before my parents died. I don’t need more.”

“Will you regret it later?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe we’ll go back.”

“No.”

“No?”

“You are part of my life, same as my friends that I don’t share with just anyone.”

Oooh I was grouped with the important people! “So that’s why I didn’t go.”

“That’s why.”

I nodded. “That was a nice thing to say.”

“I have my moments.”

* * * *

DANE AND I HAD such a good lunch that afterwards he dumped me at home and told me that he would see me the following morning. When he shoved me out of the cab, I stood on the sidewalk waving like an idiot for several minutes. Still buoyant four hours later, I accepted my friend Andy's invitation to hit the club with him and a whole big group of people. And I almost wished I would run into Sam Kage the way I looked because this way he could see what dressing to get laid really looked like.

The black jeans hugged my legs and ass like a second skin, hanging low on my hips and the silk shirt was open to my abs. I decided on my way out the door that anybody who wanted to put their hands on me was free to do so. When one of Andy's friends groped me in the car I let him. He smiled and pressed himself into me.

"Andy, Jory's open for business."

"If he is," he said, meeting my eyes in the rear-view mirror. "Then I've got first dibs."

But when the car stopped in front of the club, I spilled out and went inside with the yelling, cajoling and calling behind me. I wasted no time in pushing into the crowd and losing myself. I could hear the thump of the trance music inside my body as I danced. They were playing vintage tracks and I closed my eye and moved. It was like drowning in sound.

I had many partners but nobody could get me off the floor so they lost interest. Even as ready for a trick as I was there was no bathroom action for me. Screwing in a stall while other people peed had never been my idea of a good time. So I stayed and danced until Andy came and dragged me off the floor with strong arms wrapped around my chest. I gulped down copious amounts of ice water even though he tried to get more alcohol in me. Still on cloud nine from my talk with Dane, when I saw Nick sitting at a table near the back with some of his friends, I decided that I would give it one more try. It was almost Thanksgiving after all.

All eyes on the table rose to me until Nick noticed that the focus was behind him and turned. His gaze came up from the floor to my face very slowly. I smiled wide for him and I watched his jaw clench.

"Hey. Can I talk to you?"

He stood up and put a hand flat on my chest before he shoved me back. "Get lost Jory."

"Nick," I said, reaching for him. "Please just c'mere for—"

"What? You wanna say sorry for the way you treated me?" He shrugged. "Like it matters? Like you didn't do me a huge favour. I mean for shit's sake Jory what the fuck was I thinking? I'm going to be a doctor and you're just some trick I picked up at a club. You're the fuck and forget kind not the forever kind."

“Nick—”

“You’ve got one night stand written all over you.”

One last try because I owed him. Karmically I owed him. “Nicky please let me just—”

“What? You want me to fuck you?” The whole table laughed at once and I got that everybody else knew that I’d treated him badly as well. They were enjoying me begging him, trying to apologize and getting just what I deserved instead. Payback was a bitch and he was giving it to me with both barrels. I was in for embarrassment and humiliation galore. “Let’s go to the bathroom Jory, I’ll tap that right now for you.”

I just looked at him.

“No? You wanna take me back to your place Jory?”

I remained silent.

“It’s a shit hole but you’re trash so it makes sense. How many guys you have through there a night? Five? Ten?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay what? You wanna go to your place?”

I shook my head.

“Well you’re not coming home with me. I’d have to burn my sheets afterward.”

I took the steadying breath, took a few steps backward, then pivoted around and left. And it was weird but I almost felt better. I had let him hurt me, give me all the venom he had and then say nothing and walk away. It was somehow cleansing. My debt was paid. But I couldn’t stay. Getting your head handed to you is a buzzkill no matter what.

When I ducked outside I realized how cold it was. I needed a jacket or a cab right away. I shoved my hands in my pockets and started down the street. After a couple of minutes I realized something was moving out of the corner of my eye. I am not trained in the art of stalking as in how to do it or how not to let on when someone is doing it to you. So I stopped and turned to look at the street. The van did the same and as the side door flew open I bolted. I heard the firecracker pop close to me and ran down the alley to my right; I heard the revving engine and was up and over the six-foot chain link fence in seconds flat. Give it up for the gym.

I ran on, never once looking back, having seen way too many horror movies where the hero got it like that. The dumpster I ducked around got hit and the reverberation of metal hitting metal panicked me. When I was on the next street, I heard screeching tires as I went up and over cars stopped at the light, nearly got hit by another car that ran the red and ran flat out when I got

across. The only thought I had was that I had to lead whoever it was as far away from my apartment as possible.

The stairs leading up to the subway were there suddenly and as I ran I heard the engine. Too close to get up to the platform and I was getting dangerously close to my neighbourhood. I swerved sharply and heard the crunch of metal. I instantly reversed and started back for the club. I could feel my lungs starting to hurt even as I pushed and felt the kick of speed. Again, let's hear it for the stair climber and hundreds of laps in the pool. Funny the things that go through your head when you're running for your life.

It was hilarious, or it would have been, but when I came careening around the corner I saw Nick and his friends coming out of the club. I went around the parked cars into the street so I wouldn't run passed him and his group. I stopped suddenly and the van blew by as I looked around.

"Jory!" Nick yelled at me and when our eyes met I registered the fear there before I checked the van. It swung around and I bolted across the street. I heard the tires and more firecracker pops before I flew down another alley. I saw the dumpster and above it the roof ladder.

Adrenaline is amazing. I felt like Spiderman or something. I got up on the dumpster, leaped for the rung and did the chin up to the second one. Once my legs were under me I got up fast as the van came to a screeching stop under me. Not that I looked down, I just heard it. I heard the yelling and then there were sparks in front of my face, on all sides as I climbed. Pure luck but only in the movies could one moving target hit another. I fell over onto the roof of the apartment building and lay there for a minute trying to breathe, trying to get my heart and lungs not to explode. I pulled out my phone and dialled the police precinct. I asked not for Sam but for his partner, Dominic Kairov. I sat there as I was forwarded.

"Mr. Keyes?"

"Detective Kairov?"

"Yes what's—"

But I cut him off, told him where I was, what had happened and asked if maybe he could send like a squad car or something to scare the van off.

"Where are you ri—"

"Jory!"

I groaned as Sam's voice came over the line. I hung up and peeked over the side to the street below. No van. I was going to go to the roof door when it was thrown open and two guys came through. They both had guns drawn. Shit. I scrambled over the side and lucky for me they were more than a hundred fifty feet away. I was down the ladder faster than I had come up, dropped the few feet to the dumpster and rolled off to the pavement. I was on my feet as the wall beside

me exploded before I took the corner. I ran down the sidewalk as fast as I could, crossed two streets and hailed a cab. Once inside, I directed the driver back to my apartment. I ducked down in the back and saw the van fly out into the middle of the street and blow our doors off going in the opposite direction. I sat up and put my head back and closed my eyes. I tried to catch my breath.

“You all right man?”

I exhaled long and loud. “Perfect.”

Maybe I could skip the gym the following day.

Once I was inside the outer door at my new place I felt completely safe. Nobody knew I’d moved and when I was under the hot water ten minutes later, I concentrated on not passing out. When adrenaline leaves it just sort of deserts you in a hurry. I managed to change into my flannel pyjama bottoms and hit the bed instead of the floor when I passed out.

* * * *

THE POUNDING ON THE door woke me and when I looked at the clock in the kitchen as I shuffled to the front door, it was two-thirty in the morning.

“Jory!”

I winced. Even his voice through the door sounded like a hammer. When I cracked the door I left the chain on and peered out. “Yes detective?” I yawned loudly. “What can I do for you?”

“Open this goddamn door right fucking now!”

The volume was seriously too much for the hour. “I have neighbours,” I reminded him as I closed the door to unchain it. “Could you keep it down please?”

When I turned he stormed in, slamming the door behind him and grabbing me in one swift motion. He had a hand fisted in my hair and the other on my throat as he stared down into my eyes. I was still half asleep so my body was much more pliable then it would have usually been. I was boneless.

“You stupid sonofabitch,” he growled at me, his mouth hovering over mine.

I squirmed free of his grasp and crossed the room, putting the couch between us. “Whaddya want?”

“You’re going into protective custody right fuckin’ now.” His voice was hard and cold.

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m not.”

“If I can find you believe me they can find you.”

“Please, you know who my boss is—they don’t. I’m not worried. Besides, if they kill me maybe you can catch ‘em in the act. That would make you really happy.”

“Jory—”

“Just go away,” I pleaded. “Please. I’ll do anything.”

He stared at me a long minute before he spun around, stalked to the door, threw it open so hard that it vibrated and walked out. I was going to clap because it was so dramatic but I thought better of it. What if he heard me? Bear baiting was stupid after all. As I replaced the chain and dead-bolted the lock, I was hoping I was all done with drama for one night.

But was I...

END OF BOOK ONE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MARY CALMES

Mary Calmes lives in sunny Hawaii with her two lovely children and her long-suffering husband who supports her absolute need to write or die. And while the Yaoi Manga books confuse him, he just goes with it. Working as an assistant manager at a copy shop pays the bills and her Co-workers are always fun and interesting. Someday, maybe, she can stay home and do that which she has always loved since she wrote her first short-story in the seventh grade. Oddly enough, it too was about two men. Some things never change.