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#### Don't Ask

By J.J. Massa
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#### **Chapter One**

Captain Zachary Smith bit back a groan when he saw the man seated in front of his colonel's desk. It was his nemesis, his secret crush. His face serious and otherwise expressionless, he did his best to pretend that he was alone in the room, listening to a recording.

"Rest, Captain," barked his commander, Colonel Marshall. Zack dropped his salute to clasp his hands behind his back, eyes fixed on an invisible point above the colonel's head. "Mr. Thayer has need of your services once again," the senior officer went on. Zack fought the urge to cringe or to look at the third man.

Federal Agent Falk Thayer lounged easily in his chair, seemingly unaffected by the scene playing out in front of him. He'd come in and announced his needs. The ranking officer had listened and offered him provision. Zack had an emotional price to pay, but Falk was apparently unmoved by it.

"Captain," growled Colonel Marshall, "Federal Agent Thayer will require your cooperation regarding the Pavarato case."

The older man nodded toward a beige folder resting on the corner of his desk. "I expect you to assist fully with his investigation."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir," Zack rapped back, focused entirely on his superior officer.

"That will be all, Captain." The colonel nodded sharply.

"You are excused. Make yourself available to Agent Thayer,"
he ordered.

"Yes, sir," Zack affirmed, turning sharply. Without even a quick look toward Falk Thayer, he left the room.

\* \* \* \*

"Coffee, Penelope, would you please?" Zack asked as he passed his secretary's desk.

Though she was an Army sergeant, Penelope Raines preferred not to stand on ceremony. They'd been instant friends since their first meeting, and he didn't doubt that she knew most of his secrets. He'd told her half of them, and she'd likely guessed the rest. When others were present, they maintained a formal relationship; otherwise, they were relaxed with each other.

"Coming up, Z." She aimed a commiserating smile his way, turning toward the break room.

He strode into his small office and kicked the door closed behind him. Groaning, he collapsed into his office chair, his face sinking into his crossed arms resting upon his desk.

Moments later, when the door creaked open, he didn't look up. He smelled the strong coffee and knew that Penelope hadn't let him down.

"Just put it on the desk, Pen," he said into his forearm, not moving his face from his arm. "Hey, d'me a f'vr?" he mumbled, lifting his head a fraction of an inch, "Gimme the Pavarato file 'n lemme know when Ag'nt Thayer heads this

way." He dropped his head back into the crook of his arm, wondering when his luck would improve.

He heard the sound of the cup landing on his desk, but Penelope didn't leave. He didn't stir for a moment until, after several long seconds, still without looking up, he mumbled, "Pen? You need something else?"

"I was coming in anyway, Smith," Agent Thayer spoke finally, amusement thick in his voice.

Zack shot to his feet, nearly knocking over his chair. Automatically, he snapped to attention, groaning inside when he realized he'd done it. He heard the other man's chuckle and reached for his coffee, nonchalantly taking it from the other man, hoping to hide his embarrassment.

"Now, what kind of a good soldier gets caught unaware like this?" Falk mused, causing a hot blush to sweep up and burn Zack's cheeks.

"I, I, um, you..." he stammered, feeling like a fool. Sucking in a deep breath, he stood up straight. He was six feet and two inches tall, muscular and attractive, and he knew how to use it to his best advantage. Why wouldn't it work on Agent Falk Thayer? "I wasn't expecting you to just walk in," he objected, carefully sipped at the strong brew.

"I didn't 'just walk in,'" the other man told him calmly. "I stopped at your secretary's desk. She had your coffee." He nodded toward the liquid crutch cupped in Zack's hands.

Zack couldn't understand it. Falk Thayer had medium brown hair, medium brown eyes, and regular features. The other man was easily four inches shorter than he was. How

he could be so unremarkable and so intimidating at the same time, Zack just didn't know. But he was.

"Um, yeah," Zack looked away and took another deliberate sip of coffee. "Well, what is it you want me to do?" he asked grudgingly.

\* \* \* \*

Falk bit back a smile. Why did he so love to antagonize Captain Zachary Smith? Whatever the reason, it was good fun. Zack would always resent him—he knew that, he accepted that.

Every time he saw the Army captain, he remembered the first case they worked together—Antonin Del Gravo, Army corporal. Their cases had crossed paths as they often did when a civilian and an army officer or enlistee broke the law in more than one state and outside the bounds of a military base. As had also happened on more than one occasion, a deal had been cut and he'd had the young man sent to the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas The problem with that was that Zack had found evidence that the young soldier might not have been guilty. Falk had prevented him from pushing the case, and the corporal had apparently committed suicide before he could even be assigned a cell.

Zachary Smith believed in truth, justice, and the American way. He saw things in black and white, while Falk, several years older than him, lived in a world of gray. The truth was that the other man's idealism and innocence sometimes rankled with Falk. He doubted if the idealistic young captain

would even understand the choices, the obligations that Falk was responsible for.

"I need you to interview members of Pavarato's old unit, Baker Company, 687th Engineer Battalion. Find out who his friends were, that sort of thing," he told Zack as he watched him closely. The handsome captain had a very open and expressive face.

"Um, okay, that's in Minnesota, isn't it? Yeah," he answered his own question. Falk saw it, the flicker of indecision behind those blue green eyes. It was only a fleeting impression, quickly replaced by determination. "Okay, I can be there tomorrow by lunchtime," Zack agreed decisively. "Anything else?" he asked, keeping the expanse of the desk between them.

"No, Captain Smith." Falk took a casual step toward the taller man, remaining relaxed and seeming unaware when Zack backed away, fumbling with the desk blotter. He held out the case file, and Zack gingerly took it. "Just review this file and feel free to call me if you have questions. See you in Minnesota," he said, glancing the four inches up to Zack's face.

Surprise registered there, and possibly panic. "You're going, too? I mean ... I can just call you ... Why don't I just call you? Um, save you the trip. No sense in wasting your time..."

Falk considered the captain for long seconds. When Zack's breathing increased, he decided to let him off the hook. "You're right, Smith." He bent down and scribbled on a small

piece of notepaper. "Here's my cell phone number. Just give me a call when you have something to say."

Zack's relief was almost palpable. "Yes, s ... I mean sure, okay, good idea," he grinned, taking the tiny paper square from Falk.

With a curt nod, Falk turned and left the office, his countenance bland until he gained the outside of the building. Dropping into the driver's seat of his government-issue sedan, he rested his forehead against the steering wheel.

He had no doubt that Zack was aware of his looks and sex appeal. He was equally sure that the other man had no idea of the effect that appeal had on him. Under other circumstances, he would have given the attractive captain a tumble.

The most important of those circumstances being that the other man was straight, and second, he was in the military. Shaking his head against any hint of an erotic daydream, Falk started his car and headed back to his own office.

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#### **Chapter Two**

It had been a long day, flying to Minnesota from Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Immediately after his flight, Zack had interviewed easily two dozen of Pavarato's former coworkers, acquaintances, and at least two verifiable friends. The man he was investigating for terrorist activities had been very popular.

Zack hadn't even minded the two hour drive from Minneapolis to Hutchinson and back again, since the long drive soothed him and gave him time to think. He hummed along with his favorite Elvis Presley CDs and let the music and the road relax him.

Work had worn him through and through, though that wasn't the real reason that he was out of sorts. Zack looked around quickly as he stepped out of the cab across the street from one of Minneapolis's alternative lifestyle bars. He'd spoken to Falk Thayer three times today, and it made him antsy. He'd almost talked himself out of coming here tonight, but after the third telephone conversation, Zack couldn't help it. That placid, almost toneless voice murmuring in his ear, even condescending, it just did something to him.

He'd all but ripped off his starched class B uniform and pulled on his tight jeans and a casual shirt he knew brought out the unusual color of his eyes. Yes, he normally dated women—lots of women. He even slept with them if he had to, but he'd known since college that he was gay. He tried to

deny it and live the American dream, but facts were facts. He liked women just fine, as friends.

He stopped a few feet in front of the club's stone steps, trying to decide if he should go up to the door or just leave.

"Hello there," a male voice almost purred as a hand touched Zack's arm.

He started and turned to look at the blond-haired, muscular man who stood there smiling at him. The gleam in his eyes was decidedly predatory.

"You're new around here, aren't you?" the muscle man questioned, that dark gaze moving the length of Zack's body, lingering over his denim-covered hips and thighs.

"Uh, yeah," Zack replied. This was such a bad idea, Zack. Probably one of the worst ideas you've ever had.

The blond tugged at his arm, pulling him toward the entrance. "Why don't you and I go inside for a drink, and you can tell me where you've been all my life?"

He slipped his arm around Zack's shoulders to turn them both toward the steps that led inside. The blond was his height and then some. The doors opened in front of them, and Zack stopped as he came face to face with a very familiar, shorter man wearing a nondescript suit.

Seeing the man's brown eyes narrow, Zack managed an embarrassed grin that quickly faded as Falk Thayer spoke.

"It's about time you got here," he growled, remaining on the bottom step directly in front of Zack and looking into his eyes. "I've been waiting for half an hour. Where the hell have you been?"

Before Zack could frame a reply, the blond man's eyes moved from Falk to Zack and then back to Falk. "You two know each other?"

"Yeah," Falk answered, grabbing Zack's arm out of the other man's grip. "Let's go."

Zack didn't move, staring at Falk, trying to figure out how he was going to explain why he'd been going into a gay bar with a complete stranger. "I..."

The hesitation made the blond suspicious. "You sure you know him?" he asked Zack, and Zack swallowed nervously, still unable to put two words together.

"I..." he tried again, but stopped as Falk gave a frustrated groan and rolled his eyes, moving so close to him that he could clearly see the butterscotch caramel swirl of those brown eyes.

"We've known each other for years," Falk told the other man, his eyes boring into Zack's, daring him to deny the statement as his hand slid up Zack's arm to knead his shoulder.

Then Falk's hand moved from Zack's shoulder to the back of his neck, pulling his head closer, pressing his lips to Zack's. Zack thought he would melt or pass out—not necessarily in that order.

Too surprised to fight it, Zack felt Falk's lips moving over his, urging a response—and after a second's hesitation, he began to return the kiss, his arms sliding around Falk to pull him closer. The smaller man's lips pressed, satiny and sensuous, over his own, nipping at him and then pulling away.

When the kiss ended, Falk whispered against his ear, "Keep your mouth shut for once, Zack, and maybe I can get us out of this." Smiling, still in Zack's embrace, Falk turned to look at the blond. "Satisfied?" he asked. "Just a little, um, lover's spat. It happens to the best of us sometimes, doesn't it?" He shrugged.

With a sigh of obvious regret, the blond said, "You'd better keep him on a shorter leash, then, or someone's just liable to take him away from you."

Falk ran his hand through Zack's hair, looking deep into his eyes as he said, "It won't happen."

Stepping down off of the step and out of Zack's embrace, he said, "Come on," and led Zack away from the club to a rental car parked just down the street. Still speechless, Zack stood while Falk unlocked the passenger side and opened the door. "Get in." When he didn't move, Falk growled, "Do you really want to discuss this on a public street, Smith?" his voice low and tight.

Zack got inside, flinching as Falk slammed the door with enough force to shake the car before going around to sit behind the steering wheel. Shifting to face the other man, he gathered his thoughts and began, "Um, I..."

"Shut up," Falk barked, looking straight ahead to watch the blond go into the club. "The only thing I want to hear from you is what the hell you thought you were doing?"

He sighed, glancing at Falk's rigid profile. "I don't know," Zack finally choked out.

His mind was still fixed on that kiss, the way it had made him feel as if every nerve ending in his body was suffused

with a white-hot flame that threatened to consume them both.

"You don't know?" Falk groaned, incredulous. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair, his movements short and jerky. "How long has this been going on?" he asked.

When all else fails, Zack thought, bluff. To Falk, he said, "Um, I'm not sure what you mean?"

Falk made a noise that could have been a grunt or a growl and this time turned to look directly at him, asking succinctly, "How long have you been cruising gay bars?"

Zack thought about trying to pretend he'd just wandered in, but one glance into Falk's eyes, and he knew it wouldn't do any good. "This was the first time," he admitted. "I thought I'd be able to—nothing happened," he added quickly. "I couldn't. I just..."

"You picked one hell of a time to indulge your curiosity, Smith," Falk said, shaking his head.

"I'm not curious," Zack told him in a quiet voice, abandoning any attempt at pretense. This man held his career, held his whole life in the palm of his hand now.

"When was the last time you were intimate with a man?" Falk asked, no inflection in his voice.

Zack couldn't look at Falk as he answered. It was bad enough that Falk could use this against him—he didn't want to have to see Falk's face as he made his confession. "In college," he worked to say above a whisper.

"What? Fifteen—almost fifteen years ago, wasn't it?" Falk pointed out. "You haven't been with a man since then?"

"No," Zack said, leaning his head back against the headrest, closing his eyes. "I told myself that it was a choice. That it was just an experiment. A ... mistake." He swallowed audibly. "I chose the military ... I'm not allowed to be gay."

"So?" Falk reached over and placed two fingers on Zack's jaw, pulling it toward him. "What happened to change that decision? I mean, after all these years, why now?"

"I, um, it's just..." He couldn't finish. If he said one more word, he wouldn't have any secrets left to hide.

Falk leaned forward, sliding his palm to hold Zack's cheek and prevent him from turning his face away. "Why now, Zack?" he murmured.

"You," Zack mumbled, eyes closed. "It's you ... I'm attracted."

"And thinking about me sent you here?" Falk asked.

"I thought I'd be safe here. Away from the base. It's a big city. No one would know me."

"That was foolhardy at best," Falk gritted. "Do you have any idea what would have happened if I hadn't come along when I did?"

Zack's pride finally reared its head, injured though it was. He managed a wry smile. "I'm a big boy, Falk. I can take care of myself."

The muscles tightened in Falk's jaw and, after studying Zack for a moment, he reached across him, opening the door. "Then go on. I'm sure that brawny blond will be more than happy to help you destroy your career."

Zack tore his gaze away from Falk's angry face to look at the club's entrance—and then he pulled the door closed with a thunk.

"Good choice, Zack," Falk murmured softly. "I always said you were smarter than you look."

Zack sat back in the seat, drained. "I don't feel all that smart right this minute."

Starting the engine of the car, Falk told him, "I'll take you back to your hotel. You can come get your car tomorrow morning when it's safe."

"I took a cab here," Zack told him. "You don't have to drive me; I'll be fine."

"I insist." Falk had a hard edge to his voice that Zack knew from experience would brook no argument.

"I'm at the downtown Holiday Inn," he began.

"I know where you're staying," the other man cut him off.

"How?" He didn't remember sharing that information.

"I'm a secret agent type, Zack," Falk said with a half grin.
"Remember? It's my job to gather information."

"About me?"

Falk's mouth—the same mouth that had kissed Zack earlier—twisted into a scowl that didn't quite reach his eyes, Zack thought. "After all the trouble you've caused me over the last couple of years, I've found it's safer to know where you are at all times."

"If I'm so much trouble, why even bother?" Zack questioned.

"I have my reasons," Falk assured him.

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#### **Chapter Three**

Well, well.fI need to work on my whole spying for a living if something this big can sneak up on me. He glanced over at Zack.

Zack appeared miserable. Make that nervous and miserable—add to that the fact that he'd been so keyed up that he had chanced a trip to a gay bar less than one hundred miles from the nearest flagpole, and you had edgy and restless. Falk saw a situation ripe for his expert orchestration.

He parked the rental car and got out. As Zack rounded the car, Falk indicated with a wave that Zack should proceed him into the hotel.

On the elevator, Falk pushed Zack's hand away lightly and pressed the button for a different floor.

"I have a room upstairs. We'll go there," he said.

Zack nodded stiffly, saying nothing.

Exiting the elevator, Falk turned to a nearby door and pulled out his keycard to unlock it, reaching around his companion to push it open. He put a hand on Zack's back and gave him a little push. Bemused and unfocused, Zack moved into the room, standing unmoving. Was he waiting? If so, Falk would give him direction.

"So, you're attracted to me?" Falk took a step closer to the tall, dark, and handsome officer. Zack nodded. "You want me to touch you?" Zack swallowed and closed his eyes, nodding again. Falk stepped closer. "Kiss you?" Zack nodded again. "Open your eyes," Falk ordered him. "Look at me."

Zack did. He looked frightened.

"You want me to fuck you?" Zack swallowed audibly and nodded. Falk reached up and tapped his tight-lined lips. "Say it, Zack. Out loud."

Taking a deep breath, Zack choked, "I want you to."

"Tell me what you want, Zack." Falk took another step, almost touching the other man. He could feel the heat from the long, shaking body.

"I want you to..." He cleared his throat and tried again, almost defiantly announcing, "Will you fuck me, please?"

"Of course I will." Falk smiled almost fondly at him, gently touching his cheek. "All you had to do is ask.". Zack seemed to release a pent-up breath. "I want you to take off your clothes," Falk ordered.

The other man hurried to comply, pulling at the tight shirt, attempting to tug it over his head, ultimately becoming tangled in the sleeves. Falk moved forward to unbuckle the belt and unsnap the jeans, allowing the shirt to slide up over the toned and muscular torso.

"Thank you," Zack wheezed.

"Keep going." Falk nodded once, stepping away. "Slowly," he added. He looked back at Zack when he heard the dry whooshing sound of tight cotton slipping over hair. The muscular man stood uncertainly, short hair standing in spiky tufts, the shirt held like an offering in front of him and a questioning look on his face.

With an angled nod, Falk indicated a nearby bench, and Zack shook out the shirt, folding it neatly and placing it on the cushioned surface. Falk watched Zack finish stripping,

removing his shoes and socks, jeans and boxer shorts. Each item was folded and then placed neatly on or under the small bench.

When the naked man turned to him, looking for further instruction, Falk sucked in his breath quietly. Black hair—arrowing in a soft line down his taut, developed abdomen—dusted Zack's solid muscular torso. His hard, weeping cock curved up out of a nest of raven-colored hair. His thighs, calves, legs—the man was perfect.

Nervously, Zack glanced down at Falk's strained button and zipper. Falk was hard, who wouldn't be? Although still dressed, he knew his erection would be visible beneath the plain suit he wore.

Even so, the wide eyes, the uncertainty, he had to ask.
"Have you ever actually had intercourse with another man,
Zack?" He could see the nervous captain wrestle with an urge
to hide. Finally, Zack shook his head slowly from side to side.
"But you still want me to fuck you?"

At the other man's hesitant nod, Falk crossed his arms over his chest and raised a brow. "Yes," Zack forced out. "Yes, I want you to fuck me." His voice was a little stronger this time.

"This is your last chance, Zack." He moved a step closer.

"If you pick up your clothes right now, you can dress and leave. If you don't, you are mine until I tell you otherwise. Do you understand?"

Zack gave a fleeting smile and stepped away from the chair and his pile of neatly folded clothes. Falk nodded in satisfaction, walking up to him and stopping.

"Undress me," he ordered evenly.

The nude man kneeled at his feet and lifted one foot, removing the soft leather shoe and repeating the action for the other foot. He looked up and Falk nodded toward the closet. Saying nothing, Zack rose and carried the shoes to the closet, placing them on a small shoe rack.

Returning to Falk, Zack slid the suit jacket off of his shoulders. Next, Zack unknotted and removed Falk's silk tie, unbuttoned his starched shirt, and, laying them all on the bed, turned to help remove the white T-shirt.

Zack reached for his belt, but he stopped the soldier. "I'll finish this, hang the clothes up." Zack looked as if he wanted to argue but turned, and gathering his bundle, he walked to the closet.

Falk stepped out of his pants and boxers, walking over to Zack. He handed Zack the pants and was rewarded with a blinding smile. He smiled slightly, moving back toward the bed.

Zack moved toward him, and Falk instructed, "Climb up on the bed." At Zack's uncertain look, he added, "I want you on your hands and knees." Just saying the words made him weak.

Falk didn't need to touch the other man to see him shivering, to know he was nervous. For a fleeting moment, he considered stopping, but an image of the blond behemoth from the club presented itself. Someone would have been doing this with Zack tonight. At least Falk would take care of him.

To that end, he walked to the bathroom and rooted in his shaving kit until he found the tube of lubricating gel he kept there. Normally, Falk would use a condom, but he didn't have any. No matter. Both he and Zack were tested regularly. Sex didn't get much safer unless one abstained. Falk had no intention of that, all things being what they were.

That issue resolved, he sat on the bed beside Zack and began to stroke him, soothe him. Over his shoulder, down his back, along a thigh and back up he continued, finally resting his hand at the small of Zack's back.

"If we're going to do this, I have to get you ready, Zack," he said calmly. "And we are going to do this," Falk added. Zack moaned a little and Falk rubbed his tense flank. "There will be some pain, Zack, just so you know."

"Okay." Zack looked over his shoulder at Falk, trusting.

He would make it as good as he could for the other man. He'd keep Zack out of trouble and satisfy both their needs. It was likely that, once this night was over, he wouldn't desire the handsome young captain, and Zack would be over whatever reckless impulse had sent him to that bar.

"Open your legs wider," Falk told him, hands on the insides of his thighs, moving him just a bit.

Squeezing a large dollop of the clear substance on the fingers of one hand, he placed the tube onto the bed. With his dry hand, he reached up and stroked the tiny pucker so open to him.

Zack gasped, moaned, and gasped again when Falk moved the finger with the cool gel to his tight hole and rubbed back and forth, pushing it in.

Falk moved to kneel behind Zack and added more gel to his index finger. With his other hand, he rubbed Zack's back and cheeks.

"This is what you came here for, Zack," he murmured.
"Take a deep breath and relax, feel me, feel me in you."

Zack seemed to relax under his hands and he eased his finger in and out, further each time.

"Mmm," Zack moaned, struggling, trying to pull away.

Finally, Falk knew he'd hit the magic button when Zack began to gasp and moan. "There it is," Falk smiled, "This is why men do this. It's going to hurt a little, and then feel real good. You ready?"

"Please," Zack moaned, looking over that broad shoulder again. Falk added a second finger. "Please ... again?" he moaned and asked at the same time.

"It's okay." Falk leaned up, stroking the small of Zack's back as he reached deep inside the other man. "Almost there." Zack was panting, rocking back against the scissoring fingers inside of him.

Falk thrust three fingers deeply into Zack, earning a groaning moan of, "Please, Falk." Zack had never called him by his first name, although this was certainly the right time for it.

"Here we go, Zack," Falk promised, pulling his fingers out now and replacing them with the blunt head of his cock.

\* \* \* \*

Somewhere between excitement and excruciating pain, Zack moaned and held still. He wanted this—had wanted this—for so long. He just didn't want it to hurt so badly.

"Zack." Something in Falk's voice snapped at him, bringing his attention back to the here and now. "I want you with me, Zack."

Zack had never felt so full. As Falk slipped deeper, Zack felt the soft brown hair brushing his cheeks, and the burning was almost gone now.

"Zack," Falk called low, but Zack was focused on feel—the idea of Falk's cock so deep inside of him. Falk pulled out a little and seemed to push in at an angle, causing Zack to see stars. It felt so good. Zack heard himself moan; he couldn't help it.

"Speak up." Falk chuckled. "Answer when I speak to you."

"Yes\_sir " Zack mumbled on automatic feeling the thick

"Yes, sir," Zack mumbled on automatic, feeling the thick length sliding in and out of him, bumping that place deep inside.

Falk began to thrust faster, harder, and Zack was sure he would come—it felt so good. How had he never done this before? Thank God he hadn't known that Falk could make him feel this way. What would he have done then?

Just when he was sure he would lose himself completely, Falk stopped with a hard lunge and a long grunt. The feeling of his cock jerking in him, the rubbing, the heat filling him caused him to come, shooting his load all over the bed, his own erection never having been touched.

He felt Falk slowly pull out of him, but still he didn't move; shaking from exhaustion, he continued to kneel on his hands

and knees in the middle of the bed. This was all so new to him and so very important. He wished it wasn't, but it was. Sometimes he hated Falk, but for two years, he'd also loved him. There was nothing he could do. Falk Thayer was the center of his world and that was that.

Strong fingers bit into his waist and tugged.

"I'm glad," Zack whispered, hoping the other man knew what he meant. Falk was his first—that was so important to him.

"Hush, Zack." Falk's arm came around him, pulling him closer. "Just go to sleep," he murmured. "We'll do this again. I'm not quite done with you just yet."

Zack closed his eyes. He didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but Falk wasn't done with him yet.

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#### **Chapter Four**

Zack snapped to attention as the Chief of Naval Operations strode by, absently saluting him back as the man passed. Zack held the salute as two lesser admirals and a higher-ranked captain all returned his address on their way past.

Heart beating like a drum, he hurried behind them, stopping short of the group, knocking on the door right next to the conference room they entered.

"Come in!" a muted voice called from inside.

Zack entered, coming to attention but maintaining his salute when he realized the small office held a chair, a metal desk, a small conference table, and Falk Thayer.

"Captain Smith," Falk greeted him smoothly, not looking up.

"Uh, yes," Zack murmured, unsure of how to proceed. He hadn't seen Falk since they parted ways upon returning to Washington after their liaison—tryst? This was a situation Zack had never been in with man or woman.

Falk did look at him then, his face infinitely patient, almost amused. "I've read the notes from the Pavarato case. Why don't you have a seat?"

Feeling more than a little self-conscious, Zack made his way to a chair in front of the desk. After a covert glance at Falk, he sat down, back ramrod straight, eyes trained straight ahead.

"You've read the notes," Zack repeated back to him, more for something to say than of necessity.

The moments ticked by in the quiet room, every shift and shuffle echoing in the silence. It was quiet, too quiet. Zack couldn't stand it. Finally, he looked at Falk, who was leafing through a folder in front of him.

"I believe we covered that," Falk murmured after a moment, lifting his eyes to lock gazes with Zack. "Come here," he ordered, his voice going hard. "Remove your jacket."

Zack wanted to refuse, meant to, even, but he was up and moving before his brain fully processed the command. The instinct to obey was deeply ingrained in him now, even as a captain. Even though Zack was an Army officer and a lawyer, he'd never really commanded anyone.

"Yes?" he murmured, fighting to keep the word 'sir' behind tightly gritted teeth, as he carefully removed his jacket, folding it over the chair where he'd been seated.

"These notes ... stand here please." With a nod, Falk indicated the floor two feet in front of his chair. Zack stopped in front of the implacable FBI agent, waiting to see what he would do next. "You weren't as thorough as I had hoped, Zack," Falk observed, his chair swiveling toward Zack as he tossed the folder down on the desk. "On your knees," he ordered, his voice turning to ice when Zack hesitated.

As Zack lowered himself to the floor, kneeling, Falk spread his legs wide, edging slightly forward in the cheap office chair. Like one of Pavlov's infamous dogs, it was as if he couldn't help but obey when Falk Thayer issued an order. Zack didn't want to think about that too closely.

"What's wrong with my notes?" Zack asked, his voice thick and husky.

Falk reached over and tipped Zack's face up, two fingers under his chin. "You could have asked more questions, Zack. When was the last time Pavarato's roommate saw him on the phone? Where did Pavarato's First Sergeant see him on that Friday?"

Zack bit his lip. Falk was right. He hadn't even been paying attention, just asking questions and writing answers by rote. If not for the other man's fingers under his chin, he would have hung his head in shame.

Falk brushed a thumb across Zack's lower lip, freeing it from between his teeth. "I know you can do two things at once, Zack," Falk murmured in a low, intense voice. Zack felt himself harden under his blue service uniform pants. "Bring yourself off—and me at the same time. And let me see you do it," he ordered coolly, hooking his index finger under the waistband of his pants.

"That ... why?" Zack asked, stalling.

"You were thinking with your dick in Minnesota, Zack," Falk growled. "Maybe you'll remember what you learn with it."

Zack looked up at Falk's face and then down at the other man's lap. This was the first time he'd seen Falk and touched him since they had parted company on returning from Minnesota. With shaking fingers, he slipped the hook free from its closure, easing the zipper down on Falk's suit pants, fumbling with his own at the same time.

He was reaching for the rigid shaft tenting Falk's silk boxers when the agent caught his wrist in a tight grip. "I want to see you, Zack," Falk insisted in a hard voice.

Zack nodded jerkily, pushing his pants and boxers down his hips, below his groin. His cock sprung free, hard and aching, a clear pearl of pre-come bubbling at the slit. He turned to the side just slightly to offer a better view. At the same time, Falk lifted his hips slightly, allowing Zack to lower the elastic of his boxers underneath his balls.

\* \* \* \*

Falk had to fight to keep his eyes open. Just looking at Zack's leaking cock was enough to cause his own to dribble. Zack's long, elegant fingers wrapped around Falk's hot erection and Zack's, simultaneously.

When Zack lowered his mouth to Falk's purple head, tongue swiping at the clear fluid, the agent had to fight to keep his face impassive. He watched greedily as those dexterous fingers skimmed up and down Zack's length, fondling his balls, caressing his shaft, while sucking Falk's hungry, hard erection down.

Falk refused to look away, hungry gaze trained on Zack's cock, slick and pumping in and out of his own fist while the captain sucked and hummed around him. Zack's hand moved faster, thumb swiping the tip of his cock, all the while sucking and slurping at Falk. When Zack froze, white strands of semen welling from his straining cock, Falk could hold back no longer, biting back a groan as he pumped his release into Zack's hot mouth.

Absently, Falk stroked at Zack's short, spiky hair, beads of sweat dotting his temple, Zack's cheek resting against Falk's thigh. The aftershocks of his orgasm zinged and jolted through his system, and all he could do was breathe slowly through his nose, recovering.

With a jolt, Falk realized that he was caressing the other man's cheek, when he'd planned this interval to be little more than an object lesson as well as a free blowjob in the middle of an otherwise dull and boring day. Who wouldn't want Zack Smith to suck his cock on command?

"Get up, Captain Smith," Falk ordered, his voice hard. Time to put a stop to this hearts and flowers interlude.

Zack jerked upright, looking surprised. "What's wrong?" he croaked. No doubt his throat was sore. Falk did his best to ignore that.

"Nothing's wrong, Smith. We're done here. Put yourself back together. No, I'll do it myself," he growled when Zack reached for his zipper.

Pivoting his chair away from the confused man, Falk stood with his back to him. He wouldn't acknowledge the hurt look on Zack's face; he wouldn't think about it at all. This was an association of convenience, nothing more.

He heard Zack move to his feet, zipping and straightening himself. A few steps toward the door and then he heard the other man stop. He was obviously putting his jacket back on.

"I..." Zack began.

Falk turned, forcing his gaze away from the swollen lips of the man who had just sucked him off. Meeting his eyes, he barked, "That will be all, Captain."

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#### **Chapter Five**

"There," Penelope murmured, patting Zack's bowtie in satisfaction. "I love you in dress blues, but I can't get over how you look in mess dress."

Zack smiled. "You look pretty snazzy yourself, Pen." He stepped back, eyeing her long blue mess skirt and short, bolero-style mess jacket. "Well, I'm sure we'll do the colonel proud, either way," he forced out, his smile weak.

"Hey, it'll be nice to get out, and it's pretty safe territory," Penelope soothed, threading her arm through his. "I bet it'll be completely FBI-free," she declared.

Zack started, looking down at her guiltily. "How did you know?" he rasped, his heart in his throat.

"I didn't really know until just now," she admitted, squeezing his arm in a brief hug.

Zack didn't say anything and neither did Penelope as the two left the building side by side, finding the staff car waiting for them in front of the doors.

"Specialist Solly took off with the colonel already, sir," the young enlisted man piped up as he held the door for Penelope and then Zack. "He said to tell you that he'd be in the foyer pretending to check his hat. He doesn't want to be kept waiting."

Pen elbowed Zack and grinned. She slid into the back seat and he slid in next to her. The private who was driving grumbled something about brass and turned the radio up a little.

"So, you want to tell me about it?" Penelope encouraged, her voice low.

Zack sighed heavily. "Not really ... I have a thing for him, okay?"

"I get that part, Z, I always have," she huffed, rolling her eyes. Reaching up to straighten his hat, and then her own, she kept talking. "Nobody would know if they didn't really know you. And you've managed to make sure nobody really knows you, haven't you?"

He kept his eyes trained on the gold hash marks decorating the dark sleeve of her mess jacket. "How could I let anyone know me, Pen?" he murmured, his voice so low that she leaned in to hear him.

Her hand cupped his cheek and he looked at her eyes, half afraid of what he would find there. If anyone knew how hard he'd tried to stay hidden—dating beautiful women, flirting—Penelope did.

"I know, Zack, but now, how are you going to put that genie back in the bottle?" Her eyes were sad and knowing, filled with an empathetic pain.

The opening of his car door prevented Zack from having to answer and he was more than a little grateful. "We're here, sirs," the private announced. "Um, sir and Sergeant," he blushed at Pen's raised eyebrow.

Zack slid out of the car, holding the door open for Penelope. The two walked side by side into the foyer, quickly finding the colonel.

"It's about damned time," the older man growled. "Mrs. Marshall will be along shortly. For now, I need you two to

accompany me to our table, then you can mingle and make our office look good."

"Yes, sir!" both underlings chorused, well aware of the colonel's desire to present a united front to certain parties assembled at this important social event.

Zack hated that some of the work done at these balls and gatherings were more important to the powers that governed than what happened in courtrooms and during working hours. He followed his commanding officer quietly, trying not to consider how much more comfortable he'd be if the people around him were armed instead of just dangerous.

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than he spied a familiar face across the room. Falk Thayer stood facing him, a hand on the back of a beautiful woman who leaned into him, laughing.

Zack's stomach dropped and he swallowed. Dread coursed through him, throbbing in his head and his heart. He couldn't look away, especially when the FBI agent looked up, his caramel gaze locking with Zack's, eyebrow arching.

"You listening to me, Captain Smith?" Colonel Marshall growled, apparently not for the first time.

"Uh, yes sir!" Zack cleared his throat, focusing his gaze on the colonel once again and steadfastly ignoring Penelope who was giving him a distinctly sad and sympathetic look.

"I want you to locate Gerald Ironwood and find out what his client plans to do about his little unauthorized vacation. Go on, Captain," the colonel ordered. "You, Sergeant, can go to the door and see if you can spot Mrs. Marshall."

Zack moved away, trying not to look at Falk anymore, but he couldn't keep from looking back at him. It seemed that the other man had no such qualms, focused entirely on his date.

\* \* \* \*

Falk smiled down at the young woman his cousin had asked him to take out. She was lovely, well read, all around good company. Most of all, she wasn't Zack Smith. That might not have been so apparent if the man who was Zack Smith could be ignored.

He turned his back to the handsome captain, attempting to block out the image of him kitted out so strikingly in his mess dress uniform. Tight leggings, a short, dark jacket with gold loops and twists up the arms. The outfit only served to emphasize Zack's powerful frame, his dark hair, and his beautiful blue-green eyes.

Falk excused himself, carefully withdrawing from the clinging arms of his beautiful date. He made his way to the bar, ostensibly to bring back drinks for himself and Clarissa. The truth was that he needed a few minutes to himself and a strong shot of whiskey to clear his head.

Why was his body throbbing at the thought Captain Zack Smith when he had a beautiful blonde bombshell waiting for all the attention he wanted to give her? Falk squared his shoulders.

"Double scotch, neat," he called to the bartender.

A solid thunk heralded the arrival of a smooth single malt scotch which Falk lifted it to his lips with a grateful sigh. What the hell was wrong with him? Smith was a plaything, a toy. If

he wanted to, he could order the other man into the men's room and jerk him off, fuck him against the sink, whatever he felt like.

Clarissa was real. She was serious—perfect for him and for his career. Beautiful, smart, but not too smart, she'd suit him perfectly should he decide to settle down and move up the company ladder into administration.

Sliding off his stool, Falk intercepted a passing waiter and grabbed two flutes of champagne. It was high time he stopped playing.

"Thank you, Falk," she cooed when he handed the chilled glass to her. "To us," she smiled.

"To us," he smiled back, raising his glass—not really feeling it, but trying to.

"Do you know that man?" she asked him, nodding toward a small knot of people.

One of them had been glancing surreptitiously at him— Smith. "Yes, I know the captain," Falk told her, not bothering to lower his voice.

Zack rotated toward them, a half smile on his face. "Hi, Thayer," Zack greeted him.

Falk looked over at Zack and then back to his date, coming to a decision. "Clarissa Meyer, this is Captain Zachary Smith." Zack took her hand, bowing slightly. Falk snagged his gaze and went on. "He and I were working on a project together." He waited a beat. "We're done now. Finished."

He stood unmoving as Zack processed his words. In fact, Falk knew the second that the other man understood the

meaning. The hurt in his eyes shone brightly before the darkhaired captain nodded.

Message received. Falk Thayer was done with him.

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#### **Chapter Six**

"Zack, are you sure?" Penelope asked him for what had to be the tenth time that morning.

"I'm absolutely sure, Pen," Zack nodded, lifting a letter out of his printer tray. Moving over to his desk, he leaned down and signed his name. "What time is my appointment?" he asked her, his tone belying the lead in his stomach.

"Uh, in about five minutes," she murmured, her voice thick and husky.

He stood up straight. "How do I look?" he asked, spreading his arms wide.

"You look..." She burst into tears and buried her face against his chest.

Automatically wrapping his arms around her, Zack closed his eyes. "Hey," he breathed gently. "It'll be fine, okay? Don't worry." It wouldn't be okay, not really. Not ever again. Still, he had to do this, he thought, holding her tighter just for a moment.

Turning away, Penelope wiped her eyes on the back of her wrist. "You'd better get in there. Don't forget your folder."

With her back to him, Penelope couldn't possibly see his nod, but she couldn't have missed the snick of the door as he pulled it closed behind him after he walked through it. He'd made an appointment and it was time.

"Enter!" Colonel Marshall called from behind the heavy door, and Zack did. Marching stiffly up to the colonel's desk, he waited unmoving for the senior officer to acknowledge

him. Long minutes passed in silence, the rattle of a flimsy piece of paper finally breaching the quiet. "Now, you asked to see me, Captain. What's on your mind? Leave? You've got sixty-two days saved up."

The fact that the colonel didn't order him at ease was not lost on Zack. He suspected that his letter would not be a total surprise to the older man. With no further ado, he handed his buff-colored folder over, remaining at attention.

Colonel Marshall's eyes flickered from Zack's face to the letter and back again, fixing on the letter finally for several seconds. He shifted in his chair; reread the letter a second time.

"I hereby submit my resignation from the United States Armed Services..." the colonel mumbled. "Reasons, personal ... leave owed ... end of..." The older man looked up at him. "I can deny this, you know," he growled at Zack.

"Yes, sir," Zack agreed. He had known it was a possibility, though he never thought the colonel would consider it.

"Why shouldn't I?" Marshall demanded.

Zack moved his gaze from the wall to the old man's eyes. "I would have to reveal information that would force you to bring me up on charges," he said evenly.

He'd hoped so badly to avoid this, had never once thought that the crotchety old colonel would force the issue. They weren't especially close and the post he held was a popular one. There would be no shortage of talented young officers in line behind him.

"I suppose you'll want to take your leave time first," the colonel sighed.

"Yes, sir," Zack agreed, relieved.

\* \* \* \*

Falk had stayed away from the Judge Advocate General's office for two months now. He'd made it clear the last time he'd seen Zack that they were finished—he was finished with Zack Smith.

Keeping his distance was by far the best thing to do. Still, sometimes it just wasn't possible. He had a lead to follow up on and it had led to an active army investigation. There was nothing else to do but head for the Army JAG office.

Never one to run from a potential problem, Falk made sure that his first stop would be Zack's office. Might as well get this over with first.

"Agent Thayer, may I help you?" Sergeant Raines addressed him coolly as he entered the office area.

"I thought I'd have a word with Captain Smith before I spoke with Colonel Marshall," Falk informed her. He could probably guess why she was being so politely professional, but that was fine. This wasn't a playground; he wasn't here to make friends.

"I believe he's in with Colonel Marshall and Captain Hernandez. I'll let the colonel know you're here," she told him smoothly, reaching for the telephone.

Falk shrugged and walked past her, glancing into Smith's office on the way by. The light was off, an office box sat on the desk. Odd, untidy, but otherwise unremarkable.

"Agent Thayer, it's been awhile," Colonel Marshall ushered him in. "Captain Smith..." The colonel shrugged what looked like an apology to Zack, who smiled and shrugged back.

The older man held out his hand, and Zack reached for it, wrapping an arm around the colonel when he pulled him in. The whole thing was over in a matter of seconds and Falk flicked a puzzled glance at the swarthy, middle-aged man looking on.

Zack turned to the third man and smiled. "Captain Hernandez, good luck to you."

"Good luck to you, too, Captain Smith," he smiled back, shaking his hand.

"Keep in touch, son," Colonel Marshall ordered, his voice rough.

"I will, sir," Zack promised. He turned to Falk. "It's good to see you, Agent Thayer," he said in a low voice. "Take care."

"Smith," Falk nodded, confused. This appeared to be an elaborate parting of some kind. Very bewildering. He was more than a little surprised when Zack pulled him in for a quick hug and planted a kiss on his temple.

"Hey, I may never see you again," he smiled stepping back.

Before Falk could even open his mouth to answer that, the man was gone.

"Agent Thayer," Colonel Marshall was speaking now. "I'd like you to meet Captain Hernandez. He's replacing Captain Smith, of course, and I'm sure the two of you will get along fine."

"Pleased to meet you, Agent Thayer," the newly met captain assured, reaching out to shake hands. "Captain Smith told me that you're very focused on the job. I'm sure we'll work well together."

Falk shook the man's hand and made noises of agreement. What he said, he wasn't really sure. He felt a little dizzy.

No matter how he added up the evidence, it seemed perfectly clear. Captain Zachary Smith had moved on. That was exactly what he wanted, wasn't it?

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#### **Chapter Seven**

"Oh, no! You're kidding!" The trilling laughter sounded familiar. Falk looked around the open air restaurant, trying to pinpoint it. Clarissa had been in the bathroom for a while now ... not that he minded. "Well, Zack? So are you going to go out with him?"

His eyes rested on the woman speaking and Falk felt his heart squeeze tight. That was Sergeant Penelope Raines and the Zack she was speaking to could only be Zachary Smith, former U.S. Army Captain, JAG, Ft. Belvoir. None of that was as important as an answer to the question the sergeant had asked. Was he going to go out with ... well, with someone who wasn't Falk?

"Oh, come on! Why not?" she all but whined. It was all Falk could do to keep from cheering. He didn't bother to ask himself why he was so thrilled that the 'Zack' she was speaking to, whichever Zack that was, was not going out with whatever 'him' the sergeant referred to.

"Falk, are you listening to me?"

Clarissa. When had she gotten back? "No, of course not," he responded absently, annoyed that she was talking louder than Sergeant Raines.

"I've had just about enough of this," Clarissa hissed at him.

Falk looked at her, confused. What was her problem? "Me, too," he agreed, standing up and dropping a few bills onto the table. "I think it's time I took you home."

"Well, I ... fine!" she huffed.

The two rode in stony silence as Falk considered what he'd done, said, and last but not least, heard. He still had time to turn back, to placate Clarissa. He could make up some excuse about being tired, about job stress. She would forgive him. She wanted to. He was a good catch, after all—a high-level civil servant, that's all she knew for sure. It was plenty.

But he had no intention of changing his mind. Clarissa would make some man a good wife—someone besides Falk Thayer.

Nothing was said as he walked her to her door, opened it, chastely kissed her cheek and stepped away. "Falk, if you leave now ... don't come back," Clarissa warned, anger swelling in her voice. "I'll tell everyone that I dumped you."

He looked at her for a long minute, considering. "Whatever you need, Clarissa," he agreed. "And thank you."

"You're a fool," she growled. "We were good for each other."

"Not really," he countered. "You're not really what I want, what I need. I'm not good for you, either."

"I'm good for your career. You're stupid to ignore that." She was, but that wasn't the point.

"You don't even know what my career is." He rolled his eyes, hands in his pockets as he faced her.

"It doesn't matter," she sneered. "My family is influential. I can help you get ahead. If you walk away now, you're ruining your future." Falk studied her closely before nodding one time and turning on his heel. "What are you doing?" she sputtered. "Where are you going?"

"I'm changing my future," he shrugged. "One way or another, I'm changing my future."

\* \* \* \*

"Hey, Zack, you gonna sing?"

Zack smiled, sweeping his arms wide to encompass the nearly empty bar. "You want me to sing just for you guys?" he asked, pulling a chilled mug out of the cooler. "You ready for another one?"

"You're not paying a bit of attention to us, are you?" the man asked with an exasperated sigh. "Who were you on the phone with? Your secret lover?"

This was Wilson, a regular during tourist season. A sometime NASA consultant, the handsome ex-Navy pilot had had his eye on Zack from the first day they'd met.

"Need some mud over here, boss!" Zack heard, grabbing his attention.

"Which one?" Zack chuckled to Wilson, tossing a bottle of Kahlúa end over end to Randall, the second bartender. "I have so many secret lovers," he teased, laughing off the other man's attempts to find out more about him.

Smooth as a big league shortstop, Randall caught the bottle and turned, pouring his customer's drink. Zack pulled back the tap above the frosty mug he'd taken out and slid the foaming beer down the polished wood.

He loved his bar. Buying it had taken every penny he'd saved in fifteen years of military service and then some. Not one time during his year here had he regretted buying this

place. It was a very good thing he'd invested so well while he was still active duty.

Most of Wallops Island, just south of Chincoteague, Virginia, had been owned and used by the United States Navy until recently. His little bar stayed busy enough with a good mix of tourists, misplaced aviators, and the occasional naval officer.

This was the beginning of high season, and he was enjoying himself thoroughly. He loved to sing Elvis songs and play around with his customers every night, and it was only going to get better. He and Randall worked well together. Only one thing could make him happier...

"Come on, Zack!"

He'd been woolgathering again. Sometimes talking to Pen did that to him. He so wanted to ask about Falk. Yes, he'd walked away. He'd had to. That didn't make it hurt any less.

The bar had begun to fill while he was looking in instead of out, and Randall could probably use a hand. "Head's up!" Randall called, a half-empty bottle of Tanqueray sailing toward him.

Right. Time to get in the groove. No more thoughts of Falk. No more sighs and regrets.

Tapping two rocks glasses on the polished bar, Zack began to swing his hips in time with the beat they made. Right on cue, someone began strumming the battered twelve-string in the corner. Pouring two fingers of whiskey in each short, round glass, his head began to bob up and down.

"Well-ah," Zack let the syllable stretch out before he began singing, rhythmic clapping punctuating every beat. A turn at

the waist and a pump of his hips brought a wave of laughter, catcalls, and applause up and down the bar. Zack grinned, loving it. This was his home—he was safe here.

Running his fingers through his dark hair, he executed a perfect pelvic thrust followed by a drum-roll on the smooth wood surface of the bar, punctuating an easy bump and grind. An artful pause was followed by another twist of his hips as he tossed a bottle of bourbon to Randall, simultaneously catching a fat, round bottle of Crown Royal. Wolf whistles and clapping in time kept him on note. The night passed easily, happily, except for the ache in his heart that he resolutely ignored.

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#### **Chapter Eight**

Falk pulled on a fresh polo shirt, smoothing it over the flat front of his khakis. He was nervous, very much so.

It hadn't been easy approaching Penelope Raines and asking her where Zack was. "You're an investigator. Find him yourself," she'd told him. "Work for it."

And so he had. Now, months later, he'd located Zack, resigned his own job, and here he was. It was a helluva risk, he knew that. If Zack turned him away, well ... he'd deal with it then.

The bar was bigger than it looked from the outside and very busy. He followed a raucous crowd through the door and chose a table as far away from the long bar as he could. The bar itself was situated a little lower than the surrounding tables, so he could see the man pouring drinks reasonably clearly.

Suddenly, another man appeared behind the bar, and Falk caught his breath. He couldn't make out the guy's face, but he didn't need to. Those long, strong legs, rounded rearend—he saw that physique in his dreams every night.

"Scotch and soda," he murmured to the young woman who appeared at his table. She apparently reigned over all ten or fifteen tables surrounding the bar.

"Don't let Wilson see you staring at Zack like that," she advised, following his gaze.

"That his boyfriend?" Falk asked casually. "It's not a woman's name..." His stomach clenched at the thought of either, but he forced himself to look up at her. "He's, ah..."

She snickered. "He's hot as hell." She grinned. "And single. But Wilson hopes to change all that. Of course, he's been hoping for awhile." She dropped a wink and moved away. "Be right back," she called over her shoulder.

Falk watched as the young woman leaned in and murmured, waiting. Zack pulled a glass down, filled it with ice, and poured the scotch and then the soda. She added the two narrow straws and turned, all in the space of a minute. Before she was halfway back to his table, several seated people at the bar began to chant.

"Zack! Zack!" echoed around the room as she slid his drink in front of him.

Someone began playing an acoustic guitar, and the patrons at the bar began beating on its glossy surface in rhythm.

With a big grin on his face, Zack lifted both arms over his head and began clapping in time with his customers, hips twisting and swaying in sync. Zack began a teasing song as he sashayed down the bar, his body rippling, a pelvic pump emphasizing his artful pause, The words took on a teasing, flirting bent he leaned forward, his face inches from that of an older blond man. Why was it always the blonds, Falk wondered absently. Startled when someone moved in his peripheral vision.

"He's a piece of work, ain't he?" The waitress was back, sliding a much-needed fresh drink in front of him.

At the bar, Zack audibly sucked in his breath, his hips twisting seductively, faded, stretched denim lovingly accenting every muscle and twitch. Falk groaned aloud, shifting in his seat.

"Yeah ... always has been." His eyes went wide as he realized what he'd said.

"You knew him before?" She was down near his ear now, squatting beside him.

"Yeah," Falk confessed. If he stayed, she'd know. If he left, what difference would it make? "He was never this ... uninhibited." He looked over at her and smiled slightly. "I like it."

"Yeah?" she asked, giving him a narrow, intent look.

"Yeah." Falk sucked in a breath. Releasing it, he shrugged.
"I like it a lot."

Zack's muscular chest flexed as his upper body turned one way and his swaying hips twisted the other as he sang.

"You gonna wait him out?" she asked.

"I'm here 'til he makes me leave," Falk assured her. Some part of him was convinced that if this woman accepted him, Zack would. It was naive, but it would do, for now.

She gave him a sharp nod and turned, leaving him. Falk nursed his drink, enjoying the show. Zack worked well with the other bartender, his handsome, muscular body displayed to perfection under the yellow glow of the dimmed lighting.

The ex-Army captain sang and played around for an hour or two longer, clearly enjoying himself. It was a welcome sight, one Falk wanted to take pleasure in for many years to come.

He'd had everything he ever needed and he'd pushed it away. Zack had cared for him, maybe even loved him, and Falk had used and abused him. Guilt warred with arousal as he watched Zack flirt with a bar full of people, keeping them all, and especially one ardent blond, at arm's length.

There was guilt because Falk had treated Zack badly and he knew it. The arousal was for obvious reasons.

As the clock ticked on, the crowd began to thin, but Falk stayed where he was. Soon, there was only Zack, the blond man, and Falk, though he was hidden in a dark corner. His waitress had left him half an hour prior, her last measuring look telling him that she was leaving him there to meet Zack on his own. He just hoped it worked out. Zack had come around the bar now and was standing near the other man, his back to Falk.

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#### **Chapter Nine**

"Come on, Zack, enough is enough. Quit teasing me," the man said to Zack. His voice had the edge of impatience, even anger in it.

Falk decided it was time to roll the dice—time to take a chance. The blond man reached for Zack.

"It's about time," Falk said, walking up to Zack, cutting in front of the other man. "I've been waiting forever."

Zack's mouth dropped open. He made a little wheezing noise.

"Hey! Who are you? You know this guy, Zack?" the blond demanded.

Falk grinned. It was perfect. He stepped closer.

"Yeah." Falk smiled up at Zack, his palm settling in the center of Zack's chest.

At Zack's noticeable flinch, the man demanded, "Are you sure you know him, Zack?"

"I, um." Zack licked his lips, blue-green eyes wide with shock and uncertainty as he stared at Falk.

"We've known each other for years," Falk told the other man, his eyes boring into Zack's, hope at war with the fear that Zack would send him packing.

Falk's palm moved up Zack's chest and around to cup his neck. With a little tug, he pulled Zack forward, down, until their lips met.

So soft, so warm, Falk laved Zack's lower lip, asking to be let in. For long, agonizing heartbeats, the younger man

resisted, not moving, not responding. Finally, with a deep, resonating moan, Zack's arms came around him, lips parting.

Falk took full advantage, his tongue sweeping inside, caressing Zack's palate, searching his mouth, giving with all he had. His hands slid up, cradling Falk's head, carding through his wavy hair, reveling in the thick satin.

Slowly, carefully, Falk pulled back, resting his lips against Zack's ear. "Don't say anything, Zack. Maybe I can get us out of this." Zack turned his face in toward Falk's neck, his breath tickling Falk's throat. "Satisfied?" Falk asked the angry blond man. "It was a misunderstanding between lovers. I pushed him away," he murmured, pulling back to look into Zack's eyes. "I didn't know how to face what I really felt."

The blond man looked from one to the other, anger and disappointment radiating from him.

\* \* \* \*

Zack was aware of Wilson leaving, but he just couldn't focus on that. This was Falk Thayer in his arms, and the spy was in his arms, wrapped up tight. Zack loosened his hold, stepping back.

"Why ... why are you here, Falk?" Zack hated that his voice was rough, choked. But he couldn't help it. This was too important. And here was Falk, the man that he'd loved for years, the first man—the only man he'd ever made love with, right here in his safe place. "You said..." He hated the words, but he forced them out. "You said you were finished with me."

Falk stepped forward, one hand on Zack's cheek, the other holding his hand. "I was a fool, Zack. From start to finish, I was a fool."

If this were real ... but Zack couldn't think about that. When Falk was gone, this would still be his place. It would be okay.

"Falk," Zack choked, "why are you here? What do you want?" He didn't want to act like a little boy, crying over his hurt feelings.

"I want you, Zack, for all time. I'm willing to work to prove that to you. Let me be with you. Let me get to know you, get to know us."

The words Falk was saying sounded so good, the stuff of his most outrageous daydreams. "You ... you don't mean that. You can't. You're a company man." He turned to walk away, not wanting to hear any more.

"I quit the Company," Falk countered, stepping up behind him. "I'm here to be your man, Zack. I want to be with you."

Zack couldn't move as he felt Falk's arms slide around him. He didn't really want to move, as a matter of fact.

"You—you quit the FBI ... for me?" Zack croaked. This had to be a dream.

Zack felt Falk press himself closer, back to front, Falk's chest tight against Zack's back, his pelvis cupping Zack's rear end, his hard erection snugged tightly in Zack's denimcovered cleft.

"For you and me, yes." Falk rested his cheek against Zack's shoulder. "The FBI wasn't any better for me than the military was for you." Falk's strong, smooth fingers slipped

under the waistband of Zack's weathered jeans. "I like you this way, Zack. Maybe, if you get to know me, you'll like me without the job."

Zack could feel Falk shrug against him at the same time his warm fingers teased through the thatch of hair at his groin. Why had he decided to quit wearing boxers? Was it some kind of rebellion?

"Falk..." He could barely speak, but he had to make his point.

"Mmm-hmm?" Falk asked, his voice vibrating against the middle of Zack's back.

Almost against his will, Zack shifted, widening his stance, giving Falk's wandering hand more room, freedom to move. "It can't be all about sex," Zack finally managed.

Zack felt himself grow hard—harder, as two of Falk's fingers traced the crease of his thigh, moving down between his legs to cup his balls. "No, Zack, it's not all about sex," Falk assured him. His free hand was traveling in the other direction underneath Zack's shirt, combing through the hair on his chest. "It's about you and me and all the things we don't know about each other and all the years we could spend learning..."

Zack groaned, his hand reaching around behind them both to cup Falk's rear and pull him close. "It sounds a lot like you're ... asking for something," Zack ventured, leaning his head back against Falk's shoulder.

Falk's lower fist wrapped itself around Zack's erect cock, his other palm covering Zack's pec, caressing a rigid nipple at the same time. "I am, Zack." Falk turned his head and nipped

at Zack's chin. "I'm asking for more, for a future. Can I have that, Zack? A second chance?"

Zack pressed back against Falk, trying to think, trying to talk. Falk wanted a future with him? A life with him ... that's what he was asking for, wasn't it? Should he wait for clarification or something?

No, Zack decided. This wasn't how things were going to go. If he wanted this relationship to go forward, it would be up to him. Falk had come here; he'd made himself reasonably clear. Now it was up to Zack.

"Stop," Zack said, his voice quiet and steady.

Falk froze, carefully extracting his hands from Zack's shirt and pants.

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#### **Chapter Ten**

Zack turned to face Falk, surprised to see how nervous the smaller man was. Falk Thayer had always been larger than life to Zack—ten feet tall and bulletproof. He was so controlled that Zack had never seen even the barest flicker of emotion on his face.

"Falk?" Zack's voice was a husky whisper.

"I can go slower than this," Falk said in a rush. "We don't have to do anything besides talk..."

Zack smiled, a little embarrassed. "I didn't mean to imply that I didn't want to do anything." He grinned sheepishly. "I just don't want to do it on the floor in the bar."

"Oh." Falk smiled back, looking up though his lashes at Zack. There was nothing else he could call that besides charming. All Zack wanted was to ravage and be ravaged in return.

"I live right upstairs," Zack told him, straight-faced, eyebrows wiggling up and down.

"I think I can make it that far," Falk answered, his face turning a little pink.

"We still need to talk." Zack glanced sideways at Falk, taking his hand. Falk nodded, fingers twining as he followed Zack toward the door at the back of the bar. "Just not now."

"Just not now," Falk agreed, following Zack up a flight of sturdy stairs and out into an open area.

"So, here we are," Zack murmured, turning to face Falk again.

"Only we're here instead of down there," Falk said, keeping his face clear.

"Is there something wrong with being here?" Zack asked him, closing the very short distance between them and wrapping his arms around Falk once again. Before Falk could respond, Zack marched him backward, not stopping until the shorter man's legs bumped the mattress of Zack's king sized bed.

"I'd like to be there with you," Falk murmured, inclining his head toward the bed behind him.

"Will you make love with me, Falk?" Zack asked, feeling shy. "We've had sex, but..."

\* \* \* \*

Instead of an answer, Falk reached down, his hungry gaze never leaving Zack's. Trying not to anticipate burying himself deep inside this man that he'd missed so much, Falk moved to take his polo shirt off, arms crossed and over his head. His belt next, he slowed down deliberately, waiting for Zack's eyes to track his hands. Once he was sure that Zack was concentrating on his hands only, his fingers teased over the fabric covering his groin.

In one fluid move, he loosened his belt, leaving it hanging, opened his zipper, and let his pants drop to the floor. Quickly stepping out of them, he tugged Zack closer to him and angled for a hungry, open-mouthed, sucking kiss. Zack's mouth opened eagerly under his, the taller man's hands roaming as freely as his own.

Falk reveled in the feel of that long, hard body, well-muscled and hair-covered, pressed full length against his own, and a tongue as impatient as his tasting and taking. It had been far too long.

Working his hands in between them, Falk leaned in and slowly worked Zack's t-shirt, rolling it up, unwilling to break the kiss just yet. As he moved his hands down Zack's naked chest, up and over his lean abdomen, he felt Zack's hands trailing down his back, stopping just above the elastic of his boxers. He helped Zack out of his jeans and pulled them together, shivering as their erections slid together through the single layer of fabric.

In unison, both men settled their hands on Falk's hips, pushing down until they stood nude, facing each other.

"I want you to make love to me, Zack," Falk announced in a quiet voice. "Would you do that for me? For us?"

"I've ... never..." Zack didn't know what to say. Of all the things he'd expected from Falk, this wasn't it. "And I kind of wanted you to do it," he managed.

"How about I do it sometimes and you do it other times?" Falk suggested, a teasing grin lifting the corner of his mouth. "Starting with tonight..."

"It's important to have equality in a relationship, I guess," Zack whispered as he slowly kissed his way down Falk's throat, lingering on his collarbone, gently sucking on it before trailing farther down, pressing the shorter man back onto the bed.

Zack's teeth and tongue alternately teased first his left nipple and then his right. Falk could barely breathe through

the burning, welling sensations, willing Zack to go lower, grabbing the headboard with both hands to keep from pushing Zack down.

Zack's tongue began to trail up again, over his Adam's apple along his jaw to his ear. Both men moaned helplessly when their erections slid soft and smooth against each other.

"Soon ... Just breathe," Zack teased, seeming more confident. "It's not like we're in a hurry, are we?"

Falk gasped as Zack pushed his hips down, intensifying the contact between their erections, involuntarily arching his back. But then the feeling was gone again, and Zack's tongue finally, slowly resumed its path downward. Hot tongue, blunt teeth, and feather-light fingertips trailed farther and farther down, titillating, arousing, driving him absolutely crazy.

Panting, Falk moaned as Zack tickled his perineum, gripped the headboard even tighter in anticipation as he urged his legs apart. At the same time that hot tongue ran along the length of his erection, and Falk moaned loudly when Zack repeated the motion again ... and again.

Zack reached into the top drawer of his bedstand, grabbing a clear bottle and elbowing it shut before turning back. Falk grunted when the coldness of the lube slid down his crack, quickly followed by a gentle but insistent finger, rubbing and circling around his tiny opening. With each tight circle, the pressure increased and Falk writhed, closing his eyes when the first finger pressed in.

More! Falk just wanted more. Who knew that Zack was such a natural? He tried to push down, wanted more of the

long finger pressing into him. He hoped Zack would get the hint.

Zack made a shushing noise, grinning against his skin, but he understood, a second finger joining the first. The stretching felt just a little uncomfortable—it had been so long for him—though soon, Falk was pushing back, wanting still more. Suddenly a wave of pleasure surged through his body, quickly followed by another, causing him to tremble and gasp.

When Zack began to add yet another finger, Falk resisted. "That's enough," he growled, reaching for Zack.

Leaning back, he watched Zack squeeze some of the slippery lube on his erection, quickly slicking it. With a sultry smile, Zack wiped his hand on Falk's chest, smearing it over his nipples. Falk gasped as Zack lightly blew over the beaded little points, causing him to shiver.

Even though the sensations distracted him a little, they were not enough to hide the feel of Zack's cock filling him. When he stopped moving, Falk pushed back against his lover, but Zack kept him still, hands on his hips, holding him down. With a little hiss, he reached for Zack, pulling him closer until his face was barely an inch above his.

"Fuck me!" Falk whispered in his ear, feeling Zack shudder when he sucked his velvety soft earlobe in between his teeth. "Now!" he growled.

"Falk..." Hearing Zack moan his name that way was a very good thing, he decided, as was the hand tightening in his hair.

Zack kissed him, hard and demanding as he started moving a millimeter at a time. The slow pace was agonizing,

but so arousing. Some part of Falk had expected hard and quick, a part of him even craved it, but that small speck was completely overruled by the ecstasy building in him right now. No wonder Zack had such a reputation with the ladies, even when he wasn't trying.

That thought was fleeting, forced away under wave after wave of pleasure. He never knew slow could be so sensual, so amazing. It just seemed to go on forever.

Hearing Zack's ragged breathing through his own panting, Falk knew his partner was getting close, his control thin and shaky, and he almost wished he could hold on a little longer.

A sudden shift of Zack's weight caused him to look up, their gazes locking on each other as new waves of pleasure ripped through his body. The emotions spinning in those beautiful eyes kept him from closing his.

Falk saw his own pleasure reflected back to him as pleasure filled his body, lifting him higher and higher. Little by little, Zack increased the pace, and Falk reached between their bodies, lightly running his fingers up and down his erection before closing his hand around the base, timing his strokes with Zack's thrusts.

Suddenly Zack tensed up and plunged deeper, more forcefully into him, sending Falk over the edge. As wave after wave of orgasm spiraled through him, Falk's open mouth sought Zack's, kissing and moaning as Zack's release slammed into both of them.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in the archway that led to his sleeping area, Zack found himself amazed as he considered the previous night's revelations. Amazed, stunned, bewildered, he couldn't believe that Falk wanted him.

As he watched, Falk stirred in the large bed, reaching out, looking for something ... could Falk be looking for him, Zack wondered, and another surge of warmth went through him at the thought.

When his hand only encountered the bed linens, Falk's eyes opened and he looked around, relaxing when his gaze focused on Zack.

"Good morning," he mumbled.

Zack grinned. It was still morning, only just.

Falk stared at him for a moment and Zack could almost see him trying to remember the last thing that had happened. "I fell asleep on you."

"Yes, but not to worry, I've decided to be flattered," Zack joked. He remained in the doorway, in spite of how much he wanted to go over and climb back into bed with Falk. "It's all right," he reassured the other man. "I'm used to being up that late. I'll bet you're not."

Zack gave in to his initial desire and moved back over to the bed. He sat down and rested his hand on Falk's chest.

Falk's hand immediately moved to cover it. "I'll have to make it up to you."

"It's going to take a long time," Zack told him, wondering what Falk would make of that.

"I have the next twenty-five years blocked off for you. Think that'll be enough?"

"Only twenty-five years? What's going on after that?" Zack wondered, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

"You sure you want to know?" Falk asked, uncertainty wavering in his eyes.

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't want you to tell," Zack pulled back and kissed his nose.

"I'll be old and ugly after that," Falk shrugged. "You'll still be young and hot."

"Yeah, but I'll be used to you by then," Zack purred, leaning down to kiss the sleep-rumpled man. "Go ahead and block off another twenty-five. I'm a lifer, you know."

"Yeah?" Falk looked at him intently, challengingly. Any pretense of sleep had evaporated completely.

"Yeah," Zack affirmed. He'd loved Falk all this time, what was another twenty-five or fifty years?

"Can I get that in writing?" Falk pushed to sit up against the pillows, Zack's hand slipping to his waist. Gathering Zack's hand, Falk threaded their fingers together, smiling at him oddly.

"Uh, sure ... You want what, exactly, in writing?"

"You said you're a lifer, Zack. I want you to be my lifer.

Officially. Marry me."

Coughing, Zack cleared his throat once, wheezed, and then cleared his throat again. "Marry you?" he choked. He cleared his throat again wishing desperately that he had something to drink ... coffee, water, anything. "Really? Marry?" he sputtered.

"Really..."

Falk might have had more to say, but Zack didn't need to hear it. Sliding his free hand to the back of Falk's neck, Zack tugged his head closer as he leaned in, covering Falk's mouth with his own. That was all the answer he could give. It seemed to be answer enough for Falk.

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#### **Epilogue**

Falk stood facing Zack, a slight breeze ruffling his hair. May really was the perfect month to be standing in a tux and tails outdoors on the east coast of Virginia. He studiously avoided making eye contact with the man he was marrying. Zack had been grinning like a loon for the last two days, and Falk knew he wouldn't be able to keep from grinning back at him if they locked eyes.

"As friends and neighbors, we are gathered here today to bear witness as two of our own pledge their life and love to one another." Justice of the Peace Albertson paused to give those around him time to appreciate the importance of the event.

Falk privately felt sure that the artful hesitation was due more to the man's well-earned hangover than anything else. In an effort to throw them a bachelor party, the inmates had essentially taken over Zack's asylum. Everyone who cared in any way for the two men had arrived at the bar the night before carrying their own alcohol. In the end, Zack and Falk were the only two people who were still moderately sober at the end of the night.

"Zachary Smith and Falk Thayer come before us, that we may share in the joy of their commitment."

There had been a lull in the noise when Colonel Marshall's rumbling voice had caught everyone's attention.

"Thayer!" The alcohol had seriously impacted the old boy's volume control. "Remember that day when you asked me for

Captain Smith on the Pavarato case? Smug little bastard you were, too." Penelope Raines had agreed wholeheartedly—and very loudly.

Zack had called him a smug bastard last night in bed, afterward. So what, though, Falk thought. He was a smug bastard. And what the hell? He might be shorter, but he wasn't little. No doubt Zack would agree...

"Do you, Falk Thayer, come to this union of your own free will, with the intent of remaining faithful to your spouse, as long as you both shall live?"

Falk startled, afraid he'd been woolgathering too long and had missed Zack's vow. One look at his amused intended reassured him, however.

"Yes, I am. I do..." he stumbled. He hated being caught unaware, but it was his own fault. Zack winked at him. He'd been smiling nonstop for the last week, no matter what happened.

"Do you, Zachary Smith, come to this union of your own free will, with the intent of remaining faithful to your spouse, as long as you both shall live?"

"You're damned right I do," Zack stated firmly.

Fighting a smile, the clearly hung-over Justice Albertson looked out to the gathered crowd. "Does anyone here have any reason to suggest that these two men should not be joined in matrimony?"

Falk saw Wilson shift restlessly at the back of the assemblage. Half of the guests turned to glare at the uncomfortable man, as well as Falk himself. When he turned

back to Zack, he noted that his irreverent almost-husband was rolling his eyes.

"He wouldn't dare," Zack whispered with a snicker. "Not after you pulled your gun on him last night."

Falk felt his face heat up. Okay, maybe he had gotten a little carried away...

"Zack, repeat after me: I, Zachary Smith do take Falk
Thayer to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise from
this day forward to be faithful, for better or worse, for richer
or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as
long as I shall live."

Zack reached for Falk's hand, looking intently into his eyes. "I have loved you for years. Marrying you ... I was afraid to even dream of something like that. I still can't believe you asked me ... I, Zachary Smith, take Falk Thayer to be my lawfully wedded husband." Zack cleared his throat, his eyes misty. "I promise from this day forward to be faithful, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as I shall live."

"Ah, yes, right." Justice Albertson coughed. "Now, Falk, just repeat after me: I, Falk Thayer, do take Zachary Smith to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise from this day forward to be faithful, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as I shall live."

Swallowing to buy himself time, Falk tried to blink the moisture from his eyes. He had been an FBI agent for over a decade and nearly two. He was not supposed to get sappy at

weddings. Maybe there was a special dispensation when it was your own wedding...

"I've loved you just as long, Zack. It just took your leaving to tell me so. So I promise to be faithful from this day forward for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and to love and cherish you for as long as I live."

"Hey! That's not what I said!"

Both men turned to stare at the justice, shocked.

"I mean, uh, gentlemen, as a token of the commitment to the sacred promises you've made today, you may exchange rings."

Falk raised a brow at Zack, holding out the wide gold band, pleased to see his hand was steady. They'd agreed that Falk should go first during the rehearsal. At the time, Falk had not thought a rehearsal to be necessary. Afterward, he was grateful for it.

Zack's left hand was shaking so hard that Falk had to hold it still with his in order to slip the ring on. His eyes skipped up, worried for a moment that the nerves his lover was feeling would translate into a change of heart, even this late and after the pledges they'd just exchanged.

The love he saw in those beautiful aquamarine eyes nearly caused him to stumble, his own hand now becoming unsure. Somehow, it was finally real. Zack would be his, was his. He slipped the ring onto the proper finger, holding out his hand on autopilot. It was real, in just a second...

"I now pronounce you legally married in the state of Virginia. You may now kiss your husband."

One more time, one of countless times from this moment on, Falk reached up and pulled Zack to him.

"It's over," Zack murmured. "No more don't ask, don't tell. We're married," he whispered against Falk's lips.

Falk pushed forward, nipping at Zack's lips as he wrapped both arms tight about his husband. Kissing his way up to Zack's ear, an eternity later, Falk pulled away a little.

"Shh, don't say anything. Let me see if I can get us out of here."

Together. Alone.

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#### **Building a Life**

By Alexa Snow

Levi stepped out of the shower, scrubbed a towel briskly over his recently cut hair, and reminded himself to take slow, deep breaths. He wasn't really freaking out; what he was feeling ran deeper, a frisson of excitement in the pit of his stomach, a faint but unmistakable sizzle running through his veins. As he reached for the hairbrush, his hand was trembling.

Maybe he shouldn't have had that third cup of coffee.

It was mostly that they'd stayed up too late the night before, talking about the honeymoon while painstakingly scraping faded and peeling wallpaper off the dining room walls in their newly purchased—but under no circumstances to be referred to as "new," since it was almost two hundred years old—home. It was going to take at least a year, Levi figured, to get it looking the way they wanted it. Maybe two or three. Not that it mattered. He'd never been so happy in his life, and he was looking forward to the work with a sense of wonder and the absolute certainty that he was exactly where he was meant to be.

A second towel wrapped around his waist, he padded barefoot, carefully, across the hallway. The hardwood floors were scheduled to be refinished while they were on their honeymoon, and he was looking forward to splinter-free feet. His rented tux hung on the back of the closet door, waiting for

him. It was a real, classic tuxedo, not a morning suit, and he couldn't wait to put it on.

Outside, he could see the sun sliding slowly down toward the horizon. There was a hint of orange to the sky. Did that mean the weather tomorrow was going to be nice, or not? He could never remember, and had to silently repeat the rhyme in his head until he got to "sailor's delight" before he could let go of the worry and step into his tux slacks, leaving them unfastened until his dress shirt was on, too. They had a mirror propped up against the wall, and he was able to look at himself in it as he finished dressing. He had the distinct feeling he was forgetting something, but had no idea what it was. He knew he should have made a list, but he probably would have needed a list to remind him to make a list.

Levi blinked at his reflection. He didn't think he'd ever looked this good in his life.

He was getting married. Tonight. It was kind of hard to believe; three years ago, the country had been teetering on the edge of legalizing gay marriage in a few states, and he'd wondered if getting married would ever be an option for him. Now, more than a third of U.S. states allowed gay marriage, with another third in the process of passing legislation, and there was no doubt in his mind that the rest would follow soon. It was a whole new world.

Downstairs, the front door banged open, and he could hear the scrabble of dog toenails on the floor of the foyer. "We're back! Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah! I'll be right down!" Levi called. He straightened his bow tie and checked his reflection one last time.

He was so ready.

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#### **Chapter One**

Three years earlier

"You're sure you can't come?" Levi asked, catching his cell phone between his shoulder and his ear.

"I'm sure I won't," Brian, his on-again, off-again— apparently off at the moment—semi-boyfriend said on the other end of the line. "Don't harbor any illusions, okay? I could get out of going to this gig thing—I just don't want to. Not to go to a family thing, anyway."

"It's not a family thing," Levi said. It came out a little more sharply than he'd meant it to, but hey, he had family issues with a capital F. I. and everyone knew it, including Brian. "It's just an engagement party. Lots of free alcohol. What's not to like?"

Brian sighed. "It's just not my thing, okay? But if you change your mind and decide not to go, and you want to hook up, give me a call."

"Okay, I will. Bye." Levi hung up the phone and went back to the design he'd been working on.

It wasn't like he was really irritated or anything. Brian wasn't actually his boyfriend, just a friend with benefits, and they both liked it that way. They were great as casual friends, and they had some fairly intense sex together, but it was all about having fun. Part of the point was that they didn't have any obligations to each other. And it wasn't as if he wouldn't have an okay time at Cooper's engagement party if he went solo—at least a few of his other college friends were bound to

be there, and Cooper's family was great. He'd just go on his own. It'd be fine.

He dressed up for the party, of course. Not a suit—he didn't have one, and was glad that he could rent a tux for his role in the wedding as Cooper's best man—but a nice shirt and tie paired up with one of his four decent pairs of slacks. Hopefully he wouldn't stand out too much in the crowd. He looked good, he thought, giving one last, quick glance in the mirror on his way out the door. Neat, short, dark hair, cleanshaven, green eyes. Good enough.

There were valets at the party, which shouldn't have surprised him considering the size of the Dixons' estate. He could remember coming home with Cooper for Christmas break freshman year and literally being shocked, standing there in the driveway with his mouth hanging open as he gazed at a house that was easily ten times as big as the one he'd grown up in. Heck, his whole current apartment could fit in their foyer.

Luckily, the Dixons hadn't changed; they were just as warm and welcoming as always. Mrs. Dixon even gave Levi a hug as she greeted him, the sequins on the sleeves of her gown—nothing that fancy could be called a dress, Levi thought—pressing uncomfortably against his wrists as he returned the embrace in as formal a way as he could.

"It's so good to see you again, Levi," Mrs. Dixon said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Levi said, shaking Mr. Dixon's hand.
"Congratulations. Cooper and Kate make a great couple."

"Are you saying nice things about me behind my back?"
Cooper asked, appearing as if from nowhere and patting Levi
on the shoulder.

Levi grinned and shook his head. "Me? No way. I never have a nice word to say about anybody, you know that."

"You two," Mrs. Dixon said fondly. "It's so nice that you're still friends after all these years."

"It's only been, what, seven years? I'd think to an old broad like you, that'd be nothing." Cooper dodged his mother's attempted smack, then kissed her cheek. "It's okay, Mom. I love you even though you're ancient."

"You're a naughty, naughty boy," Mrs. Dixon said, laughing. "It's a good thing Kate can handle you."

There was a little girl in the study, sitting behind a desk. It was an interior room, with no windows, so there were three floor lamps turned on to provide light. One was behind her; it threw a soft, white glow across her hair and shoulder. Her hair was pale blonde, but under the light from the lamp it looked tinged with red. Like Cooper's hair, Levi realized as he stood there in the doorway watching her, and he vaguely remembered that this girl was Cooper's niece.

She looked up from her coloring and smiled. "Hi."

"Hi," Levi said. Even though she seemed totally comfortable there, alone with a strange man, he stayed where he was. "I'm Levi. I think we've met before. I'm your Uncle Cooper's friend."

"He's getting married," she said. "This is a 'gagement party. I'm the flower girl."

"Oh, really? Cool." Levi put his hands into his pockets.
"Um. That should be fun."

"I get to wear a fancy dress. Do you want to see my drawing?" She looked at him expectantly, so he nodded.

"Sure." He went over to the desk. Her picture was of brightly colored flowers, drawn with scribbled crayon. Her name was scrawled across the bottom of the page in uneven, shaky script—Ashley. "Very nice."

"I like pink," she said, unnecessarily since half the flowers were pink. "What's your name again?"

"Levi."

Ashley frowned. "That's a funny name."

"Yeah, I guess," Levi said agreeably. He'd certainly gotten a fair amount of teasing about it when he was in grade school. "Yours is pretty, though."

"Thank you," she said.

The door on the right hand wall of the room opened suddenly, and the man who had opened it blinked at Levi as if he hadn't expected him. Which of course he probably hadn't.

"I'm Levi Cohen," Levi said right away, offering his hand as the man walked toward them. "Cooper's college friend? The best man. I think we've met before."

"Philip Webb." Philip wasn't tall—he might have been half an inch shorter than Levi, actually—but he had a firm grip. And a British accent. Levi had forgotten about that. "And this is my daughter Ashley. I'm the Dixons' son-in-law."

"I remember. You're married to Cooper's sister Meg, right?"

"Right." Something dark and unhappy moved across
Philip's face, which wasn't traditionally handsome, though
Levi found it compelling all the same. Philip's nose was a little
too big, but his eyes were a pale, almost silvery blue, and his
brown, curly hair was long enough to brush his shoulders.
"You're in the wedding party, too, aren't you?"

"So it would seem."

"And I'm the flower girl!" Ashley piped up. "It's a very important job."

"It is," Levi said. "Especially at your age. You must be very responsible for them to give you such an important job at ... six?"

"I'm not six yet! Only five. But it's my birthday next weekend. Isn't it, Daddy?"

"It is," Philip confirmed. "You're very nearly six."

"We're going to Chuck E. Cheese's," Ashley went on. "For my party. We'll have pizza." She made a face. "Grandma doesn't have pizza tonight, only icky things."

Levi, who didn't share her opinion of the party food, said, "Oh, I don't know. Some of it's good. What about that big cake?" It was two-tiered and covered with fresh fruit, or maybe what was supposed to look like fresh fruit but was actually made out of some kind of frosting. The fact that he wasn't sure probably meant the person who'd made it knew what they were doing.

"It's not chocolate," Ashley explained, and Philip laughed.

"She's a big fan of chocolate," Philip said.

Ashley dug around in her crayon box until she found a tiny stuffed animal, which she held out to Levi, who took it.

"That's Hershey," she said. Upon closer examination, the stuffed animal turned out to be a dog with a head twice the size of its body and wide eyes. "Because of chocolate."

"He likes to eat chocolate?" Levi asked, amused.

"No! Dogs can't eat chocolate, it's tock-tick to them." She looked at her father.

"Toxic," he clarified. "Yes, it is. His name is Hershey because of Ashley's fondness for chocolate, that's all."

"Oh, I get it." Levi offered the toy back to Ashley, but she shook her head.

"You take care of him for me," she said. "Until the party's over. Okay?"

"Are you sure?" Levi asked.

"Yes."

"Speaking of the party, I think it's time we go back to it now," Philip said. To Levi, he explained, "She was feeling a bit overwhelmed with all the people, so we retreated briefly. But we can't hide in here all evening, can we?"

Ashley sighed. "Okay. I'm going to give my picture to Grandma."

"I'm sure she'll love it," Levi said. He knew Mrs. Dixon would and would be profuse in her praise. It was weird, though, the tug in his chest that he was pretty sure was a feeling of unexpected loyalty to this little girl. He wasn't usually all that into kids.

They were swept into a sea of sociality as soon as they stepped foot into the main part of the house. Cooper and his fiancÈe Kate dragged Levi over to meet Kate's sister, Julia, who was the maid of honor and therefore Levi's partner in the

wedding party. Julia was like a petite version of Kate, and just as cheerful. Fortunately, Julia let drop four times in their fiveminute conversation that she had a boyfriend, which let Levi off the hook as far as romantic expectations went.

"What's that?" Julia asked finally, gesturing at the stuffed toy in Levi's hand, which he'd forgotten all about until that minute.

"Oh! It's Ashley's—um, Cooper's niece. She asked me to hold it for her."

Julia's expression went from happy to concerned. "Oh, yeah, that's terrible, isn't it?" She had lowered her voice, like she didn't want anyone to overhear the conversation. "I can't believe about her mother."

"What do you mean?" Levi asked.

"Oh, you know, about Cooper's sister disappearing and everything. It's so crazy." At the look on Levi's face, Julia blushed. "God, you didn't know. Wow, I'm so sorry. Forget I said anything?"

"Sure," Levi said. He'd get it out of Cooper later, he supposed. "I should probably get it back to her, though. Excuse me?" Levi took a step back, and Julia nodded.

"Okay. I'll see you around."

Fifteen minutes later, Levi still hadn't managed to track down Ashley and Philip. He even went back to the study in case they'd retreated again, but the room was empty, the lights turned off. Going through the hallway toward the kitchen, Levi bumped into Kate. "Hey, have you seen Philip and Ashley?"

"Not for a while," she said. "Maybe Cooper knows?"

"Have you seen him?"

Kate laughed. "Yes—he was just talking to my parents near the fireplace. He and my dad have some kind of football betting thing going on."

Snagging a glass of wine from a tray, Levi went on through to the living room, where Cooper was still talking to Kate's parents. After another set of introductions, Levi was able to ask about Ashley and Philip. "She asked me to hold her dog until the end of the party." He held it up.

"Oh, Hershey," Cooper said. "Crap, they already left. Just a little while ago—Ashley was tired, and tired tends to precede cranky in the kindergarten crowd. Philip said they'd better leave while they could still do it gracefully."

"You think she'll be upset?"

Cooper nodded. "Probably. Maybe I should take it over there. I can probably get away for—"

"Nah, don't be silly," Levi told him. "Give me their number and I'll call. I can drop the dog by on my way home."

"Are you sure?" Cooper asked.

"Yeah. Anyway, it's your party! You can't just leave in the middle." Levi hesitated, then patted Cooper's shoulder. He was kind of neurotic about touching his straight friends—you never knew when one of them might decide it was more intimate than he was comfortable with—but Cooper was safe. Probably.

"Leave?" Kate, appearing suddenly, sounded horrified, but her wide grin made it clear she was just joking. "Oh, wait, I forgot, I don't love you anymore. Go ahead, Levi, take him wherever you want!"

"I don't love you anymore first," Cooper protested as Kate's parents stood by and watched, smiling indulgently.

Half an hour later, which was when Levi figured he could make his earliest getaway without being rude, he said goodbye and stepped out the front door onto the wide brick walkway, then to one side so he could make a phone call without blocking anyone's path. He was glad, as he pushed the buttons and waited for the other end of the line to ring, that Cooper had programmed Philip's phone number directly into his cell instead of writing it on a piece of paper.

It rang eight times. Levi was about to give up and hang up when he heard a click and Philip's distinctive accent saying, "Yes, hello?"

"Um, hi. This is Levi Cohen. We met tonight at Cooper and Kate's engagement party?"

"Yes, I remember you." Philip sounded impatient.

"I still have Ashley's chocolate dog," Levi said. "Cooper said she'd miss it, so I volunteered to swing it by your place on my way home. In about fifteen minutes? Unless it's too late."

Philip cleared his throat, and when he spoke again he sounded apologetic. "Levi. Thank you. That would be fantastic, if it's not too much trouble. Ashley's been very upset about it and I was trying to sort out what to do. She was meant to be asleep nearly an hour ago."

Checking his watch, Levi said, "Well, tell her I'll be there soon. Cooper said you're on High Street? Forty, right?"

"That's right. Thank you."

He drove a little faster than the speed limit and pulled up in front of their house about ten minutes later. Philip opened the front door as Levi was walking up the driveway. Ashley was in his arms, her head on his shoulder, face tear-streaked.

"Hershey," she said plaintively as Levi pressed the stuffed dog into her hands.

"Thank you," Philip said. "Would you like to come in?"

"Um. Oh. Uh, sure, okay." Levi hadn't been thinking of it,
but once the offer had been made, he remembered Julia's
intriguing comments about Philip and Ashley, and he was too
curious to pass on the opportunity.

"Let me just get her settled, and I'll be right back. Sit down—make yourself at home." Philip gestured at the couch and went down the hallway to where, presumably, the bedrooms were.

It was weird to be left alone in a stranger's house. Even sitting down felt like a violation of this family's privacy, somehow, but Levi made himself, because to continue standing didn't feel any more natural. Luckily, Philip was back within a few minutes.

"Thank you so much," he said as he came into the room. "I don't know how I'd have gotten her asleep without that dog. I was very surprised that she gave it to you to hold, actually; she's normally very protective of it, and now that it's just me, I—" He broke off and looked down, as if he felt he'd said too much.

"It wasn't any trouble." Levi stood up because Philip was standing. "It's okay. I understand." He didn't, of course. He didn't really understand any of this, but there was just

something about Philip, something sad, maybe even broken, that made him want to tell the other man that everything was going to be okay.

"Would you like a drink?" Philip asked. "I've got a nice single malt."

Levi didn't know what that was, but it seemed polite to say yes. "Okay, sure. That would be great."

"It's the least I can do, under the circumstances." Philip moved to the dining area that was part of the living room because of the open floor plan. There was a tall bookcase there, with lots of books on the middle shelves and some scattered toys on the lower ones. On the top shelf were what looked like some picture frames laid flat—Levi could just see the edges of them, the slightly metallic sheen—and a bottle of liquor, which Philip took down and set on the dining table.

Philip went into the kitchen and came back with two glasses, then poured an inch or so of the amber-colored alcohol into each before handing one to Levi.

"Thanks," Levi said. He lifted the glass to his lips and took a tentative sip; it burned up into his sinuses and down his throat, but not in a bad way. It still made him choke a little, though. "It's—it's good." He cleared his throat.

Philip didn't laugh at him, at least. "It's a bit of an acquired taste."

"Like coffee," Levi said. "I used to think it was gross when I was a kid. Now I can't start the day without it." He sipped some more and felt himself starting to relax. "It really is good."

"Should we sit down? You said you went to college with Cooper?" They moved back into the living room and sat across from each other.

"Yeah. We met freshman year. I'd only been in the city a few months, and I was pretty desperate for a friendly face, and, well, you know Cooper. He's about the friendliest guy around." Levi looked down into his glass and thought for a few seconds, then added, "He didn't even blink when I told him I was gay. It didn't faze him." He dared a glance at Philip's face, checking for the man's reaction.

Philip wasn't blinking, either. "Well, why should it? He's a reasonably educated young man." He swallowed the rest of his own liquor in one big gulp that seemed effortless, like he'd just let it slide down his throat, then set the glass on the side table. "I take it you've had less pleasant reactions in the past?"

"Yeah," Levi said, remembering. "You could say that."

"Tell me." Philip's voice was so smooth and soothing, there was no way to resist it. Levi didn't want to.

"My family," he said, softly. Maybe it would hurt less that way. "I—um. I tried to come out to my mom when I was thirteen. The night I was bar mitzvahed, actually."

"She reacted poorly?" Philip asked.

Levi shook his head slightly. "She reacted so fast that she cut me off. Like she didn't want to hear it. She just kept talking and talking, not even taking a breath, until she could get the hell out of my room and away from me." He still felt her rejection keenly when he thought about it, even knowing that it was nothing compared to the bigger, more devastating

rejection that hadn't taken place until years later. "I'm sorry," he told Philip. "I don't—I don't know how to talk about this."

"Which isn't the same as not wanting to," Philip observed.
"Then what happened?"

"I went back to pretending," Levi said. "I mean, I didn't start dating girls or anything. But when things between me and my best friend in high school ... well, heated up—I didn't say anything. We pretended we were doing homework when we were alone in my room, and my mother acted like there was nothing wrong with it. Like she didn't suspect anything, even though I knew she did."

"And then you got caught." It was probably a guess on Philip's part, but it was a good one.

"And then we got caught." Levi tightened his hand around the glass he was holding and looked at Philip as he spoke the words. "I kissed him—Ross—at the back gate one night when we were saying goodbye. I didn't think anyone would see. Well, I didn't think about it at all, really. But my father—I guess he glanced through the garage window at just the wrong moment."

Philip was looking at him with so much compassion that he kept going. It was like now that he'd started, he couldn't stop.

"To say that he flipped out would be putting it mildly. He came storming out and met me halfway back to the house. He hit me. I'd never—he was a pretty calm guy, usually. I never saw him mad like that. His face was all red, and he hit me. Not very hard, I don't think, but I got a bloody nose anyway, and I slipped on the path, in the mud. He stood here, looking at me like I was—like I was the most disgusting

thing he'd ever seen. Then he told me to get into the house and get cleaned up, because we were going to have a talk." Levi's voice was rough.

"I'm sorry," Philip told him. Philip stood up, and for a few seconds Levi thought that was an indication that their conversation was over. Instead Philip came around the coffee table and sat on the couch with Levi—close enough to touch, though he didn't. "Then what happened?"

"Then he told me—they told me—that I could never see Ross again if I wanted to stay under their roof. I think they thought I wouldn't have a choice; it was only a few months until graduation, and they knew how much I wanted to go to college. They wanted that, too. But I couldn't. I couldn't make a promise I wouldn't keep, and I couldn't stay. So I packed a bag and went to stay at Ross' house until the end of May. Ross' mom is great. I wish she could have been mine." It felt disloyal to say it, but it was true. Levi discovered that his nose was stuffed up, then he felt a tissue being pressed into the hand closest to Philip. "Sorry. I've just—I don't talk about this." He'd never even told it to Cooper like this, not like it was a story.

"Hey. It's all right. I understand." Philip's hand rested warmly on his shoulder. When Levi turned his head to look at Philip, he discovered how close together they were. Philip's nose was inches from his. Philip's mouth—which was shockingly sexy up close—was inches from his.

Levi couldn't help it. He leaned in, wanting so badly to touch Philip's lips with his own, and Philip let him. Philip didn't pull back.

At least, not until a fraction of a second after their mouths actually did touch, just the faintest, most fleeting brush of tender skin over skin. Then Philip pulled back, and Levi's heart sank.

"I'm sorry," he said immediately, before Philip could accuse him of anything. "God, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry." Philip cradled the side of Levi's face, brushed a thumb across Levi's lips. His expression was one of genuine regret. "You're beautiful. But I can't."

Confused, Levi just blinked at him. "What—but, why?"

"I'm married," Philip said, hardening his voice. "I can't. I'm sorry. I think you should go."

The next thing Levi knew, he was sitting behind the wheel of his car with little memory of how he'd gotten there. What the hell had just happened?

He called Cooper the next day, halfway through the morning. "Hey, great party," he said.

"Yeah, I thought so, too," Cooper said. "You know how my mom loves to have people over."

"That was a party to end all parties," Levi told him. "I can't even start to imagine what the actual wedding's going to be like."

"Huge," Cooper said. "Okay, not really, apparently, according to people who know more about weddings than me."

"Which would be pretty much everyone," Levi pointed out.

"Right. Thanks for that." Cooper was typing away at his keyboard; Levi could hear it through the phone. "Anyway, Kate's family is planning it—along with some fairly heavy

assistance from my mom—and paying for it. So I figure they can do whatever they want. As long as I get to wear a tux and not something insane like leather pants."

Levi laughed. "Hey, so anyway, about why I'm calling..."

"It wasn't to hear the dulcet tones of my voice?" Cooper feigned sounding hurt. "Levi, I will never recover."

"What's the deal with Philip and Meg?"

The sudden silence at the other end of the line told him what a serious subject he'd broached. "Uh. Yeah."

"You don't have to tell me," Levi said. "I just—Julia kind of said something, and then Philip kind of said something, but neither of them actually told me the real story. You've got to help me out here. Keep me from saying something really stupid in front of the wrong people at the wrong time."

Cooper cleared his throat. "It's kind of complicated."

"What isn't? Hell, Coop, you know everything about me. Have I had a simple life? Who better to understand than me?"

"Okay," Cooper said finally, reluctantly. "But not over the phone. Can we meet for lunch? At Haver Park, near the gazebo. I'll bring sandwiches from Extra Cheesy—those turkey cranberry ones you like so much. Okay?"

"Sure," Levi said. He'd have agreed to pretty much anything to learn more about Philip, who had been the star of his masturbatory fantasy the night before.

Even if it meant meeting outside for lunch in the dead of winter.

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#### **Chapter Two**

"Holy shit!" Levi complained, slapping his hands against his upper arms in an attempt to drive some blood into them.

"It's, like, ten degrees below zero!"

"It isn't below zero at all, you big baby," Cooper told him. "Here, take your stupid sandwich."

"It's not like I can eat it; I can't even feel my fingers. Let's just walk." Levi tucked the bag holding his sandwich under his arm and his gloved hands into his armpits. Their shoes made crunching noises on the gravel-strewn running track.

"My mom would be really pissed if she knew I was telling you this," Cooper started.

Levi sighed. "Then I promise she won't find out I know."

"Okay." They took another dozen steps before Cooper went on. "I told you when Meg got sick, didn't I?"

"I think so." Levi racked his brain. "It was in her sophomore year, wasn't it?" He had a vague memory that she'd been diagnosed as bipolar, gone on meds, and met and married Philip.

"Yeah. Once they got her meds right, she and Philip got married—well, they eloped, which believe me my mom never forgave Meg for—she was really looking forward to planning a big wedding—and Meg was talking about going back to school."

Nodding, Levi said, "That was when she got pregnant." He specifically remembered how thrilled Mrs. Dixon had been about the impending arrival of her first grandchild.

"And when she went off her meds. They told her she shouldn't take them while she was pregnant." Cooper grimaced. "By the time Ashley was born, Meg was totally out of her head. Then she just took off."

"Where is she now?" Levi asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"We don't know," Cooper said. "No one's heard from her in almost two years."

"God."

"Yeah. My parents have hired private investigators and everything, but so far no luck. Personally ... I think she might be dead."

Levi didn't even know what to say to that. "How come you never told me?"

Cooper shrugged. "My mom didn't want me spreading it around. She's embarrassed, which is stupid, but she's also really upset about it, and I didn't want to make things worse for her. Plus it's not like there's anything you could do, you know?"

"No, but still. I don't know." The end of Levi's nose was starting to feel numb. "Look, let's go get coffee or something, this is ridiculous."

"It's more ridiculous than you know," Cooper told him, and they both laughed as they turned off the track and headed up the hill toward the shops on Park Street.

\* \* \* \*

The next evening when Levi got home from work, there was a small, formal-looking envelope in his mail slot along

with the bills and junk mail. He took all of it into the apartment and dropped the rest of it onto the small table where he always piled way too much stuff. Then he carefully pried open the seal.

Inside the envelope was a little handmade card. It was made from green construction paper and crayon scribbles. He opened it and inside was an adult's handwriting. "Thank you for bringing Hershey back." And then, in a larger, crooked script, "Love, Ashley." The smaller writing must be Philip's.

It was almost six o'clock; Levi had had a hard time getting out of the office. Before he could talk himself out of it, he flipped open his cell phone, found Philip's number, and dialed.

"Hello," Philip answered after the third ring.

"Hi. It's Levi." Now that he had Philip on the phone, he wasn't sure what to say to him. "Um. Could I talk to Ashley for a second? I wanted to thank her for the card."

"Of course." There was a moment's silence, then Ashley's little voice saying hello. She didn't have even a hint of a British accent, Levi realized.

"Hi," he said. "It's Levi. I wanted to say thank you for the card you sent me."

"Daddy wrote it," Ashley said.

"But you signed your name." Levi was already out of things to say. "Um, anyway. Thank you."

"Will you put it on your fridge?" Ashley asked.

"What?"

"On your fridge. With a magnet. To save it." It sounded like she thought it was a perfectly reasonable suggestion.

"Oh. Sure." Levi only had a couple of magnets on his refrigerator, and they were all the flat, rectangular kind with ads on them. "I will. I'll save it."

"Okay." Philip murmured something in the background and Ashley said, "My daddy wants to talk to you. Bye!"

"Bye."

"Hello, Levi," Philip said. "I hoped you might have a moment to talk?"

"Sure. What about?" His heart was beating quicker than usual, and his hands were starting to feel kind of sweaty.

"About the other night."

"Oh. That."

"I'm very sorry," Philip said. "I know I was giving you mixed signals, and that certainly wasn't my intention. The truth is ... the truth is, my wife left us some time ago, and I don't know if she's ever coming back. That makes things complicated, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"You're straight," Levi said, because that was the easiest, shortest explanation.

Philip snorted. "No, actually, I'm not. I don't even know that I'm bisexual. When Meg and I met, I'd never dated a woman. But we grew very close very quickly. We had sex once—one night, when we were both very drunk—and she got pregnant."

"Does Ashley know that?" Levi asked. He could picture her sitting right there, listening to everything Philip said.

"Not all of it," Philip said. "Don't worry; she's in the other room doing her homework. But she knows that most people

are neither completely straight nor gay—as much as she understand the concepts at her age, at least."

"So ... I guess I don't know what you're trying to tell me."

Philip sighed. "I don't suppose I know, myself. I think I just wanted you to know. To understand. I didn't want you to think it was you, especially after you were so open with me."

"That was sort of an accident," Levi admitted, and Philip chuckled. It was a rich, deep chuckle; Levi liked the sound of it.

"Well, I'm still pleased that it happened. I like you. If things were different..."

"But they're not." Levi finally got what Philip was trying to say. "It's okay."

"I hope so," Philip said. "I do like you. If you thought we could be friends, I'd like that as well. But I'll understand if that's not something you want."

"No," Levi said, then winced. "I mean, yes, it is. I'd like that, too. Friends is good." It wasn't like it was possible to have too many friends, especially handsome ones with sexy British accents. "So, are you going to the thing this weekend?"

"The thing where we get fitted for tuxedos? Yes. I suppose we'll see each other there."

"I suppose we will," Levi agreed, and hung up feeling inexplicably better.

"You're late," Cooper said to Levi as he walked into the formalwear shop.

Levi checked his watch. "Two minutes. When did you get so anal?"

"When I told him if he didn't get everyone here, I wouldn't have sex with him for a week," Kate murmured in Levi's ear. Then, in a more normal voice, she said, "Oh, good, here's Philip."

"Sorry I'm late," Philip said, pulling off his gloves. He was wearing a brown knitted hat tugged down over his hair, and his cheeks were ruddy with the cold. "Ashley has a bit of a hard time with my leaving, some days."

Which made perfect sense to anyone who knew the story.

"Well, we're all here now," Cooper said. "Kate, which one did you like again?"

"This gray one." Kate pointed to it on the flyer, then looked at the salesman who was loitering nearby. "Can we see it in person?"

"Of course," he said, and disappeared into a back room.

"I thought tuxedos were black," Cooper said, which made Levi feel better, because he'd been thinking the same thing.

"Tuxedos are black," Philip said. "But this is an afternoon wedding, so it calls for morning suits. Which aren't technically tuxedos, and which aren't black."

"Wow, way to be the know-it-all brother-in-law." Cooper punched Philip's shoulder playfully.

Philip hit him back. "There are plenty of things I don't know, and most of them are more important than this."

"This is important!" Kate said. "It's our wedding!"

"It's just one day," Philip told her. "I'm not saying that it's not important, or that you shouldn't want everything just so. But in the grand scheme of things..."

Kate looked sober, as if she was thinking about Philip and Meg. "Yeah, I get what you're saying. You're right."

Reaching out to touch Kate's shoulder, Philip said, "But I don't want to spoil your fun. What color will the ladies be wearing?"

"Fluorescent purple!" Cooper shouted, then dodged Kate's slap. "Oh, no, I forgot—neon orange!"

"Like hunters," Levi said helpfully.

"So we don't accidentally shoot each other," Philip added, and laughed.

"If you guys get us thrown out of here for rowdy behavior, I'll never forgive you." Kate glared at them.

The sales guy who'd gone to get the sample suit came back with it. Kate held it up to Cooper, who with his blond hair looked good in anything, and nodded. "Yeah, this one. Definitely." She gave it back to the sales guy. He held it up in front of Levi.

"Mm, yes. Very nice." It was said in a professional tone, but the admiring look the guy was giving Levi was anything but. "Now we'll get everyone's measurements, and just fill out a few forms. Sir?"

Cooper got measured first, then the sales guy lingered over Levi's measurements, to the point where Levi felt kind of uncomfortable about it. It was one thing to be admired and another entirely to be molested. He glanced up and caught Philip watching him. "Hey, you're next," Levi said.

Philip grinned. God, he had a great smile, wide and generous. It made it harder to forget their almost-kiss, looking at his lips like that. Levi turned his attention back to

the sales guy, who was writing his measurements down, and told himself firmly that there was no chance of anything happening between him and Philip. No chance at all.

When all the measuring had been done and the forms filled out, Levi said his goodbyes and headed for the parking lot down the street where he'd left his car. He was about halfway there when he heard someone calling his name. He stopped and turned.

"Hey," Philip said, coming toward him. "I was wondering if you'd like to go get a coffee." When Levi hesitated, he added, "Come on. Please? Do you have any idea how rare it is for me to have a free hour in the middle of the afternoon?"

"Okay." Levi shoved his hands into his pockets. "God, it's cold. I can't wait for spring."

"It won't be long now." Philip pulled the hat he'd been wearing before out of his pocket and offered it to Levi. "Seriously, take it. The cold doesn't trouble me."

Levi blinked at him, and Philip, moving slowly, pulled the hat down onto Levi's head.

"There," Philip said. His hands lingered on Levi's cheeks.

"It looks good." His voice was soft, his eyes gentle. Under any other circumstances, Levi would have thought Philip was being romantic. But he couldn't have been. Could he?

They walked together to the big bookstore on the corner, which had a coffee shop in it. At least inside the building was warm.

"What would you like?" Philip asked, taking out his wallet.

"Just a regular coffee," Levi said. "You don't have to pay for me, though."

"I don't have to," Philip agreed. "I want to."

"Wouldn't that make this sort of a date?" Levi asked, then immediately regretted it.

Philip looked at him. "I suppose it would."

Levi's stomach did a weird half-flip. "Oh," he said in a small voice. "But..."

"Lord, don't get started with the buts," Philip said, rolling his eyes and stepping up to the counter as the person in front of them in line moved away. "Two medium coffees, please."

"Columbian or French roast?" the girl asked.

"One Columbian," Philip said, glancing at Levi. "French roast always tastes burnt to me."

"Two Columbians," Levi said firmly. He'd never noticed the difference, but Philip seemed to know what he was talking about. "What do you mean, don't get started with the buts?"

"There are enough reasons why I shouldn't be doing this," Philip told him. "Don't add to them." He handed money to the cashier, then looked at Levi again, more seriously. "Unless you don't want to do this. Which, under the circumstances, I'd completely understand."

"I think I'm just a little confused," Levi said as they took their cups of coffee and moved to the station where the cream and sugar were.

"I don't blame you." Philip sighed. "I'm more than a little bit confused. But ... I want to spend time with you. I've been thinking about you all the time, and you even starred in a rather erotic dream I had last night."

That was nice to hear. "Yeah? Was I any good?"

"You were fantastic," Philip said, blowing steam from the top of his coffee in a way that got Levi's attention focused on his lips again.

"Um. Good." He quickly added a dollop of cream to his cup and glanced around. "Do you want to sit down? Or maybe wander? Sometimes that makes talking easier. You know, if you're just sitting across from someone, and you have to keep looking at them, it can be—"

"Yes." Philip was watching him with an amused expression.

"By all means, let's wander."

By the time they'd strolled past the travel section and into cookbooks, the heat in Levi's cheeks had faded. He hoped. It had been a long time since he'd gotten all nervous-talky like that, but it turned out he still found it embarrassing.

"I'm always looking for recipes Ashley will eat," Philip said, paging through a book with brightly colored photographs.

Levi leaned against a shelf. "Is she one of those picky eaters?"

"I don't know. She's really the only child I'm familiar with, so it's hard to tell. She doesn't like foods that are mixed together, so any sort of casserole is out. Oh, other than salad, she likes that."

"You'd think that would be good," Levi said. "I mean, at least she's eating vegetables, right?"

Philip nodded. "There is that. But I get rather tired of macaroni and cheese—"

"That's two things mixed together," Levi said helpfully.

"More, if you count the cheese sauce ingredients."

"Yes, thank you," Philip said dryly. "I don't care how many ingredients it has. It could have a thousand and it wouldn't make it any more appealing the third night in a row."

"Fair enough. But I still like mac and cheese." Levi took a book off the shelf and started leafing through it.

"Well, you eat it, then," Philip muttered, grinning goodnaturedly despite his tone.

Levi raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like it could be an invitation."

"Levi," Philip said very seriously. "Would you like to come have dinner at my house tonight? Keeping in mind, of course, that we would be accompanied by my young daughter."

"I'd love to," Levi said. Someone went to pass behind him in the aisle, and he stepped closer to Philip. A little closer than he'd intended. "Sorry."

"I'm not." Philip glanced at his watch. "Damn. I've got to go—if I'm late, Ashley gets very upset. Because of her mother."

That last bit didn't seem easy to say, so Levi patted Philip's arm awkwardly. "Yeah."

"Come over at six?" Philip suggested.

"I'll be there," he said.

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#### **Chapter Three**

Levi changed shirts twice before he went over to Philip's. Not because he couldn't decide how he wanted to look, but because the first two shirts were literally unacceptable—one was missing a button, and the other had a stain he hadn't noticed before he'd put it into the wash.

Having come home still wearing Philip's hat, he put it on again when he left his place. He was pretty sure it was meant to be a loan, and it was better to be safe than sorry. Imagine if he got there without the hat and Philip said, "Hey, where's my hat?" (Only cooler, what with the whole British way of speaking thing.) Showing up without it could be a recipe for total embarrassment.

Ashley was the one who opened the door when he knocked, although Philip was ten seconds behind her, scolding, "How many times have I told you not to open the door unless I'm with you?"

"But you said Levi was coming for dinner," Ashley said, clearly perplexed by what she saw as contradictory information.

"That's not the point," Philip said. He smiled at Levi and tugged Ashley backward to give Levi room to come in.

"Daddy," Ashley said, tilting her head to one side and looking at Levi. "He's wearing your hat."

"I know. I gave it to him this afternoon. He was cold and I wasn't."

"Daddy's never cold," Ashley told Levi. "Sometimes he wears shorts in the middle of winter! And he forgets to wear his coat. All the time!"

"He must be warm-blooded," Levi said, but even that fairly simple comment seemed to go over her head. Or maybe she just didn't care. Either way, she turned and went back to the dining area, where she'd been playing with what Levi was pretty sure was Play-Doh. It was really brightly colored, whatever it was.

"I'm making caterpillars!" she said as Levi and Philip walked over to join her.

Indeed, there was a collection of small, caterpillar-shaped forms on the table, spread out in an arc like a Technicolor rainbow. "Very nice," Levi said, since some response seemed to be required of him.

"Let me take your coat," Philip said.

"Put the hat in the sleeve," Ashley ordered. "That way he won't lose it."

"He's a grown up," Philip reminded her, sounding amused.
"He won't lose his hat."

"Your hat," Ashley said.

Philip shook his head. "It's his now. I gave it to him."

"Actually, she's right. I lose stuff all the time." Sheepishly, Levi took off the hat and gave it to Philip, who, obeying without further argument, shoved it down into a sleeve of Levi's coat. "I mean, I won't lose your hat."

"It wouldn't bode well if you did." From the kitchen, there was a sudden, strange hissing sound. "Bloody hell!" Philip

immediately thrust Levi's coat back into his arms and disappeared into the kitchen.

Levi draped the coat over the back of a chair and followed Philip. "Uh ... is there anything I can do to help?"

"Sort out a way to get it into my head that a watched pot may not boil, but an unwatched one will always boil over." Philip had lifted the pot from the burner; underneath, in the burner pan, water sizzled. "I do this every bloody time."

"It's just water," Ashley said loyally, as if she'd heard it a hundred times before. Maybe she had.

"I know, I know." Dumping some of the water into the sink, Philip set the pot on a different burner and turned that burner on. "Well, at least it will boil in less time now." He looked anxiously at Levi. "You're not starving, are you?"

"No," Levi said. "Don't worry about it—I can wait."

"Levi, come make a caterpillar. You can use the gold," Ashley said as if it was a particular treat.

"Okay." He went back to the dining area, sat in the chair next to Ashley's, and made first a gold caterpillar, then a blue and green striped one, and finally a butterfly. "For when it comes out of its cocoon," he explained.

Ashley looked impressed. "Can it fly?"

Leaning in to whisper conspiratorially, Levi said, "Let's find out!" He pried the bug from the table and tossed it at the sliding glass door along the back wall. It flew pretty impressively for about four feet, then hit the glass with a splat. And stuck there. Ashley started giggling and Levi said, "Shh!" at her just as Philip stepped into the doorway. "Uh oh!" Levi stage-whispered. "Are we in trouble?"

"I don't get in trouble for doing kid things," Ashley confided. "But you're not a kid."

"Am I in trouble?" Levi asked Philip, and Philip smiled.

"We'll let it slide this time," he said. "Just don't let it happen again. Ash, it's almost dinner time. Please put the Play-Doh away and wash your hands. You, too," he told Levi.

"The package says it's non-toxic." Levi held one of the little yellow cups up.

"Just because it won't make you sick, that doesn't mean you'd like the shock of seeing a neon surprise in the toilet the next day," Philip said severely.

"I'm not going to eat it," Levi said.

Ashley, who'd been busily shoving wads of dough into containers without any apparent concern for color separation, looked up. "I did," she said. "It tastes funny. Like salt."

"From a child who won't eat soup." Philip went back into the kitchen to deal with the food, and Ashley and Levi went to the nearby bathroom to wash their hands. When they came back, the mess was gone, the table was set, and Philip was bringing in a glass bowl of salad and a bottle of salad dressing. "I know this isn't very formal, but I don't have anything proper to put it in."

"Please tell me you're not one of those people who decants ketchup into little ceramic bowls with matching spoons," Levi said.

"Ooh, can we, Daddy?" Ashley asked. "I like ketchup."

"No and no," Philip said, going back for two casserole dishes; one had macaroni and cheese in it, and the other had

green peas. "Okay. Is that everything? Oh, wine? Levi, would you like some?"

"I don't know," Levi said. He grinned. "What kind of wine goes with mac and cheese?"

Philip pointed at Ashley's napkin, eyebrows raised, then said, "I have a nice Pinot Grigio in the fridge. I generally have a glass with dinner. Of wine, I mean, not necessarily that type."

"Sure, I'll try some."

By the time Philip got the wine and sat down, Ashley had put her napkin in her lap and served herself a large helping of macaroni and a tiny helping of peas.

"You're going to take more vegetables than that, I hope," Philip said.

"I took some!" Ashley protested.

"Three peas is hardly 'some.'" Philip was smiling.

"Fine," Ashley said, in a tone Levi would have expected from a teenager. "I'll take more."

"Thank you," Philip said.

They talked—mostly Levi and Philip, with the occasional input from Ashley, who seemed intent on stabbing one tine of her fork directly into the middle of each pea—about a variety of things. Philip was in advertising, and often worked extra hours at night after Ashley had gone to bed.

"It's the kind of profession that requires a certain amount of commitment," Philip said, almost apologetically. "It wasn't easy even when Meg was—" He cut himself off and shot a worried look at Ashley.

She didn't appear upset, though, just kept shoveling macaroni into her mouth.

"Later," Philip said quietly. "Can you stay until she's in bed? We should talk."

Levi swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I can do that."

After dinner, they played a board game so simple that a cat probably could have participated—if it had had opposable thumbs. Then Ashley was sent to put on her pajamas, a job that could have taken about two minutes but instead took fifteen because she kept coming back out to the living room to tell them "something really important." Levi thought it was adorable, but he could tell Philip was finding it frustrating so he tried not to smile. It was hard, though. She was so cute.

"I want Levi to read to me," she announced when she reappeared, finally wearing her pink flannel pajamas. She danced from one foot to the other. "My toes are cold!"

"That's why you're supposed to wear your slippers," Philip said. "Why don't I just read to you, like always?"

"I want Levi," Ashley said, pouting.

"I don't mind," Levi said, and Ashley smiled triumphantly.

He read her some poems by Shel Silverstein until her eyes started to close against her will, then bookmarked the page and said, "I think you'd better go to sleep now." She didn't answer, although her eyes were still partway open, and he stood and took a step toward the doorway when she spoke.

"Meg is my mommy."

"Oh, yeah?" Levi said, stopping, because it seemed like he should say something and that was the best he could come up with.

"She went away." Ashley turned onto her side, snuggling under the covers. "She was sick a lot. Sometimes she didn't come home at night. And then she didn't come home at all."

Levi thought desperately. "You must have been very sad." "I was. I wish she'd come home." Her voice was so little.

From the doorway, there was a small sound. When Levi turned his head to look, he saw Philip standing there, one hand on the door frame. He waited to see if Ashley would say anything else, but her breathing had evened out, her eyelashes silver against her cheeks, so Levi walked softly toward Philip, who melted into the shadows of the hallway to make room for him to pass. Philip went straight for the single malt, poured himself twice as much as he'd had the other night, and tossed it back.

Philip rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and said in a low voice, "I didn't know she remembered any of that."

"I guess kids can have better memories than we give them credit for," Levi said uncertainly. "Do—do you still want to talk?"

"You know, I think it might be better if we don't. Maybe you should go. Get out while you still can." Philip didn't sound like he really meant it. He sounded bleak, hopeless, and when he lifted his eyes to meet Levi's, something in them made it clear that he was a man bereft.

"Not a chance," Levi said.

Philip set down his empty glass, strode across the room, and kissed Levi.

It was a hard, almost brutal kiss, basically the opposite of the one they'd barely had before, and it turned Levi on all the way down to his toes. Philip's hands were on his face, tilting Levi's head for a better angle, and his mouth tasted sharp like liquor. "God, I want you," Philip muttered.

"Okay," Levi said, feeling dazed. Philip's hands slid down along his sides and around to his ass, and it felt so good. Levi couldn't remember the last time anything had felt so good. "Okay. We can do that."

"We have to go to the bedroom," Philip said. "Where we can lock the door." He was already pushing Levi in that direction.

"Okay. Yeah, good." Knowing he sounded like an idiot didn't make it any easier for Levi to stop, but luckily Philip didn't seem to care. They stumbled their way down the hall and into the darkened bedroom at the end of it.

Philip shut and locked the door, then turned and took Levi's mouth in another incredibly intense kiss, hands busy slipping the buttons on Levi's shirt free from their button holes. Levi gasped when Philip palmed across his bare skin, and groaned when Philip pushed his shirt down off his shoulder and kissed it, lips hot and wet. "I want to take off all your clothes," Philip said. "I want to suck your cock. God, Levi..."

"Do it," Levi said, grabbing Philip's hand and pressing it to his still-covered erection. "Please, Philip."

Somehow, Levi's pants were unfastened and shoved down, and then Philip was on his knees, mouth closing over the tip of Levi's cock. It was made all the better because it was so

unexpected. Levi couldn't even move—he was wearing his shoes, and his pants were caught around his ankles. All he could do was thread his fingers into Philip's amazing, thick hair and try to bite back the moans he would have gladly let slip if Ashley's bedroom hadn't been so close by.

It wasn't easy. Philip's lips slid down, down to the base of Levi's dick, then back up toward the head, the suction exquisite. Levi panted and tried not to pull on Philip's hair too uncomfortably. He closed his eyes, because the sight of Philip kneeling in front of him, lips stretched around his cock, was just too much. He shuddered, not wanting to come too soon because it felt so damned good.

Then Philip slid a warm hand around Levi's balls, lightly stroked them, and he went off like a rocket. The first fierce spurt threatened to buckle his knees; he was grateful for Philip's hands steadying him, and shocked at the adoration he felt when he opened his eyes and looked at the man. The waves of pleasure lasted until Levi was trembling with exhaustion.

"Here—lie down," Philip said.

Levi found himself being guided to the bed and pushed down onto it. Gentle and capable hands undid his shoes—he could hear the two thumps as they hit the floor—and freed his ankles from the tangle of his pants and underwear. Then Philip lay down next to him and kissed him.

"Wow," Levi said. "That was ... intense."

"For me, too," Philip told him. He took Levi's hand and held it against the front of his pants, which Levi could feel were damp.

"Very intense." Levi rolled toward Philip and slung an arm around him. "But you're still all dressed."

"I am. We'll have to do something about that, won't we?" Neither of them moved, though, content to lie there and feel each other's warmth and recover from their exertion.

What Levi could see of the room was decidedly masculine. There was a small framed poster of what looked like an ad for furniture hung on the wall, and nothing out of place. "It doesn't look like anyone lives here," he observed. "Oh, God, I'm sorry—I didn't realize how that would sound."

"It's all right," Philip said quietly. "I did it over about six months ago. If you'd seen it before, you wouldn't recognize it. But I needed it to stop looking like Meg. The constant reminder was more than I could bear."

"Is that—when you stopped thinking she might come back?" Levi asked, hesitant but curious. Besides, Philip had said they needed to talk, and he was pretty sure this had been the intended topic of conversation.

"I think so." Philip's fingers traced a vein along the inside of Levi's arm. "I suppose Cooper gave you all the details?"

"Yeah, but only because I asked. I mean, it wasn't idle gossip or anything."

"Oh, I know. The Dixons are very discreet. Also a bit ashamed, I think. They don't like the thought of their daughter being mentally ill, let alone a drug addict who abandoned her husband and child." Philip sounded bitter, not that Levi blamed him.

"It must have been really hard."

"Strangely, it got easier when she left for good. Well, after the first few months, at least; then I was waiting for her to come home, wondering what sort of trouble she might have got herself into in the meantime. Wondering if she'd come home in withdrawal, begging for more money. Which there wasn't, at that point, because I hadn't been able to bring myself to take her name off the accounts. She even spent Ash's college money—not that there was much of it."

"Are you guys—are you okay now?"

Philip rolled onto his back and looked at the ceiling.
"Financially, you mean? Yes, we're fine. The Dixons have been fantastic about the whole situation. They even watched Ashley during the week when I was working, before she started kindergarten this year."

Unsure if the snuggling portion of the post-sex period was over, Levi stayed where he was. "I kind of know what that's like," he offered, thinking it might make Philip feel better. "I mean, after my parents—well, you know—my grandmother sent me a check. Until I got it, I was totally freaking out. I had no idea how I was going to live after graduation, let alone go to college."

"That was nice of her," Philip said. "Of course, it's too bad she couldn't have talked some sense into your parents instead."

Levi laughed, sounding bitter himself. "They got to her, first. The condition of me taking the money was that I could never tell them she helped me."

"But what would stop you from cashing the check and then telling them?" Philip asked, puzzled.

"Other than the fact that I actually have morals?" Levi hitched himself up onto an elbow so he could see Philip's face.

"Sorry," Philip said. "Yes, other than that."

"Well, it's pretty easy not to tell someone something when you don't talk to them."

"At all? Ever?" Philip lifted his hand and touched Levi's cheek. "You deserve so much better."

"Maybe," Levi said, shrugging. "But life's not really about people getting what they deserve. Look at you and Ashley. Did you deserve what happened with Meg?"

Philip sighed. "I might have. If we hadn't got so incredibly pissed that night that I slept with her..."

"Then there wouldn't be any Ashley," Levi pointed out, and Philip looked startled.

"No, you're right. Of course there wouldn't. And that would be—I can't even imagine." Philip tugged at Levi's shoulder until he moved closer and lay down with his head sharing the pillow. Neither of them said anything for a little while. Levi rubbed one fingertip across Philip's nipple, watching it tighten and then soften again. "I think she's dead," Philip offered finally. "I think Meg's dead."

Levi hugged him. "Wouldn't you have heard? I mean, the police..."

"The police have better things to do than look for someone who left of her own accord," Philip said. "Don't get me wrong—the Dixons hired a couple of private investigators to look for her, and I think officially they still are, but it's been a long time." He sighed more heavily. His fingers carded through Levi's hair. "I want to tell you something. Can I?"

Levi could hear what he was asking loud and clear. Can I trust you? "Yeah. Yes. You can tell me anything. I promise."

"And you take your promises seriously." Philip hesitated for a long moment, and Levi waited, trying to be patient. "I don't just think she's dead. I hope she is." He turned his head to look at Levi, even though it was awkward. "Do you think that makes me a horrible person?"

"No! God, no! No, I don't think that."

"The thought of her out there on the streets. What she must be doing to get money for the drugs. It makes me—I don't know, it makes me crazy." Pushing himself to a sitting position against the headboard, Philip ran both hands through his hair, making it stand up wildly. "It makes me want to—to break things, to go to some bar and start a fight, just so I can feel—arrrh!" He banged his head into the wall, but not hard enough to hurt himself or, hopefully, wake Ashley.

That didn't mean Levi found it any less alarming. "Hey," he said, sitting up and getting a hand along the back of Philip's skull to cushion it from any further impact. "I know it's not easy, but don't freak out on me."

"Not easy?" Philip repeated. "Not easy? Well, isn't that the understatement of the century."

"Don't take this out on me," Levi said. He might be insecure sometimes, but he wasn't a doormat. "It's not my fault."

Philip gave him an apologetic look. "No, of course not. I'm sorry."

Letting his hand slide down to the back of Philip's neck—which was more comfortable than having his knuckles

pressed against the drywall—Levi leaned in and kissed him. Philip made a soft, maybe desperate sound into Levi's mouth and clung to him. By the time they separated, Levi had one goal in mind. "You think it'd be okay if I took your clothes off now?"

"I think that would be all right," Philip said, and Levi went to work.

Levi ended up spending most of the night, then sneaking out very early, some time before five. Philip crept to the front door with him and kissed him goodbye very thoroughly. "I'll call you," Philip whispered.

"Okay," Levi said.

He drove home, where he collapsed into bed for a couple of hours before his alarm went off and forced him into the shower with its piercing beep. Standing with the hot water stinging his face did little to wake him up, so he swung by Starbucks on the way to the office—a rare treat—and got a tall mocha in the hopes that it would do what the shower hadn't. Still, he couldn't successfully stifle a yawn when he picked up his ringing phone just after ten.

"Hey," Brian said. "What are you up to tonight? You want to get together?" That was a euphemism for "fuck." He must have heard the tail end of Levi's yawn, because he added, "Oh, sorry, am I keeping you up?"

"No, my job's doing that," Levi told him. "God, just come over here and kill me now." His head was pounding and he could barely keep his eyes open.

Brian didn't sound nearly sympathetic enough. "You're hung over, aren't you?"

"Believe it or not, all I had to drink last night was a glass of wine. At six o'clock."

"Okay," Brian said slowly. "So what else did you take? X? Or did you just get really, really stoned? Oh man, don't tell me you got really, really stoned without me?"

Levi groaned and cradled his head in his hand. "I didn't."

"Then what the hell—" Brian swore under his breath. "You hooked up with someone. You were up all night having hot hook-up sex."

"Yes," Levi said, too tired to deny it. "Yes, okay. Really hot sex. Almost all night, although I think there was some sleeping in there somewhere."

"Almost all night?" Brian snorted. "You're getting old if you were sleeping instead of fucking."

"Not old, just very tired. And technically there wasn't fucking. I mean, there was no, you know." Levi lowered his voice, which was completely unnecessary because he was in his own (admittedly small) office with the door closed and there was no one who could overhear him unless he'd been shouting. "Actual fucking."

Brian made a tsking noise. "You were with a guy all night and you just, what, practiced frottage?"

"'Practiced frottage'?" Levi felt like crap, but that didn't mean he couldn't laugh at the absurd. "What the hell kind of language is that, you jerk? Don't tell me you've been reading The Joy of Gay Sex again."

"It's a classic," Brian protested. "Anyway, come on. I want all the dirt."

"It's not like that," Levi said. "It's not—" God, he didn't think he was mentally capable of explaining it right then. "Look, he's a nice guy, okay? I like him. Kind of a lot."

"Oh my goodness, little Levi's in love," Brian crowed, and Levi, not in the mood to put up with his crap, hung up the phone.

Of course, Brian called back twenty seconds later. Levi was tempted not to answer the phone this time, but the sound of ringing wasn't doing his headache any favors. "Yes, what? And don't be a jerk this time or I'll hang up again."

"I'm sorry," Brian said, sounding sincere. "I didn't know this was such a big deal. It is, isn't it? A big deal."

"Yeah," Levi said, and laid his head down on the desk.
"Yeah, it is."

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#### **Chapter Four**

After work, Levi went straight home and back to bed. He slept hard for four hours and woke up a little before ten, then rolled over and stared at the ceiling, seriously contemplating going back to sleep. But his stomach was growling and the thought of food was even better than sleep.

He'd just finished shoving the first half of a grilled cheese sandwich into his mouth when the phone rang. He checked it before answering, then hastily swallowed, choked, and pushed the button. "Hello? Hi, Philip."

"Hi," Philip said, his accent warm and affectionate. "How are you?"

"Good," Levi said. "Um, you know. Tired. What about you?"

"I slept through my alarm," Philip said. "I didn't have time to take a shower. Ashley missed the bus and I had to drive her to school, then my boss gave me a hard time for being late. And I fell asleep at my desk mid-afternoon and drooled on my shirt."

"Oh, God," Levi said, stricken. "I'm so sorry—"

"Levi," Philip said, stopping him in mid-babble. "It was completely worth it."

Levi found himself grinning. "Oh," he said. "Was it? I mean, it was for me."

"I'm glad. Would you like to do it again sometime?"
"Yes."

Philip chuckled. "Well, I couldn't ask for a more definitive answer. This weekend? Friday night? I'd love to do it sooner, but this week is crazy for me at work, and Ashley's starting her new dance lessons."

"Oh. Okay." He was disappointed; it was only Monday. He was supposed to wait all week? It sounded like forever, and he knew it was going to feel that way.

"I swear, if there were any way I could do it sooner, I would." Philip sounded genuinely regretful. "It's just impossible." More roughly, he added, "If it helps, I can assure you that I'll be thinking of you constantly."

"Well ... yeah. Actually, that does help. Friday's good." Levi looked at his sandwich, growing cold on the plate, the cheese congealing, then leaned back in his chair and got comfortable. "So, what else did you do today?"

The week crawled by. It was a good thing Levi was busy at work, because that helped. So did the three lengthy, post-Ashley's-bedtime phone calls that he and Philip had. He learned how Philip had come to the U.S.—to go to college, and then never left—and how he'd met Meg—at a party, and they'd both known immediately that they were destined to be best friends. The sex had come later, on a bad night for both of them, with Ashley the surprise result.

Levi told Philip about his first two years in Madison, when he'd been so scared he'd run out of his grandmother's money that he'd lived on as close to nothing as possible. Ramen noodles and spaghetti and macaroni and cheese seven days a week.

"And I made you eat more," Philip moaned.

Levi laughed and said it was okay, it was fine, it was great. He'd learned to darn his own socks in an attempt to eke a few more months out of them. "Well, I guess it wasn't really darning in the strictest sense of the word. I'm not totally sure what darning even is."

Now, with a good, secure job doing graphic design and a fairly nice apartment in a safe neighborhood, Levi's life was a little less crazy.

He even told Philip about Brian. "But he's just a friend."

"A friend you have sex with," Philip repeated. "Not that I'm in any position to judge; I have a wife I don't have sex with. It isn't awkward?"

"Not really," Levi said. "I mean, we both knew from the beginning that we weren't compatible like that. The sex is fun, because we're friends, but we don't really expect anything more than that from each other."

"And are you ... still sleeping with him?" Philip asked.

"Um." He wasn't, and not for lack of Brian asking. In fact, it seemed like Brian was more interested in him than ever, which was a little disconcerting. "Well, no, actually. Now that you mention it. No."

"Oh. Is that—would I be remiss in assuming that's because of me?"

"Nope," Levi said. "Not remiss." For the first time, he wondered if it was mutual. On the one hand, Philip had said he hadn't had sex in ages, but on the other it wasn't like they had any kind of arrangement. This early period, when things were still being negotiated, were definitely not Levi's favorite.

"What are you thinking?" Philip asked.

"What?" He'd totally lost track of the conversation, and wasn't sure if he'd missed something Philip had said. "Uh."

"I'm not interested in anyone but you," Philip told him.

Levi wished they were in the same room so he could see Philip's face. Talking on the phone wasn't the same at all. "What if Meg came back?"

Philip cleared his throat before answering. "I don't think that's going to happen, Levi."

"But what if it did?" Maybe he should have thought about this more carefully before getting involved.

"I really don't think it will," Philip said. "But if she came back—well, things would be different than they were when she left. Obviously she'd have a place in our lives—she's Ashley's mother first and foremost—but I don't think I could go back to the way things were even if you weren't in the picture."

Relieved, Levi said, "Okay. It's just—and I'm not trying to put pressure on you, you know?—but I don't want to get fucked over."

"I completely understand. I promise you, that's the last thing I'd want to do." Philip lowered his voice. "So I'll see you tomorrow night? Ashley's going to sleep over at the Dixons'—she loves that, they spoil her rotten—so if you'll agree to eat here, I'll promise you something much more adult than macaroni and cheese."

"I can't wait," Levi said.

Friday night at six-thirty, Levi pulled up in front of Philip's house. The porch light was on and the place looked warm, somehow. He considered jogging up the walkway, but it had

snowed, just a few flurries, that afternoon, and he figured with his luck he'd slip and end up at the ER instead of in Philip's bed, which was pretty much all he'd been able to think about all day.

He'd had an extra cup of coffee mid-afternoon, not wanting to be low energy, and as a result his heart was pounding as he knocked on the door. It had to be the coffee.

Philip opened the door. "Hi."

"Hi," Levi said.

After waiting a few seconds, Philip grinned. "Are you coming in?"

"What? Oh! Yeah, sorry." God, he could be such a dork sometimes. He stepped inside so Philip could close the door and shut out the cold.

"I've missed you," Philip said, and kissed him. Levi thought it was supposed to be a casual, welcoming kiss, but it very quickly turned into something else entirely.

"Dinner?" Levi finally asked desperately, when his coat was on the floor and his shirt was half unbuttoned. He had one hand down inside Philip's unfastened pants.

"Fuck dinner," Philip said.

Levi shook his head, lips moving against Philip's. "No, I meant—God, yes, like that—is it going to set the house on fire or anything?"

"No. No, it's fine, on low keeping warm. No fires, I promise." Philip pinched Levi's nipple again and lowered his head to suck on it. Levi's dick jolted inside his jeans, pressing almost painfully against the zipper, and he moaned softly.

"I don't want to wait for dinner," he gasped.

"You're mad if you think we're waiting for dinner," Philip murmured into his ear. "God, everything's in the bedroom, though. We'll have to move."

"Move? You mean walk?" Levi giggled, actually giggled. He felt high, so turned on that his blood was singing through his veins.

"It's not far," Philip said. "It's quite close by, actually. Remember?" He sucked on Levi's ear lobe, then slid his mouth lower along the sensitive column of Levi's throat. "Here—I'll help you."

It was the second time Levi could barely recall their kiss-interrupted stumble to the bedroom, but this time they didn't need to close the door, and this time when they fell down onto the mattress, they were both naked. He couldn't get enough of the feel of Philip's skin against his own, cool and smooth. "Fuck me," he begged, as Philip, on hands and knees, bent and nuzzled his cock. "Please, please tell me you're going to fuck me this time, because I—I need it. Need you."

"Is that what you need?" Philip reached over and came back with a bottle of lube. "You want me to put my cock here?" Slick fingers teased the skin beneath Levi's balls, slipped over his opening.

Levi lifted his hips. "Yes."

"Right here?" Philip's finger pushed inside him, wet and insistent. It felt good.

"Yes."

"Here?" Two fingers now, working slowly in and out, curling, finding his prostate, and Levi shuddered. "Is this where you want me?"

"Please. Please, Philip..."

"It's okay," Philip said. He sounded so calm; somehow, that just made Levi more crazy. "You don't have to wait anymore, love. I'm going to fuck you now."

Levi gritted his teeth to keep from sobbing while Philip smoothed on a condom and knelt between his thighs. The first press of Philip's cock inside him made Levi inhale sharply, his lips parted. It felt so wide, his body stretching to accommodate it. Even though it hadn't been that long since Levi'd been fucked, this was different. Philip slid inside like he belonged there; his cock was slightly curved, the ridge of the head rubbing across Levi's prostate with the first complete stroke, and all conscious thought fled.

He didn't know how long it went on—it could have been one minute or twenty. He was aware of the sound of his own moans, of the rhythmic thumps of the headboard hitting the wall, and of the incredible sensation building in his cock. He could feel Philip's hand on him, wrapped snugly around the base of his dick to keep him from coming. He moaned again in protest.

"Christ, you're so gorgeous," Philip said. Levi wasn't even sure what that meant; he just knew that it was a good thing, although not as good as the orgasm that was hovering just beyond his reach.

He cried out, begging without words for release. Philip let go of his cock and put both hands on Levi's hips, steadying

him and stroking into him more carefully. Levi's whole body shook, his teeth chattering together, head thrown back. When he came, it was like an explosion of pleasure pulling him apart.

Levi gradually realized that Philip was still fucking him, and faster than before. "Come on," Levi gasped, which was all he was capable of right then. "Give it to me."

Philip faltered, groaned, then drove forward again, and Levi could feel the cock inside him throbbing. "God," Philip muttered. His hips jerked a few more times before he collapsed down on top of Levi. "One—just one second."

"Until what?" Levi asked. He ran a hand down along Philip's back to his ass. "No hurry."

"But you must be uncomfortable." Philip pushed himself up onto his elbows, obviously intent on moving, and Levi quickly wrapped both arms around his waist.

"I'm not uncomfortable. I like it. Stay."

Philip met his gaze, then nodded and relaxed. "All right."

They kissed some more, slowly, in no hurry now. Levi really liked the way Philip kissed—not at all hesitant to use his tongue, but not forcing it into Levi's mouth, either, which was something that really turned Levi off. "Mmm," he said finally. "I love how you kiss."

"Do you?" Philip sounded pleased. "I love how you kiss, too. I'd almost forgotten how much I enjoy this."

"Sex?" Levi asked.

Philip nodded. "Yes, sex. Thank you for reminding me." He was smiling down at Levi.

"You're welcome," Levi said, as his stomach growled loudly. "Um, maybe to pay me back you can feed me dinner?"

"I do remember something about that," Philip agreed.

"Very well, let's go and feed you, then." He kissed Levi once more, then lifted an eyebrow and added, "I think you'll need the calories in preparation for the rest of the evening."

Levi turned his face into the pillow and grinned.

They woke up to the phone ringing. Blearily, Levi lifted his head and looked for a clock.

"It's after nine," Philip said. "Is that your cell phone?"

"Yeah." Levi burrowed closer and pressed his cold nose against Philip's bare upper arm. "If it's important, they'll leave a message."

"Ah, the mantra of the single man." Philip was amused.
"I've got to answer every call. Never know who it might be."

Levi mumbled something unintelligible even to himself and slung an arm around Philip's waist.

Ten minutes later, just when Levi was starting to feel awake enough to consider morning sex, the doorbell rang. Several times, insistently, and then whoever it was added door knocking to the mix. It sounded like a guy, Levi thought. Like a guy who was freaking out.

Philip was up out of bed and tugging on his pants. He shook out his T-shirt and pulled it on. "I'll get it," he said. "Just stay here."

That didn't sound so good to Levi, not that he'd been looking forward to getting out of bed. But he didn't want to be anyone's dirty little secret. He wouldn't be that. He'd hidden

who he was for years as a teenager, and he couldn't do it again.

By the time he'd gotten dressed and made it to the living room, Philip was opening the door.

"Oh," Levi said as Kate came storming in. "I thought you were a guy."

"What?" Kate's expression went from upset to confused.
"I'm not a guy. Why would you think that?"

"The knock," Levi explained. "Sorry, you were in the middle of freaking out?"

"Of course I'm freaking out!" Kate said, throwing up her arms and pacing. "Do you know what the reception hall did? They double booked us. And since the other people paid their deposit first, we're screwed. The only date they have free is in two weeks. How the hell am I supposed to finish planning my wedding in two weeks? It's insane! It's totally impossible! And Levi, what are you doing here?" She stopped and frowned at them, hands on her hips. "Oh, my God. Oh my GOD! You! And—and you!" She pointed at them accusingly.

Philip reacted first. "Kate, please don't be like that. Please."

"Don't be like what?" Kate asked. "Are you guys together? How long has this been going on? This is so great! I'm so happy for you! I'd hug you, except I'm in the middle of freaking out about my cancelled wedding."

Levi, immensely relieved at her reaction—although he doubted Cooper was going to be so accepting—said, "Don't worry. We'll figure something out."

"What are we going to figure out? The wedding is less than three months away! How the hell are we supposed to find a new venue that has an opening in June? It's—it's completely impossible." Kate's eyes were full of tears suddenly, and she sniffled and dug in her pockets, bring out wadded up Kleenex. "And these are awful. Do you have any tissues?"

"Of course," Philip said. He went over and took a box from the end table and brought it to her.

"Thank you. I'm going to sit down. Can I sit down?" she said. Now that he looked at her more closely, Levi could see that her eyes were red and swollen. He went over and sat down next to her, put an arm around her.

"It'll be okay, I promise," he said rashly. "We'll find another place."

"Or we'll plan the quickest wedding in history," Philip said, then stopped. "Actually..."

"Do you really think we could?" Kate sniffled again and wiped at her eyes before looking at him trustingly. "I mean ... two weeks."

"But you've arranged so much of it already," Philip told her. "If the reception hall is on board, that's the vast majority of the problem right there. Oh, except for the church."

"Cooper's dealing with the church. I told him there was no point, because we couldn't possibly get married in two weeks, but he insisted on going over there." She blew her nose. "But what are we going to do about bridesmaid's dresses? And I wasn't supposed to choose the flowers until next week!"

"We have resources," Philip said. Standing there, he looked like someone who could accomplish anything. Levi

certainly believed him. "We'll get the dresses this weekend, and order the flowers. We can phone the invitations—people will understand—or maybe even email some of them."

"I can design something," Levi offered. "An invitation. For the email."

Kate kissed his cheek. "Thank you. You guys are just—thank you so much. You really think we can do this?"

Levi and Philip looked at each other. "Absolutely," Philip said, speaking for both of them.

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#### **Chapter Five**

Once the news came in from Cooper that the church could arrange for the change in dates—"Of course it can," Kate said bitterly. "Who the hell wants to get married in March?"—they decided the best thing to do was go ahead with it.

"Besides," Levi said, "this way you can take your honeymoon when the weather here is still cold and miserable. You'll appreciate it that much more."

"That's true," Kate said, perking up. "Oh, I have to call the airlines and the hotel, too. I need a list. I need a list the size of my arm."

"You might have to settle for this," Mr. Dixon said, handing her a leather-bound notebook with what looked like a silver pen attached to it. "Make a master list, then you can delegate jobs as necessary."

Cooper came down the main stairs of the Dixons' mansion—really, Levi needed to stop thinking about it that way, even in his own head—with Ashley.

"Daddy!" Ashley let go of Cooper's hand and ran down the last few steps and across the room to where Philip was sitting. "Uncle Cooper says we're going shopping today!"

"We are," Philip said. "To buy you a beautiful dress for Cooper and Kate's wedding; won't that be fun?"

"Yay!" Ashley jumped up and down and clapped her hands. "Is Levi coming with us?"

"Um," Levi said, when Philip looked at him questioningly.
"Well ... I guess I could. I need to design the invitations, but I

can do that this evening. I think." He looked at Kate to make sure that was going to be okay with her, but she was diligently scribbling in her notebook. "Kate?"

"Hm?" She lifted her face without taking her eyes off what she was writing. "What?"

"Is it okay if I go dress shopping with Philip and Ashley and do the invitation design for the email tonight?"

"Oh. Mmmhmm. Yes, sure, that's fine. Okay, flowers—the cake—"

Mrs. Dixon came in with coffee cups on a tray and set it on the table. "I called the bakery earlier. They're going to check their schedule and get back to me before noon about whether they'll be able to manage it at such short notice."

"That's okay," Kate said. "The reception hall said they could provide a cake if our place couldn't do it."

"They'd better throw it in for free under the circumstances," Cooper muttered, then looked guilty. "Um, not that I'm paying for it either way."

"Have you called about the tux rentals?" Mr. Dixon asked him, and Cooper went wide-eyed and shook his head. "Well, off you go." Cooper went.

"I had breakfast," Ashley told Levi. "Waffles! With strawberries."

"Were they good?" Levi asked.

"Yes! Daddy, when are we going shopping?"

Philip stood up. "We can go right now, if you're ready."

"Her bag is by the door," Mrs. Dixon said. "Get something really pretty, darling!"

"Did you know the wedding is going to be in two weeks?" Ashley asked excitedly, and seemed confused when all the adults groaned.

"What color is peach?" Ashley asked as they entered the first store on their list of possibilities.

"It's sort of like pink," Philip said.

Levi gave him an astonished look. "What? No, it's not. It's a pale shade of orange."

"Like, orange paint, and you add a lot of white paint to it? Like that?" Ashley didn't wait for an answer, because she'd spotted a display of frilly little girls' dresses and ran over to check them out.

"Like pink," Levi repeated, laughing. "Seriously?" He thought, belatedly, that he might hurt Philip's feelings, but thankfully Philip was laughing right along with him.

"I did say 'sort of,'" he pointed out. "Oh, Ash, be careful. You don't want to damage them."

"They're sturdier than they look," a saleslady said, coming over to join them. She was wearing a suit, which seemed kind of incongruous, but on the other hand she probably would have looked weirder in a bridesmaid's dress. "I'm Joan. Is there something in particular I can help you with today?"

"I'm the flower girl!" Ashley said. "In two weeks!"

"How nice!" Joan bit her lip, hesitated, then asked, "Are the two of you...?"

"No!" Levi said. "No, it's her uncle that's getting married. This is the groom's brother-in-law." He pointed at Philip.

"All right," she said pleasantly. "Is there a color scheme in mind?"

"Peach. There's also a rapidly-approaching deadline in mind," Philip said. "There's been a glitch in the plans, and the wedding's been moved up. So we really need something off the rack, so to speak, unless you can assure us there's a way to order a dress and have it arrive very quickly."

"Oh, dear. And what size is she?" Joan asked.

"A six," Philip said. "Is there any chance at all? I realize the time issue makes this less than ideal."

"I think we can probably manage something," Joan said.
"We have another shop about forty miles from here and often share inventory when it's necessary, but we generally have some things available in her size. Let's see what we can find, and if we don't have any luck I'll call our other store and see what they have in stock."

"Thank you so much," Philip said. "I really appreciate this."

"Oh, that's what I'm here for," Joan said. "Now, what's her name?"

"Ashley."

"Ashley, I'm going to find some very pretty dresses for you to try on, okay? Do you want to come see the fitting room?" Joan gestured toward the back of the store and smiled at Levi. "This shouldn't take long."

In fact, they were there less than half an hour before Ashley fell head-over-heels in love with a lacy, peach-colored dress than fit her perfectly.

"And you won't even have to worry that she'll outgrow it before the wedding," Joan said. "Now, Ashley, if you'll change back into your other clothes, I'll put your dress in a very special box so nothing will happen to it."

"But I want to wear it," Ashley said. She was standing in front of a mirror, enchanted by her own image. The dress had a full skirt and a satin sash around the waist.

"Well, yes, you'll get to wear it on the day of wedding. And probably for the rehearsal, too! That will be fun. But if you wore it home, it might get ripped or stained. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

Ashley pouted. "I don't care. I want to wear it now. My old clothes are stupid."

"Ah." Wisely recognizing that this was a battle she didn't have to fight, Joan told Philip, "I'll just go and give you a minute."

"Thank you," Philip said. As Joan left, he told Ashley.
"Come on, now. We're not going to argue about this. Take off the dress and we'll go have lunch somewhere before we look for shoes."

"But I want to wear it! I'll be careful. I won't spill on it or rip it, I promise!" Ashley clasped her hands together and blinked up at her father. "Please, Daddy?"

"No," Philip said firmly, and she started to cry. "I'm sorry. I know you want to wear it, but we can't chance anything happening to it. After the wedding, you can wear it as much as you like. To school, even."

That idea seemed to cheer her up. "Really? To school?" She spun around once, then again, before saying, "Okay, I'm ready to change now. Can we go to Friendly's?"

"I thought maybe we ought to let Levi choose. Since he's been such a good sport about coming with us on our

errands." Philip glanced at Levi as he pushed the door to the fitting room open for his daughter, then followed her inside.

Levi leaned against the wall. "I don't care," he said through the closed door. "Friendly's is fine." He hadn't had anything for breakfast but a hastily grabbed package of Pop-Tarts from Philip's cabinet; right then he'd happily have eaten at McDonald's.

"Yay!" Ashley said, and Philip handed the frilly dress over the top of the door for Levi to take.

"My birthday party is tomorrow," Ashley announced at Friendly's, around a mouthful of the same orange macaroni and cheese that Levi recognized from their previous meal together.

"Oh, bloody hell," Philip said. He rubbed a hand across his face.

"You forgot my birthday?!" Ashley sounded irritated instead of sad, at least.

"No, of course I didn't forget your birthday," Philip told her. "I just forgot that tomorrow is Sunday, that's all. It's been that sort of week." He directed this last to Levi.

"Yeah, I remember," Levi said. Wiping his mouth with what he could tell was going to be the first of many napkins, he took another bite of his delicious but very greasy barbecue chicken sandwich, then reached for another napkin. "Are you excited about your party, Ashley?"

"Yes! It's going to be at Chuck E. Cheese!"

Philip rolled his eyes but she continued on.

"We're going to play games, and have cake and ice cream, and presents! And the mouse is going to dance!"

"I don't think he's going to dance," Philip said. "He might— I don't know. Clap? I don't think he talks, so there won't be any singing of the traditional birthday song. By the mouse," he added quickly, when Ashley started glaring. "The rest of us will sing, of course. Levi, will you come?"

"I'd love to come," Levi said. "Assuming it's okay with Ashley."

"Will you bring a present?" Ashley asked, seeming very interested in the answer.

"Ashley! That's not polite," Philip said, but Levi just laughed and waved his protest away.

"That's okay! Of course I'll bring a present."

"I'm not sure she deserves one," Philip said severely. He lowered his voice and started explaining to Ashley why what she'd said was impolite, and Levi carefully focused his attention elsewhere.

His french fries were already cooling, so he concentrated on dipping them into the puddle of ketchup he'd squeezed onto the plate, much to Philip's amusement. The ketchup tasted a little off, like maybe it wasn't really Heinz and the restaurant was decanting cheap generic ketchup into the bottles instead. Or maybe Levi was just paranoid. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd been accused of it.

"I'm sorry, Levi," Ashley said obediently, echoing her father's words, and Levi looked at her and smiled.

"It's okay," he said. "I forgive you."

"When can I have my ice cream?" Ashley asked Philip.

"When you've finished your lunch," Philip told her. "All if it. Well, except the pickles."

Ashley ate two fries at once and said, "I don't like pickles." "You want me to eat them for you?" Levi asked.

"Yes, please." She looked longingly at the fancy box from the dress shop, which was in an even fancier bag and tucked between Levi and the wall on his side of the booth. She'd insisted on bringing it into the restaurant with them, not wanting to leave it in the car. "Can I try my dress on again when we get home?"

"I suppose so." Philip ate another bite of his own meal, a salad with so many other things piled on top of it that Levi wasn't sure it still counted as a vegetable. "As long as you wash your hands first." He looked at her cheese-smeared mouth and added, "And your face."

"Okay." Ashley ate two more huge bites of macaroni, then looked at Levi. "Are you going to get ice cream, too?"

"I don't know. I might be too full."

"Too full for ice cream?" Ashley looked horrified.

"Well, maybe not. What kind should I get?" Levi asked.

Ashley gestured with her hands, indicating a very tall sundae. "Three flavors! And three toppings. Hot fudge, marshmallow, and butterscotch. And whipped cream, and sprinkles, and a cherry."

"That sounds like a lot," Levi said, amused.

"Don't worry," Ashley said. "Daddy can help you eat it."
And she went back to her french fries, totally oblivious to the look that Philip and Levi shared.

Levi pulled into the parking lot in front of Chuck E. Cheese's and shut off his car. Three spaces over, Philip and Ashley were taking things out of the trunk of Philip's car.

"God, I just known I'm forgetting something," Philip said as Levi joined them. "Could you carry this? Please?"

"Sure, yeah, anything." Levi willingly took the large gift bag Philip was holding out, then watched as Philip eased a large, flat box from the trunk.

"The cake," he explained.

"It's strawberry!" Ashley said, dancing in place. She was wearing what looked like white tights under her long winter coat, and pink dress shoes. "Grandma!"

Mrs. Dixon had just gotten out of the Dixon's shiny black car. "Oh, sweetheart, don't cross the parking lot! Stay there with Daddy."

Ashley twirled in place, then flung out her arms, hitting Levi in the hip. "Oh! Sorry, Levi."

"That's okay," he told her. "Hi, Mrs. Dixon."

"Hello, Levi." Mrs. Dixon and Mr. Dixon were wearing matching—or close enough—dark wool coats, and looked out of place against the backdrop of the brightly colored sign with the cartoon mouse. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks, how are you?" Was it his imagination, or were Cooper's parents looking at him differently? It was probably crazy to hope that Kate and Cooper hadn't told them about him and Philip. What were they thinking? Levi's stomach twisted and he plastered a wide but fake smile onto his face.

"We're well. Looking forward to Ashley's party! How are you, darling? Very excited, I can see that."

Mr. Dixon was holding two gift bags even bigger than the one Levi was holding for Philip; all of them were bigger than

the clumsily wrapped gift he'd brought, which was tucked under his arm. The five of them went inside, where they were met by Cooper and Kate.

"We're all early," Kate said. "Hi, Ashley. Are you excited?" Levi didn't get why anyone would ask the kid that. Her cheeks were bright pink, her eyes shining, and she could barely stand still. "Yes! Ooh, 'Lizbet!" She spotted a friend and was off, unbuttoning her coat as she went, letting it slip from her arms to the carpeted floor.

"Ash!" Philip called, exasperated, but Mrs. Dixon patted his arm and said, "It's all right, dear. Let her go. No point in trying to rein her in now. Birthday fever's taken hold."

For the next hour, the place was a total zoo. It was easy to spot the kids who were there for Ashley's party, since most of them were kind of dressed up. Didn't make any sense to Levi, who would have thought putting them in old clothes would have made more sense what with all the pizza and ice cream, but then, he wasn't a parent, was he?

The thought depressed him, somehow. He'd always imagined he'd have kids someday, whether he was in a long-term relationship or not. Single guys could adopt, after all, even if it might not be the easiest thing in the world. He'd done hard things before.

Still, now, watching Ashley and her friends play skee-ball and video games, he sort of felt like life was passing him by. These kids were so happy.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden hand on his hip. Levi looked up at Philip, who was watching him. "You look sad," Philip said.

"No," Levi said, but it was such an obvious lie that he sighed. "Okay, maybe a little."

"Why?"

Levi shrugged. "I guess—sometimes it seems like everyone has a family but me. I know, it's stupid—"

"It's not stupid," Philip protested. "And it's not really true. The Dixons consider you an honorary son, I think. It's how they've always talked about you."

"Yeah?" Feeling a little bit cheered up, Levi leaned in closer to ask, "That doesn't make this some weird form of incest, does it?"

Philip laughed, surprised. "If it did, I think they'd have been a bit more upset at the idea."

Levi felt his eyes widen. He wished they were in a quieter, less crazy place to have this conversation. "They know?"

"They know," Philip said. "And they're fine with it. I knew you'd probably be fretting about how they might react when they found out, so it seemed best to just get it out of the way now. They've been urging me to start dating for months now—they're very good people, you know—and I made it clear that when I did, it would be men. So they've had time to get used to the idea."

"Levi!" Ashley was suddenly there, tugging on his hand. "Come stomp spiders for me!"

"Um-what?"

"Spiders! Over here. I put the token in, and you stomp, okay?" Ashley led him over to a game where spiders on a platform lit up and he had to touch them with his feet before the lights went out. It was harder than it looked, he

discovered, and by the time he'd finished, he was sweating and probably red in the face. Ashley seemed thrilled with the long ribbon of tickets, though.

They'd finished the pizza and were gathered around the table, ready to light the candles on the huge pink birthday cake, when Philip, who'd been keeping up a running monologue while getting things ready, suddenly stopped talking. Levi had been watching Ashley but listening to Philip; when Philip went silent, Levi looked at him.

Philip had gone totally still, unmoving. The lighter, which he'd just flicked on, kept burning, but he didn't seem to notice. He was staring toward the entrance to the building, where a woman with short, blonde hair was arguing with one of the store employees. She looked up then, while Levi was watching her. And he recognized her.

Meg.

"Mommy!" Ashley cried, and struggled out of her chair to run to her.

No one else seemed to know what to do; everyone just stood there, pretty much frozen in shock, Levi included. Philip swore and dropped the lighter, bringing his thumb to his mouth and sucking on it, then walked across to where the employee was still arguing with Meg about coming in. Philip said something to the young man and he relented, stepped back, and let Meg in. Ashley immediately threw her arms around Meg and held on.

Meg and Philip looked at each other over their daughter's head. "I wanted to come for her birthday," Meg said, and Levi realized that he'd walked toward them.

Shrugging slightly, Philip stood there but didn't say anything.

"That was you," someone said, and Levi turned his head to see that it was Mrs. Dixon. "Who phoned this morning to ask about the party."

Meg nodded. "Sorry for the whole ruse thing. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well, it's definitely a surprise," Mr. Dixon said.

They all stood there. Again, no one seemed to know what to say. Then Ashley stopped hugging her mother long enough to suggest, "I want to have my cake!"

"Okay, sweetheart," Meg said. "It's your birthday, so you can have anything you want. If you want to have cake, let's have cake!"

"Yay!" Ashley ran back to the table as if nothing unusual were happening, as if her mother hadn't just returned after having been missing for a third of her life, and everyone else followed. Philip lit the candles—his face, Levi noted, was pale, but his expression was blank, like he wasn't even there—and they all sang "Happy Birthday." Levi didn't really feel like he was there, either.

Even with Philip so quiet, and not really looking glad to see Meg—even with everything Philip had told him—it was hard not to imagine their family back together again. Ashley was so happy, for one thing. Meg gave her a small, wrapped package from her pocket, and Ashley unwrapped what turned out to be a brass key chain in the shape of a heart like it was a pony and a trip to Disneyland instead of something that

didn't even make sense as a present to a six year old. Did she even have any keys?

"She's been gone for years," Levi overheard one of the party guest's mothers saying quietly to another. "Drugs."

Levi gave them a dark look and they subsided.

It suddenly occurred to him, as Ashley was handed another brightly wrapped gift to open, that he was willingly submitting to torture. And that, all appearances aside, he really wasn't a masochist. Screw this, he thought, and picked up his jacket and headed for the door.

Part of him hoped that Philip would notice and come after him—okay, most of him hoped that, except for the little part that would have felt guilty if it had actually happened. But it didn't happen, and he was okay with that. Absolutely okay. The fact that he was halfway across the road that led to the parking lot without realizing it until a car blared it horn and locked its wheels trying not to hit him just meant that he was distracted, not not-okay. He barely knew the guy. It wasn't like he'd been picturing himself surrounded by a whole family or anything. Not at all.

"Get out of the road, asshole!" The car's driver must have been pissed off to roll down the window in this cold. Levi blinked and discovered he was already out of the road.

"Hey!" Someone else yelled at him, and he turned blindly and shouted back, "Fuck off!" almost into Brian's startled face.

"Hey," Brian said again, more gently this time. He grabbed onto Levi's upper arms. "Hey, are you okay?"

Levi didn't move. "Of course I'm okay. I'm fine. Why—why wouldn't I be o-okay?" His throat felt swollen and his heart was clenched in his chest.

Brian was leading him somewhere, and he went along because he didn't know what else to do. "Come on," Brian said. "Come on, here. Get in."

He found himself in the passenger seat of Brian's car; Brian was getting in on the driver's side. "My car—" he started.

"We'll come back for it later, okay? I'll bring you back later. Levi, what happened?"

"I don't know," Levi said, looking out the window at the clear blue sky. He leaned his temple against the glass and let its icy cold soak into him and numb him. "I don't know."

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#### **Chapter Six**

They went back to Brian's place; his roommate wasn't there, so they had the apartment to themselves. It was quiet. Brian sat Levi down at the kitchen table, which was actually jammed up against the wall in the space between the tiny kitchen and the not much bigger living room. Two of the table's legs were on the kitchen linoleum and the other two were on the living room carpet. The first time Levi had seen it, he'd just about laughed his ass off. Now, he just found it sad.

"You want some tea?" Brian asked. He was filling a small sauce pan with water from the tap, which confused Levi until he realized the pan was a substitute for a tea kettle.

"You have tea?"

"I think so." Setting the pan on a burner and turning on the stove, Brian started to go through the cabinets. "Um, maybe not. Oh! Hot cocoa mix."

"Sure," Levi said. He knew he had to pull himself out of this funk. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

Brian shrugged. "You looked so pitiful after you almost got flattened."

"But you're never nice to people," Levi said, which came out sounding even less nice than it had in his head.

"That's not strictly true." Brian spooned powdered cocoa mix into two mugs. "I was nice to someone just last week, in fact. Of course, I was hoping it would get me laid..."

"I didn't mean it like that." Levi picked at the edge of the table where the stuff that was supposed to make it look like wood was peeling away from the layer underneath. "I'm just surprised."

"You're lucky you didn't get surprised flat by that car,"
Brian said, then came over and sat down in one of the other chairs. "So, are you going to tell me what happened?" His straight brown hair was falling into his eyes; he brushed it away impatiently.

Levi looked down at the peeling table. "Nothing happened."

"Bullshit," Brian said. "What, did you actually crash a fouryear-old's birthday party and then get kicked out?"

"She's six," Levi said hotly. "And I didn't crash, they invited me." God, he really cared about this, didn't he? "Anyway, her mom showed up, and it all kind of went to hell."

"Whose mom, the kid's?" Brian frowned and shifted, his knee knocking against Levi's under the table. "What's bad about that?"

"She took off, like, two years ago, or something. She's schizo—no, sorry, bipolar, I think—and a drug addict. They thought she was dead. And then she just turns up at her daughter's birthday party like nothing ever happened, and everyone else pretends right along with her. It was really weird."

Brian sighed. "I tried to warn you about straight guys who like to dabble. It's a recipe for getting your heart broken."

"He's not, though. Straight, I mean." Levi wanted to deny that his heart was broken, but it would have been a lie.

"Sure, he is," Brian said. He scooted his chair around the leg of the table and closer to Levi's. "And he wouldn't deserve you even if he wasn't."

"What?" That wasn't the kind of thing Brian said. It was so weird to hear those words coming from him that Levi thought he must have misheard. "Wait. What?"

Brian rested his hands on Levi's knees. "You know I-I care about you."

"Care about me?" Levi echoed.

"You have to know that. Come here." Brian tugged at him, pulled Levi over into his lap, and Levi didn't fight it. Brian kissed him, and Levi let it happen. "Let me take you to bed. I'll make you feel better."

Levi groaned and wrapped his arms around Brian, burying his face in Brian's neck.

"Well, there's an affirmative response," Brian said dryly.

In his coat pocket, Levi's phone started to ring. "Maybe that's him."

"And maybe it's a wrong number," Brian countered. "You really think he's going to call you in the middle of his kid's party?"

"Probably not," Levi said glumly. The phone rang again.

"Here, let me see," Brian said. He shifted so he could rummage in Levi's pocket—his coat was thrown over the back of the chair Levi had been sitting in before. "Guys with kids always put the kids first."

They were supposed to, Levi thought. People were supposed to put their kids first, over boyfriends or girlfriends or their personal feelings about stuff their kids might be

doing. Philip was a good dad, and a good person, for taking care of Ashley the way he did.

That just didn't seem to leave any room in his life for Levi.

"Unknown Caller," Brian announced, and flipped the phone shut again before tossing it onto the table. Brian kissed Levi's jaw, face rough with stubble against Levi's skin, and slid a hand up the inside of Levi's thigh suggestively. Gentle fingertips traced Levi's cock through the heavy fabric of his jeans, and Levi could feel himself starting to get hard. Sex with Brian had always been great. "Come on; let me take you to bed. You won't regret it. Why feel bad when you can feel good?"

It wasn't an unreasonable philosophy, Levi thought, and he nodded and let Brian lead him to the bedroom.

Staring at the ceiling about half an hour later, Levi apologized again. "I don't know what my problem is."

"Nothing a little Viagra wouldn't fix," Brian muttered. He was lying on his back, too, his naked cock still flushed and hard against his stomach. "Would you mind giving me a hand here, at least? Or, you know, a mouth would be good, too."

The problem was, he just wasn't turned on at all. Everything about this felt wrong. Not freaking out and running around waving his arms wrong, just a subtle, something about this was "off" wrong. And apparently that was wrong enough to keep him from getting an erection, no matter how expertly Brian sucked him.

"Hello?" Brian said. He was obviously irritated, and Levi didn't really blame him.

"Right," he said. "Sorry." He rolled onto his side facing Brian and wrapped a hand around Brian's cock.

"God." Brian closed his eyes and reached to tangle his own fingers with Levi's. "You could still let me fuck you, you know. Even if you're not that into it."

"No." Levi did his best to make it sound inoffensive, but Brian jerked away from him and got out of bed.

"You know what? Forget it. Don't do me any favors." Brian stormed out of the room and Levi lay there wondering if he should go, feeling more miserable than he had when he'd left stupid Chuck E. Cheese's. He was actually blinking back tears when Brian came back, lay down next to him again, and pulled him into a hug. "I'm sorry," Brian said. "I'm an asshole."

"Yeah," Levi said, trying to sniffle without making any noise. "You are."

Brian rubbed the back of Levi's neck comfortingly. "Sorry."

Considering he wasn't sure he'd ever heard Brian apologize before, this was actually a big deal. "Okay," Levi said.

"Okay as in okay, you forgive me?" Brian asked.

"Yeah. Okay. I forgive you for being an asshole." Levi smiled against Brian's chest.

"Are you sure?" Brian said. "Because, um, I have something else to tell you."

Levi pushed himself up onto an elbow and looked down at Brian. "What?"

"When your phone rang before..." Brian wouldn't meet his eyes. "It was Philip."

"Are you serious?" Levi gave Brian a shove and got up, looking for his clothes. "I take it back—you aren't forgiven."

"I was just trying to protect you," Brian said, sitting up.

"Then you're trying to protect me from the wrong person," Levi said hotly. He found his jeans and underwear, still tangled together, and pulled them on. "You should be protecting me from you."

"I'm your friend," Brian protested. "I've been your friend a hell of a lot longer than this guy. And I wasn't kidding when I said you're always going to come second for him."

"Yeah, well, if this is what coming first with you feels like, I'll take him every time," Levi shot back, and grabbed his T-shirt up off the floor as he left the bedroom and went to find his phone and the rest of his life.

He tried to call Philip back on his way down the stairs to the street, but the call went straight to voice mail. "Hi," Levi said, knowing he had to leave a message and hating the process of trying to figure out what to say. "It's me. Um, Levi. I'm sorry about before. My phone is on now. Call me back? Or I'll try to call you again in a few minutes."

Stepping out onto the street, he realized that he'd come over in Brian's car. As he stood there, trying to decide what to do next, Brian came outside. "You need a ride."

"Yeah."

"Well, come on. I told you I'd take you back, didn't I?"

Neither of them said anything on the ride back to the parking lot. Brian pulled in next to Levi's car, then reached over and touched his leg.

"Look, I really am sorry, okay?"

"Whatever," Levi muttered, reaching for the door handle. "Levi—"

"Okay." Levi looked at Brian, who was wearing a pitiful expression. "Okay, I get it. You're sorry." He sighed.

Brian took his hand back, then said, "Call and let me know how it turns out?"

"Yeah," Levi said. "I will." It was hard not to say thanks, but somehow he managed it.

Philip's and the Dixons' cars were gone—Levi couldn't remember what time the party was supposed to go on until, but it was obviously over. He didn't know if there'd been plans to continue it somewhere else afterwards, or if those plans had been disrupted by Meg's appearance. Not knowing what else to do, he drove to Philip's house, where, to his relief, Philip's car was parked in the narrow driveway.

Levi parked on the street, locked his car, and walked up to the front door. Once there, he didn't know if he should knock. What if Philip, Meg, and Ashley were having a joyous reunion? What if Philip had called before to say sorry, now that Meg was back everything was different? He hesitated, then started to turn away.

The front door opened.

"There you are," Philip said. "Are you all right? God, I'm so sorry, I know this is a horrible mess." He took a breath and visibly tried to relax. "I'm so glad you're here."

That made Levi feel better. "You're not mad? I mean, I know I just took off out of there without saying anything..."

Philip was turning his head as if listening to something in the house. "Sorry," he said, turning back. "It's just—will you

come in? Please? Meg and Ashley are in her room—Ashley's room—getting reacquainted, but I—" He lowered his voice. "I don't want to leave them alone too long."

"Maybe I should come back another time," Levi suggested, even though he really, really didn't want to leave.

"No, please. I want you here." Philip stepped back and gestured, and Levi went in and shut the door behind him. It was warm inside, at least. "You didn't answer your phone when I called."

"I didn't know it was you," Levi said. That seemed like the simplest explanation.

"Are you—" Philip stepped closer. "Can I—?" Without finishing, he put his arms around Levi and hugged him. His sweater was rough against Levi's face, but it felt good. Levi closed his eyes and hung on. "I was worried," Philip said.

"I'm sorry."

Philip pulled back, framing Levi's face in his hands. "Are you all right?"

Levi nodded. "I am now. Um, I think. I guess that depends on what's going on." There were so many questions and he wasn't sure he was ready to hear the answers to all of them. "What—what's going on?"

"Meg was hoping she could move back in here." Philip spoke softly, keeping their conversation private. "I told her no. She's clean and sober—well, she says she is. She seems to be, but sometimes it can be hard to tell."

"Then where's she going to stay?" Levi had no idea why he was arguing about this; it wasn't like he wanted Meg to stay there with Philip.

"I don't know. Maybe at the Dixons', if they'll have her. I know they'd like to talk with her, but she wanted to spend some time with Ashley first." Philip smiled tightly, like he wasn't really happy about any of this. "And it's Ash's birthday, after all. We're hardly likely to refuse her anything today, are we?"

"You think that's why Meg picked today to come back?"

Philip sighed and moved away, toward the bedroom,
listening. Then he sat on the sofa and leaned forward, resting
his head in his hands. "I don't know. I think she came today
because it's Ashley's birthday and she wanted to see her. It's
probably not fair to read anything more into it than that." His
shoulders twitched.

Levi went over and sat next to him, putting an arm around him. Levi was pretty sure Philip was crying, although he wasn't making any noise. "Hey. Hey, it's okay."

"Why now?" Philip asked. He lifted his face; his eyes were red, but dry. "Just when Ashley was starting to do so well, just when I was—just when you come along, she has to turn up again, not looking an utter mess, and I just—I've no idea how to deal with this." He gave Levi a desperate look.

"It's okay," Levi repeated. He knew he sounded stupid, saying the same thing over and over, but he was pretty sure Philip wasn't in any state to notice. "Shh, come on. It'll be okay. We'll deal with it together."

Philip turned toward Levi and clung to him, squeezing so tightly that Levi could feel his ribs creak in protest. Philip was trembling; Levi ran his fingers through Philip's curls and murmured more stupid but hopefully reassuring things until

there was a sound from Ashley's doorway, the door hinge crackling as the door was shoved in one direction or the other, and Philip straightened up and away from him like a shot.

Levi hadn't had time to blink—Philip was already in the hallway—but he stood up, intending to follow on nothing more than instinct, when Philip backed up into the room again, and Ashley and Meg came in.

Seeming surprised to see him, Meg offered Levi a tentative smile. "Hi," she said. "I'm sorry, I don't remember your name. I know we've met before. You used to come home with Cooper for Christmas break, right?"

"And Thanksgiving, and pretty much every other time the dorms closed," he said, shaking her offered hand. It was small, but kind of square, like Cooper's. "Levi."

She seemed incredibly ill at ease when Ashley let go of her other hand and hugged Levi. "Thank you for the Barbie," Ashley told him, and it took him a few seconds to realize she was talking about the birthday present he'd left the party before seeing her open.

"You're welcome. I hope you liked it."

"I did! Mommy, do you want to play Barbies?"

Meg nodded. "Sure. Where should we play?"

"All the clothes are in my room," Ashley said. "Daddy made a special closet for them; it's called a ward-robe. Like in the Narnia books."

"Well, that's nice." Meg didn't look like she knew what Ashley was talking about. In fact, she seemed pretty overwhelmed, which was probably understandable. She let

Ashley tow her back toward the bedroom, and Philip watched them go, then sat down on the arm of the sofa, shoulders slumped. It made Levi's heart ache to look at him, knowing there was so little he could do to help.

"You don't have to let her stay," Levi said quietly.

"Of course I do. I mean, not overnight, obviously, but I can't just ask her to go. Did you see Ashley's face? How happy she is? How can I take that away from her?"

"She might have a good time chasing a ball into the street, but you wouldn't let her do that," Levi argued, then sighed. "Sorry. It's not like I know what the right thing to do in this situation is."

"No, but you care about Ashley," Philip said. "That's worth a lot, actually." He reached out and curled his fingers into the waistband of Levi's jeans, giving a gentle tug so Levi stepped closer. Then he leaned in, resting his forehead against Levi's stomach. "Where did you go?"

Levi stroked Philip's hair. "When?"

"When you left the party. Your car was still in the lot."

"My friend Brian showed up—he'd called earlier and wanted to know what I was doing, and I told him about Ashley's party, and—anyway." There was so much to explain that he didn't know where to start.

"Did you sleep with him?" Philip asked, without lifting his head.

"No," Levi said. He was grateful about it now, but knew he couldn't leave it there. "I mean. He wanted to, and we—we went to bed. But I couldn't ... I didn't. I didn't want to."

Philip let his breath out all at once, like he'd been holding it. "All right."

"All right?"

"Good. I'm glad. The thought of you—" Philip looked up at him, eyes worried. "I don't want to share you."

"Okay," Levi said. "I don't want to share you, either." He waited, not saying more, hoping that Philip would understand what he was saying.

"You won't have to," Philip said. "I meant what I said before; Meg and I aren't getting back together."

Meg cleared her throat in the hallway and they both turned their heads to look at her, stricken. "Um," she said. She was holding a shiny green doll's dress. "Sorry, I was—Ashley wanted me to find some scissors to trim this thread, but they weren't in the bathroom where they used to be."

Standing up, Philip said, "I moved them to the kitchen, on top of the refrigerator. There was an unfortunate incident in which she tried to cut her own bangs. Meg..."

"It's okay," she said. "I understand." She went past them into the kitchen, and after a quick, apologetic glance at Levi, Philip followed her.

Levi could hear them talking easily enough, even though they kept their voices low.

"We didn't know if you were ever coming back," Philip said.

"Neither did I," Meg told him. "It's okay, Phil." There was a brief pause, then she asked, "Is—I mean, are you and Levi...?"

"Yes," Philip said. "It's still new, but—I'm happy. It's been a long time since I was really happy. I'm not willing to give that up."

"I wouldn't want you to," Meg said gently. "I've only been clean for nine weeks. Don't get me wrong, every single day of it has felt like a hundred years, but I—I needed to do it. For Ashley, and for you—even if you want a divorce, because we were friends first, weren't we?" Philip must have nodded, because she went on. "And for me. Because being high and drunk all the time, that was no way to live."

"I can't begin to tell you what a relief it is to hear you say that," Philip said.

"It's a relief to feel it," Meg said. "I hated myself for a long time, but things are getting better. I wouldn't have come back unless I thought I could be the mom Ashley deserves. I want her to be happy, and I want you to be happy, too. I know you weren't happy with me, even before."

"I wanted to be," Philip said. It sounded like he was crying, or maybe trying not to. "I did love you."

"But you're gay," Meg said. "We both knew it. That night, the night I got pregnant, it was just one night. It wasn't enough to build a life on." Her voice was muffled when she added, "I'm so sorry, Phil. I never wanted to hurt you. Things are going to be different, I promise."

Ashley came out of her bedroom and looked at Levi. "Where'd my mom go?" she asked. She sounded worried.

"She's in the kitchen getting scissors," Levi said, pitching his voice so that Meg and Philip would be able to hear him.

A few seconds later, Meg came through the doorway from the kitchen. "I found them," she said cheerfully, pasting a smile onto her face that looked fake as hell to Levi but which Ashley seemed to find convincing.

"Yay!" Ashley said. "Levi, do you want to play Barbies?" Levi blinked and said, "Um. Do I?" He wasn't sure who he was asking.

"Sure you do," Meg said, and her smile suddenly seemed genuine. It felt like she was including him, even. "Come on, Phil, you, too."

Clapping her hands, Ashley said, "This is the best day ever!" And then none of them could keep from smiling at her delight.

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#### **Chapter Seven**

"You don't have to ... be quiet..." Philip panted behind Levi's ear, and Levi, reminded that they were alone in the house because Ashley had spent the night at her grandparents' house, groaned loudly. Philip's cock stroked into him again, long and slow, and Levi shuddered. He was on his stomach, his own dick pressed between his body and the mattress.

"God, Philip." He hitched himself up onto his elbows and pushed back to meet the next thrust. "I want to come. Please."

"Soon," Philip said.

Levi groaned again. "Now," he begged. Philip had woken him with a long, slow blow job, teasing him to the brink of orgasm five or six times before rolling him over and sliding into him.

"Here, get up." Philip slid out of him and Levi whimpered in protest. "Up on your knees, and hold on here." Philip's amazing hands—he could have been a doctor—guided Levi up onto his knees, fingers wrapped around the sturdy top edge of the headboard. "There, good. Now I can take care of you."

When Philip pushed into him again, Levi couldn't even groan. All he could do was cling to the headboard, eyes clenched shut. He could feel his body opening for Philip's cock, his nerve endings screaming at the contact. A desperate, wordless cry escaped him when Philip hit his prostate. He wished he was flat on his belly again, because he

was pretty sure with the friction he would have been able to get off. Now, with his achingly hard erection bobbing in mid air, he couldn't do anything at all.

"Christ, you're so good." Philip always talked during sex, muttered endearments and silky-smooth filth. "You're so hot inside. I want to fuck you forever. Want to fall asleep with my cock inside you every night." He pulled back and thrust in again.

Levi tightened his grip on the headboard until his knuckles whitened. Keep talking, he thought at Philip.

Philip's hands steadied him, holding onto his hips. "I love the sounds you make when I fuck you." Thrusting more quickly, Philip found the perfect angle, nailing it every time, and Levi whined. "Are you close? Tell me."

"Please," Levi gasped. "Yes. Please, God. God, God." He chanted the word and got caught up in Philip's rhythm, shoving his hips back.

"How close are you? I want to feel you come." One of Philip's hands moved up over Levi's abdomen to his chest, caught a nipple between finger and thumb and pinched it.

He was so close, but he couldn't. "Can't." He needed more, needed Philip to touch his dick. The next sound he made was a sob. "I can't."

"Of course you can," Philip said reasonably, like they were talking about making sandwiches. He didn't even sound winded. "Do you want me to touch you?" Levi whimpered and nodded, and Philip let go of his other hip and curled a hand around Levi's dick instead. "Oh, God, you feel so good," Philip

whispered, and came, his cock pulsing in Levi's ass. He stopped moving then, his groan harsh against Levi's spine.

Levi didn't care. He still had Philip's cock inside him, still hard enough to feel good, and he had Philip's fingers tight around his own cock. He rocked a little, back and forth, Philip's cock skewering him, Philip's hand stroking him, and when Philip's teeth scraped across his back he came, too, biting his lip to keep from crying out loudly.

"There," Philip murmured. "I told you I'd take care of you.
But you don't have to be quiet, love; it's just us, remember?"

"You only call me that," Levi said between gasps, waiting
for his heart to stop racing so furiously, "when we're fucking."

Philip released Levi's cock carefully. "Call you what?"

"That word." It was easier to talk about this when he didn't have to look at Philip's face, so Levi didn't move. "Love."

"Ah." Philip didn't seem to share his feeling about their method of discussion, because he eased his softening cock out of Levi and turned him around. "Is that really the only time I call you that? I hadn't realized."

Levi kept his gaze focused on Philip's knee, wishing he hadn't said anything. "Never mind. Okay? Can we just not?"

"Not talk about it?" Philip made a frustrated noise. He peeled the condom off his dick and dropped it into the trash can beside the bed without tying it, which Levi knew from personal experience was going to result in a mess. "You're the one that brought it up, Levi. Why don't you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know," Levi muttered. Right then, he wanted nothing more than to leave before the conversation got even messier than the inside of Philip's trash can.

"Levi." Philip wiped his hand on the sheets, then touched it to Levi's chin. Levi let his face be lifted, but couldn't bring himself to actually meet Philip's gaze. "Levi. Look at me. Please."

He couldn't. "I can't," he whispered. He wanted to, because he knew Philip was irritated, and it felt like it had taken him such a long time to get here, into a relationship with a man he could actually picture spending the rest of his life with, that the last thing he wanted was to chance destroying it. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Philip said. "This is my fault; I'm the one who's sorry."

That was enough of a surprise that Levi did look up. "Why is it your fault?"

"Because I haven't told you I'm in love with you." Philip's voice was so gentle that it made Levi's heart hurt.

"You are?" He felt his lips form the words, but there was no breath behind them.

"I'm in love with you." Philip said it again, very clearly, then held Levi's face between his hands and kissed him. "Madly, as it turns out. I'm sorry I waited to tell you; I thought—I thought it was too soon. I didn't want you to feel pressured. You're younger than I am. You have your whole life ahead of you, and my life's been such a bloody mess..."

"Your life is amazing," Levi said, finding his voice at last. There were moments when he worried that maybe he was

drawn to Philip because he did have a family surrounding him, people that loved him. Then Levi would look at Philip again and be reminded of all the reasons it was Philip he wanted, and not just Philip's life. "You're amazing. This is what I want. You. And to be part of your life."

Philip was looking at him with a warm, tender expression. "That's what I want, too—to build a life with you. That's exactly what I want." Hearing it made Levi feel better than he could ever remember feeling. It made him want to pull the covers up over them, put his arms around Philip and spend the rest of the day in bed.

Just then, Philip's alarm clock went off. It was set to the radio, which funnily enough, was playing a commercial for a bridal shop. "Darn," Levi said.

Leaning in to kiss him, Philip said, "We'd better get ready or we'll be late, and somehow I can't imagine Cooper being forgiving about that on his wedding day, no matter how wonderful a last-minute bachelor party we threw for him."

"Probably not," Levi agreed, and got up to start the shower.

Ashley did an amazing job as flower girl—she'd kept her dress spotless despite multiple modeling sessions, and she didn't seem even slightly shy about being the center of attention as she walked slowly up the aisle in front of the bride, strewing pastel flower petals as she went. It wasn't until the bride had been handed off to her groom by her father that Ashley turned to her mother, who was sitting in the front pew, and stage-whispered, "My tights are runny!"

Levi, who couldn't even begin to imagine what that might mean, strained to listen without moving, but he could see Philip's grin and that made him smile, too.

"MOMMY! MY TIGHTS!" Ashley said it more loudly the second time.

Meg answered back, also stage-whispered, "IGNORE THEM."

"But they look messy!" Ashley said.

"No one else can see them," Meg said.

Levi gave up trying not to look and turned in time to see Ashley tug at Kate's wedding dress. "Auntie Kate, can you see this?"

Kate, straight-faced, bent and looked. "It's very tiny," she assured Ashley. "No one will know."

Except for all the people sitting in the front half of the church, Levi thought, based on all the smiles he could see. He was glad beyond words that Cooper and Kate weren't the kind of people who would flip out because their "perfect day" had been sullied by a child's child-like behavior.

"Okay," Ashley said. To her father, who had stepped out of place in line to observe what was going on, "It's okay, Daddy. No one will see." And then, toward the patient minister who was waiting to go on with the ceremony, she gave a little wave with her hand. "You can go now."

There were chuckles from all around, then the minister cleared his throat and started to speak, and Levi let words he'd heard a dozen times wash over him, listened to Cooper and Kate's familiar voices repeating them. There were lit candles flickering around them, the smell of melting wax

mingling with the roses and other flowers woven into the bouquets. Levi told himself it was the smoke that made his eyes water. He was so distracted it took him a minute to realize why Cooper had turned to him, and he hastily fumbled Kate's wedding ring from his pocket and gave it to Cooper.

He felt something touch his own hand a few seconds later, and realized that Philip, who was standing next to him, had curled a pinky finger around his own. He looked at Philip and smiled, and Philip smiled back as the minister pronounced Cooper and Kate husband and wife, and told Cooper to kiss the bride.

At the reception hall an hour or so later, Levi leaned back in his chair and looked longingly, not for the first time, at the glass of champagne that was waiting for the toast to the happy couple. The servers had come around and filled the glasses; Meg had shaken her head when they'd reached her, and Philip had relaxed in some almost imperceptible way and put his hand on Levi's knee under the table. There was music—some kind of string band, classical, just instruments without anyone singing. It made the wedding seem what Philip would call "posh", which Levi was pretty sure meant incredibly fancy.

"I want to see the cake," Ashley said.

"Again?" Meg said. "You've already seen it half a dozen times."

Ashley frowned. "How many is that?"

"Six," Philip told her. "But we can see it again if you want to."

"I'll take her," Levi said, standing up. "I need to stretch my legs anyway."

They crossed the large room, skirting the line of people who were waiting for their turn at the appetizer buffet and dodging a waiter carrying a tray of hot canapÈs to get to the table that held the tall cake. It was four-tiered and perfect, with a cascade of peach-colored flowers and tiny green leaves running down it.

"It's so pretty," Ashley said, awed.

"Not as pretty as you are," Levi said.

"I'm not a cake." Ashley stuck out her tongue as the song being played came to a end and the next one didn't take its place. Without the music, everyone seemed to hear the sounds of their own voices and become immediately selfconscious, the end result being a room that went from politely noisy to almost dead silent within thirty seconds. Then Cooper and Kate came through the open doors at the end of the hall, looking stunning and completely happy, Kate radiant in her long white dress, and a collective cheer—a well-bred cheer, Levi reminded himself—went up.

One of the band members, who had a microphone near her, announced them, then asked everyone to watch while they danced their first official dance as a married couple. The music started back up, and Cooper led Kate in pretty much the only dance he knew how to do—a sort of shuffle back and forth. In retrospect, Levi wondered why the Dixons hadn't insisted that Cooper take some kind of dance lessons. Maybe they would have, if the wedding hadn't been so thrown together at the last minute.

Levi had to admit it was beautiful, though. There wasn't a single aspect that looked like it hadn't been slaved over for months. The best thing was that Levi knew the Dixons and Kate's family wouldn't have cared if it was imperfect—they weren't shallow like that. They knew that it was Kate and Cooper's relationship that was important, not the details of the wedding.

"You look happy," Philip said, coming to stand beside Levi and Ashley.

Levi watched his friends on the dance floor. "I am. What's not to be happy about? I have you, and my best friend just got married."

"It's wonderful, isn't it?" Philip looked wistful, and Levi remembered that he and Meg hadn't even had a real wedding, just a quick visit to a justice of the peace and what Philip had referred to as "a very posh dinner at a very nice supper club." Turning his attention to Levi again, Philip said, "Maybe, someday..."

"Maybe someday," he agreed. He wasn't one hundred percent sure what Philip was even thinking, but it didn't matter, really; he couldn't imagine Philip wanting something that wouldn't be okay with him.

When the song ended, the rest of the bridal party was urged to join the bride and groom on the dance floor. That paired Levi up with Kate's sister Julia and Philip with the other bridesmaid, Kate's friend Sarah, and left Ashley and Meg on the sidelines. Levi spent most of the dance watching Philip and lost track of Ashley entirely until the song ended—then Philip looked around and got more than a little freaked out.

"Where's Ash?" he asked Levi.

"I don't know," Levi said. "She was just here a minute ago."

"God, Meg didn't leave with her, did she? She couldn't have, she doesn't have a car."

"Or a valid license," Levi pointed out, and stopped Kate and Cooper. "Did you guys see where Ashley went?"

"With the way she's been talking about the cake, I figured she'd be right there staring at it," Kate said. "Wasn't she just here?"

"I thought I saw her leaving with Meg," Julia said, pointing toward the hallway, and Philip took off like a shot with Levi right on his heels.

"I shouldn't have taken my eyes off her," Philip muttered under his breath. He took a quick look out into the parking lot, then turned toward the bathrooms, shoving open the door to the ladies' room without so much as calling out a warning to whoever might have been in there. "Ashley!"

"Hey, this is the women's room," a female voice called back.

"Is my daughter in there?" Philip asked. "She's six."

"No, just me," the woman replied, and Philip spun around, letting the door swing shut again. "Where the bloody hell—"

"Are you looking for us?" Meg asked as she and Ashley came out of a small bathroom labeled "Family Room."

"Where the hell have you been?" Philip snapped, and both Ashley and Meg recoiled in the face of his anger.

"She was upset because she got frosting on her dress." Meg was obviously doing her best to stay calm. "We came to get her cleaned up."

Philip drew a slow breath and rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know where Ashley was and I was worried. But I shouldn't have shouted at you." Levi was aware that there were a few people watching them from the entrance to the large reception room, but honestly didn't care what any of them thought.

Still wide-eyed, Ashley sniffled. "I touched the cake. Don't tell Auntie Kate—she'll be mad at me."

"No, she won't." Philip crouched down and opened his arms to Ashley. "I'm very sorry I raised my voice—I didn't mean to. I was scared when I didn't know where you were."

"Okay." Ashley stepped forward into a hug. "Are you sure she won't be mad?"

"I'm sure," Levi said, because it was killing him to stand there saying nothing. "I'll bet she won't even notice."

"I put my whole hand in," Ashley said. "It was an accident. I didn't know that would happen. It looked hard so I thought I could touch it, but it smeared and then I touched my dress." The dress looked clean enough to Levi, though maybe a bit damp.

"Is everything okay out here?" Mr. Dixon asked. Someone must have told him there was something going on, because he looked concerned and his wife was right behind him.

"It's fine," Philip said, even though it was clear he was still more upset than any of the rest of them. "We're fine."

"They're going to serve lunch now," Mrs. Dixon said.

"Ashley, would you like to come with us and your mom, and Daddy can join us in a few minutes?"

"Okay," Ashley said, and kissed her father's cheek before taking her grandparents' hands and going off willingly enough.

Meg took a deep breath and tucked her curly hair back behind her ears. "I'm sorry," she said to Philip. "I didn't think. You're totally right to have reservations, but I'm going to prove to you that you can trust me." She kissed Philip's cheek, too, and left as the announcement was made in the big room for everyone to take their seats.

"Are you okay?" Levi asked.

"I thought I was," Philip said. "Clearly, I was wrong. God, I can't believe I did that."

"No one blames you." Levi hesitated, because someone could come walking out of the big room at any time, then thought "screw it" and put his arms around Philip and hugged him.

Philip hugged him back, so tightly it almost hurt. That was reassuring; it told Levi that he was doing the right thing.

"It's okay. Shh."

"I hate this," Philip whispered. "I feel like a monster."

"What?" Levi pulled back so he could see Philip's face. "You are not a monster. You're a dad trying to protect his daughter; that's a good thing."

"Not when I scare her by acting like that," Philip said. "And Meg—it can't be good for her recovery to have me doubting her."

Levi shrugged. "You aren't the only who's going to need time to get over what happened. If things are still like this in a couple of years, sure, I'd agree you had a problem, but not yet. She's only been back two weeks. Cut yourself some slack."

"I'm not sure I know how," Philip admitted, and Levi hugged him again, feeling the tension in his shoulders and back.

"You need a massage," Levi said. "Or maybe..." He looked around, then gestured at the family bathroom behind him. "Maybe we could do something else. Just, you know, really quickly."

Philip smiled and nudged Levi back a step. "You're a very bad influence, you know."

"I know," Levi said cheerfully. "But you don't help, looking all sexy in your tux the way you do."

"It's a morning suit," Philip said, and then they were stepping into the bathroom and Philip was locking the door.

"I prefer you in your birthday suit, but I guess this will have to do." Levi undid Philip's belt and the front of his rented trousers and took out his cock, already half hard. "I really love your foreskin." It turned Levi on just thinking about it—someone else's cock was already an exciting novelty, but one that had something his own didn't was even better. He pulled it down away from the head, then drew it back up, and Philip's cock gave a slow throb.

"God, that feels good." Philip closed his eyes and slid a hand around to squeeze Levi's ass.

"Let me suck you off," Levi whispered. "I really want to." He did; he wanted to feel Philip's cock pushing over his tongue, stretching his lips wide.

Philip nodded, and Levi tugged him over nearer the toilet, put the toilet lid down, and sat. That put him at just about the right level to slide Philip's cock into his mouth. Which he did, smiling as Philip groaned softly and wove fingers into his hair. "Make it quick," Philip begged.

So Levi did. The point was to ease tension, after all. After only a few weeks together, he was still learning Philip's body, but most men found it hard to hold back in the face of steady, firm suction, and Philip was no exception. A minute in and he was biting his lip to keep quiet; fifteen seconds after that he was moving on his own, fucking Levi's mouth with short jerks of his hips.

"Christ, yes," Philip said, and steadied Levi's head with both hands. "Yes, God—" And he came, shooting over the back of Levi's tongue, the taste of him sharp and salty. Levi rode it out, sucking gently to coax the last shudder from Philip, then let Philip's still-hard cock slip free and stood up to kiss him. Philip groaned in relief and kissed back, mouth soft against Levi's. "God, I love you."

Levi could feel himself grinning like an idiot, but he brushed Philip's hand away when it fumbled at the front of his pants. "Later."

"But-"

"Later," Levi said again. "We have to get back before anyone suspects anything." He was still grinning as he tucked Philip away and fastened up his tux pants. Morning suit pants.

Whatever. It didn't matter; he didn't care. He felt incredibly, insanely happy as they went out to join the rest of the wedding party for lunch.

The food was good, as he'd known it would be. Delicate salad greens with fresh raspberries, all of which must have been flown in from somewhere, or grown in a greenhouse, because the ground outside was frozen, even though the reception hall was warm enough to have Philip shrugging out of his jacket and loosening his tie. Philip's hair was tousled again—no matter how much he tried to keep it down, it always did its own thing sooner or later.

There was a warm soup with crab meat, thick and creamy, and hot rolls. And then sirloin with roasted vegetables. By the time his plate was clear, Levi was seriously wondering if his rented slacks would stay up with the button undone, because if he ate anything else he'd definitely need to unfasten it.

The music, which had been very quiet while they ate, picked up in volume and tempo as the wait staff came around and started clearing the tables. This was obviously the cue to dance, and a lot of people got up to do so, including Kate and Cooper. Kate's hair, which had been swept up into an elaborate style, was slowly escaping its combs, tendrils of it hanging down around her face. She looked as deliriously happy as Levi felt, which was kind of funny when he thought about it. It was her wedding day, but he was the one who felt like he'd won the lottery.

"Daddy, let's dance!" Ashley was up out of her chair, tugging on Philip's sleeve.

"All right, all right." Philip went along with her goodnaturedly. They went out onto the dance floor, staying near the edge because Ashley had a tendency to crash into other people. Levi leaned back in his chair and watched them, glancing over at Meg, who was taking a sip of her water.

"It's a beautiful wedding," Meg said. "I'm glad I was able to be here for it."

"Me, too," Levi said. "Everyone's glad."

"Except Philip," Meg said, her mouth twisting.

"That's not true." Levi turned toward her. "He's glad you're back. It's not easy, but it'll all work out."

"I hope so." Meg set her glass down on the table, then picked it up again, like she needed something to do with her hands. "I don't think I've ever seen him so happy. He wasn't when I was with him. I mean, he wasn't depressed, I don't think, but ... it was like there was always something missing." Her lips quirked into a half smile. "Not just the sex. Maybe it was you."

"I'd like to think so," Levi said.

She stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. "Good."

"Mommy!" Ashley called from the edge of the dance floor. "Come dance with us."

"That's my cue," Meg said, and stood up.

Watching the three of them together made Levi's throat feel funny. He hoped his expression wouldn't make his feelings totally obvious to anyone who looked at him. Then Cooper, who'd just spun his bride in a circle, making her

squeal and clutch at him, called, "Levi, come on! Get out here!"

He shook his head, but Kate chimed in, urging Ashley to get him, and the next thing he knew he was being dragged out onto the dance floor. Kate had changed partners and was dancing with Philip, and Cooper grabbed Ashley and swung her up onto his hip. Meg was smiling at him uncertainly.

"Do you want to dance?" Levi asked her, and her smile broke open wide.

Meg was a good dancer—much better than her brother, who was still just goofing around, much to Ashley's delight. When the song ended, everyone paused, and Kate, whose cheeks were flushed, said, "Excuse me—I'm just going to go freshen up. I'll be back in a minute." She kissed Cooper.

"That's my wife," Cooper said, as if he couldn't believe it.

"I'll come with you," Meg offered, and the two women went off toward the hallway.

"I can take her," Philip said to Cooper, gesturing at his daughter.

"Are you kidding? No way!" Cooper spun Ashley in a circle and her laughter pealed out. "Dance with your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend, boyfriend," Ashley repeated, still giggling.

"Levi? Dance?" Philip held out his hands, and for once Levi didn't hesitate—he stepped into Philip's arms and let himself be held. As the next song started to play, he and Philip moved, their feet finding a rhythm together easily, and everything felt right in ways Levi had only been able to dream of before that moment.

"I love you," he whispered in Philip's ear, and Philip tightened his grip.

They kept dancing.

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#### **Chapter Eight**

#### Present day:

They'd agreed that Levi would be the one waiting with the justice of the peace, in part because he was more nervous and convinced he'd trip and fall flat on his face in front of everyone. Plus that way Philip could be accompanied by Ashley, who at nine had announced that she was "too old" to be a flower girl and that she wanted to give her father away.

Levi thought he'd never seen anything so perfect in his life as Philip walking toward him, his glorious curly hair lit up by the floodlights in the Dixons' more than ample yard. Beside Philip walked Ashley; she was wearing a simple silk dress she'd chosen herself, the color a pale mint green. She was holding a small bouquet of white roses in one hand and the end of the leash in the other; between her and her father, snuffling at the grass, was Hershey, their dog, named after the stuffed toy dog Ashley still hadn't abandoned even at her mature age.

Ashley looked beautiful—Levi's last deliberate thought before everything became a blur was that she was going to be stunning by the time she was a teenager. Then there were Philip's eyes on his, Philip's lips shaping the words of their vows, their friends and family cheering, and Hershey's excited barks. He was only dimly aware of their first dance; it was like a dream. They'd decided to let Ashley help them cut the cake, and at that point she was more capable of doing a good job than he was.

"Are you all right?" Philip murmured in his ear as he was licking white icing off his knuckle, and he turned what was surely a dazed expression toward his husband—his husband—and nodded.

"It's just—" He stopped, shook his head to clear it, and tried again. "It seems like this can't be real."

"It's real," Philip assured him, and lifted Levi's face for a kiss. "It's real, love."

"Hey, you're supposed to wait until people tap their glasses with spoons," Cooper said, suddenly appearing beside them and slinging an arm around each of their necks.

"This is our wedding," Philip said. "We don't have to wait for anything."

Cooper ruffled Levi's hair. "Okay, okay, fine. Whatever you say, big guy." He reached to ruffle Philip's hair, too, then stopped himself. "I'd better not—you could beat the crap out of me."

"And I couldn't?" Levi, feeling clear-headed now, punched Cooper's shoulder. "What, I'm some weakling all of a sudden?"

"You didn't even want to walk up the aisle," Cooper pointed out. "Well, the metaphorical aisle. It's just grass, after all. Speaking of which..." He grinned.

"No getting high at our wedding," Levi said firmly, and Cooper's face fell.

"Not even a little?"

"No matter how much Brian tempts you," Levi said.

Cooper grinned again; he'd just been kidding, and they both knew it. "He's a bad influence, that one. I'm glad you settled on someone a little more steady."

"Oh, Lord, now I'm the steady one who's a good influence," Philip bemoaned.

Kate came up to them with the squirming bundle that was her and Cooper's daughter Lillian. "Can you take her for a minute?"

"Sure," Cooper said agreeably, but Levi reached for her instead. There was something about babies, all small and warm and sweet-smelling (mostly) that appealed to him in ways he couldn't have begun to describe.

"Let me take her," he said, and Kate handed her over.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"You look good with her," Philip said approvingly. It wasn't the first time. Levi knew Philip wanted another child, probably sooner rather than later, but they'd only recently started talking about adoption. It was an idea that Ashley was incredibly excited about.

Lily squirmed and grabbed onto Levi's tie, then managed to untie it somehow. They all laughed. "Is she being cute?" Ashley asked, joining them. "Am I missing cuteness?"

"There's always more where that came from," Levi assured her, crouching down so she could see her baby cousin more easily. Hershey chose that moment to come bounding up to them, too, snuffling the baby's hands excitedly.

"No, Hershey!" Ashley grabbed onto Hershey's collar and tugged at the dog. "Don't drool on Lily!"

"It won't hurt her," Philip said, and Ashley gave him a disbelieving look.

"Saliva is full of germs." She told the dog, "Go see Grandpa. Go on, Hershey, go find Grandpa!"

The dog barked and ran off, for all the world acting like it understood what Ashley had said. They could see it dodging between tables that had been set up on the lawn, then it disappeared.

"She's a good dog," Ashley said to Lily, making exaggerated faces. "She's such a good dog. Isn't she a good dog, Lily?"

The baby gurgled and waved her arms around like crazy, forgetting that one hand was still holding onto Levi's tie, which was barely managing to stay around his neck under the assault. Levi tried to pry Lily's fingers from the tie, but she just tightened her grip and blew a spit bubble.

"Ew!" Ashley said. "If she's drooling, I'm leaving." She flounced off—she'd taken off her fancy shoes that had looked more like slippers to Levi, and was barefoot. Levi hoped she wouldn't step in anything worse than baby spit.

"Either of you want a drink?" Cooper asked.

Levi shook his head as he straightened up, his knee popping. "I'm good. Philip?" He'd never gotten into the habit of shortening Philip's name to Phil the way Meg did; he wasn't sure why.

"Nope. I'm going to take my new husband for a spin around the dance floor once your wife comes back for this one." Philip chucked Lily under the chin and she chortled and

kicked her legs, causing one of her little fabric shoes to fly off into the grass.

"Oh, well, let me take her off your hands," Cooper said. Levi relinquished his hold and let Philip lead him back over to the wooden dance floor that had been assembled beside the biggest white tent in the yard.

"It was so nice of the Dixons to let us have the wedding here," Levi murmured against Philip's shoulder as they danced.

"It was," Philip agreed. "It has been every time you said it."

"Hey," Levi protested. "Just because it's no big deal to you, because you've always had a family, doesn't mean I can't appreciate it."

Philip stroked a hand along Levi's back. "No, of course not. I didn't mean that. I appreciate it, too, you know that."

"I know. I do." Levi pulled away a little bit but didn't stop dancing. "I'm so lucky."

"I'm the lucky one," Philip said, and swung him in a circle.
"Incredibly lucky. You're everything I ever wanted."

"I know the feeling," Levi said, as Ashley came running up to them and then pretty much crashed into them. "Oof," he said, and Ashley laughed and hugged them both.

"Happy wedding!" she said. "You have to have cake now!"

"Is there a Happy Wedding To You song I'm unfamiliar with?" Philip asked, amused, as Ashley led them to the head table, where plates with thin slices of cake were waiting for them.

Ashley rolled her eyes—great, Levi thought, practicing for her teen years—and smacked at her father playfully. "No. It's just a rule. Your wedding, so you have to eat cake."

"You'd think there'd be some sort of rule book outlining these things," Philip said to Levi, and he looked so happy that Levi grabbed onto his tie, tugged him in close, and kissed him. He would have done it a lot longer, too, only they were interrupted by spoons clinking on crystal—wait, that was supposed to make them kiss, not stop them from kissing—and Meg's voice, gentle, over the sound system.

"Hi," she was saying. "Hi, everybody. I'm Meg Dixon. I had the privilege, for a few years, to be married to Philip." Levi knew this didn't come as a surprise to anyone there—it was a small wedding, only about fifty people. "He and I have a beautiful daughter together. And now, I have the privilege of seeing him marry Levi, who is exactly the right person for him, and who I trust completely with our daughter Ashley. She's lucky enough to be getting Levi as a third parent." Meg lifted her bottle of sparkling water (no point in letting people wonder what was in your glass, she'd told Levi wryly) and said, "To the happy couple!"

For once, Levi didn't find himself blushing at being the center of attention. He only had eyes for Philip, whose wide smile met his own, not faltering even when Ashley dropped herself down onto his lap.

They checked into their very nice hotel near the airport after ten o'clock that night, both of them weary but having so much to talk about that they hadn't stopped since stepping into the limo. They'd booked the honeymoon suite, with its

king-sized bed and heart-shaped hot tub, and the first thing Levi did upon walking into the room was go immediately to the bed and collapse on it, face down.

"I do love your arse," Philip said, sitting beside him and patting it.

"You can do anything you want to it as long as I don't have to move," Levi moaned. Belying his own words, he flipped over onto his back.

Philip laced his fingers with Levi's. "Was it a good day? Everything you were hoping for?"

"It was," Levi said. "The best. Perfect."

"Every day with you is perfect," Philip told him. "All I wanted was for you not to be disappointed by it. You didn't feel there was ... something missing?"

Oh God, here it was. Levi had eventually, after much persuading, agreed to invite his family to the wedding, on the condition that that would be the end of the discussion. No more talking about it. He'd been convinced they wouldn't respond, and it had turned out he was right. Neither his parents nor his grandmother had replied, and the seats that been left for them had been empty until Meg and two of her friends had moved into them. (Levi was sure that Philip had been responsible for that plan.)

"You promised," Levi said, and Philip frowned. "That we wouldn't have to talk about it."

"Ever?" Philip's frown deepened. "I didn't think you meant ever. Surely that's not reasonable."

"I told you about my parents that first night," Levi said.

"More than I've ever told anyone. Isn't that enough? I don't

want to go on and on about it; it just makes me feel like shit."

The expression on Philip's face changed to sorrow, which of course made Levi feel guilty. "Oh, love, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Levi tugged Philip down onto the bed and shoved himself up onto an elbow. "None of it's your fault. Just don't make me talk about it, because talking about it turns me into a maniac, and I don't want to be a maniac on our wedding night."

"Oh, I don't know. I'd rather like a sex maniac," Philip said thoughtfully, eyes shining, and Levi smacked his chest with the flat of his hand, then kissed him.

Philip tasted like champagne and cake and coffee, a weird combination of Cs, and he opened his mouth willingly to Levi's. Levi went to work unbuttoning Philip's shirt slowly, one button at a time, then bent his head to press his mouth to the skin he'd bared. He pushed the shirt to one side and sucked on a nipple; Philip arched underneath him and made the best sound, eager and anxious for more.

Taking his time, Levi worked his way down Philip's body, pausing to linger on his favorite spots—the sensitive bit of skin just over Philip's last rib, his navel, and the tender hollow where thigh met groin. When Levi finally turned his attention to Philip's cock, it was hard and reddened, damp at the tip.

"Levi..." Philip said pleadingly.

"Impatient?" Levi asked, blowing warm air across Philip's balls.

"Terribly. You bring it out in me."

"I hope not." He pressed the flat of his tongue against the base of Philip's cock and smiled at Philip's gasp. "I'd hate to think I bring out the bad qualities in you."

Philip shifted, moving so fast that Levi didn't realize what was happening until he found himself flat on his back with Philip on top of him, their noses touching. "Is impatience a bad quality?" Philip asked.

Blinking, Levi said, "Um..."

"No, go on. Think about it if you need to." Philip rubbed his erection against Levi's pelvic bone and grinned what Levi was pretty sure could be called an evil grin. "Is it?"

"Yes," Levi said, then frowned. "I mean, no. I don't know. I don't care."

"You don't care?" Philip murmured against his lips.

Levi shook his head. "I don't care as long as you're going to fuck me. You are, aren't you?"

"Is that what you were hoping for?" Philip asked. "Though you're rather over-dressed..." Philip ran a hand down along Levi's body, lingering over his groin, shaping the fabric of the dress slacks to outline his erect cock. "I could take these off you, if you like."

"Yes," Levi said, wanting nothing more in that moment than to be naked beneath his husband. "Please."

"Always so polite," Philip mused. But he finally, finally started to take off Levi's clothes. He didn't linger at the task the way Levi had, but it still felt like it was taking too long, like forever, before Levi was stretched out on the comforter with Philip's mouth hot and wet on his balls.

"Philip ... please..." Planting his feet on the mattress, Levi lifted his hips, begging for what he wanted, what he knew Philip would be happy to give him.

"I can't possibly know what you want unless you tell me," Philip said.

Levi whined. Years together hadn't made this any easier for him, freeing as it could be at times to put what he wanted into words and speak them out loud. "You," he forced out. "Your tongue." Philip licked his thigh, and that was impetus enough to add, "In me."

One of the best things about Philip was that, once Levi had spoken, he got what he asked for. He choked back a wail at the feel of Philip's tongue, hot and slick, pushing inside him. Philip's hands pushed at his thighs, urging them to spread wider, and Levi did what he could to obey, though it was hard to concentrate on anything other than Philip's wet tongue licking him open.

"God," Levi heard himself whisper. His legs were shaking and he tilted his head back, staring blindly at the ceiling as Philip's tongue pushed inside him, long, slow licks. "Philip."

Philip made a questioning sound; the vibration made Levi's cock throb almost painfully.

"Please fuck me," Levi said. His voice sounded broken to his own ears and his breath came in uneven stutters that made his throat feel raw. "Please, please, please." God, his cock ached. He needed—

And then Philip was over him, hard cock stretching him wide, eyes locked on his, and Levi had everything he needed. He trembled and clutched at Philip's hips, then slid his hands

lower to Philip's ass, pulling Philip in closer. It felt so good he groaned; Philip leaned down to kiss him. Their lips met. It wasn't gentle; they were both too eager for that.

Philip pulled back, then shoved into him again, fast and hard. This time, they both groaned. They moved together, Levi lifting his hips to meet Philip's thrusts.

"God, I love you," Philip said. "I love you, I love you."

Levi thought it back at Philip, but couldn't spare the breath to echo the words aloud. When Philip wrapped a hand around his cock and stroked it roughly, Levi cried out and came, just like that, with no more warning. The pleasure was so intense his vision went black around the edges, and for what felt like a really long time he forgot to breathe. At last, he remembered, inhaling desperately just as Philip moaned and came, too, heat slicking Levi's insides.

Levi wrapped his arms around Philip and held him as he shuddered, then ran a hand down along his back. "I love you, too," Levi said, murmuring the words against the edge of Philip's ear.

"Thank God for that," Philip said. He lifted himself so he could see Levi's face. "Are you happy, love?"

Levi nodded and smiled. "What about you? Are you happy?"

"I've never been so happy," Philip told him, then yawned.
"Or so tired. Lord, what a long day."

"We should have gone to bed earlier last night," Levi told him, as they separated and moved to pull down the covers.

"I was too excited," Philip admitted.

"Oh, so was I." Levi grinned as he slid into bed. "I was just stating the obvious."

"Well, you're very good at it." Philip got between the covers, too, and shifted over to the center of the bed so they were touching. "Would you like to try it again?"

"Um ... we should go to sleep now?" Levi said, and reached for Philip's left hand, touching the wedding band that circled his ring finger.

Philip turned his head and kissed Levi's hair. "And so we shall," he said, and Levi sighed happily and closed his eyes.

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#### **Apples & Gin**

By Jenna Jones
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#### **Chapter One**

Noah Kingston sat on the landing, glass of scotch in hand, and watched the party going on below. It was a small party, only thirty people or so: Sawyer's backup band and personal assistant and manager, and Noah's partners from his photography studio, as well as some of their employees, actual friends, and people Sawyer liked and Noah could tolerate or vice-versa.

Despite the small size—though Sawyer would say the small size was the best part—and the variety of the guest list, it was a good party. People were chatting, music was playing, and there was plenty of beer and snacks in the kitchen. Candles in punched-tin buckets led to the tiny dock on the canal and reflected on the water and Noah had hung lights from the balcony on the upper floor. It was all in celebration of Sawyer Shaw and the completion of his new album.

Sawyer was easy to spot from Noah's position: laughing in the center of a group on the sofa, his long legs sprawled out as he cradled a beer bottle against his thigh, the only person in the room to wear plaid. His laugh was joyous, infectious, and everyone around him responded to it, from Terry Silver, his manager, to Sandi, the receptionist from Allen Kingston Stone.

Noah sipped his scotch. He supposed he should be making more of an effort, playing the host, making certain all the guests had a good time—but they were having a good time without his interference, and he could just watch, which he

preferred to do anyway. Not just Sawyer—though he always found Sawyer worth watching—but the swirls and eddies of all the guests, their friends who knew each other because they knew Sawyer or Noah. He loved, for instance, to see Jonas Allen laughing with Sawyer's sound engineer, or Terry dancing with one of Noah's assistants, or Sawyer's personal assistant Jeannie sitting with his backup band and looking perfectly happy and comfortable between them.

He tilted his head at the black-clad woman who climbed up the stairs and sat on the landing beside him. She tucked her long skirt neatly under her legs and looked at him, friendly and unfamiliar.

"I don't know anybody here," she said without preamble. "Well, except for Sawyer, and I don't think I could say I know him so much as I've seen him around the office. And I know my date, of course." Noah nodded, having another sip, and she said, "And I saw you, and I thought, hey, here's another person who doesn't know anybody and I thought—well, obviously, here I am."

"You are quite welcome to join me in watching the party," Noah said.

"Thanks." The woman nodded, smoothing her skirt. "It's not like most industry parties I've been to. It's mellow."

"It's not exactly an industry party," Noah said. "It's a 'yay, the album's done, I feel like having a party' kind of party."

"You must know Sawyer well. Like I said, I've only seen him around the office. And I've heard some of his music, of course." She hesitated. "Is he really as good a musician as

they say he is? Because his songs all sound pretty ordinary to me. Of course, I'm not really a country fan."

"He's a really good musician," Noah said. "One of the best in any genre."

"I keep hearing that. I'm not sure I believe it."

Noah looked at her, cocking an eyebrow. "Oh? Why's that?"

"He's too good-looking. And all he does is sing," she said.

"And play a little guitar. My twelve-year-old nephew can sing and play guitar."

Noah had another sip. "Sawyer writes all of his own songs, in addition to arranging them, and he played all the instruments on his first album and his fourth one. Granted, the first one was just him and the guitar, and the fourth one was just the guitar and a piano with an occasional mandolin, but he played all three."

The woman looked nonplussed. "You must work for the label. Have I seen you around the office, too? You seem familiar but I can't place you."

"I'm in photography. Everything on the walls," he gestured to the room below them where several of his pictures hung in an orderly row, "is mine."

"Oh," she said, "I'm sorry. You're Noah Kingston. I'm Betsy," she added, looking embarrassed. "Betsy Black. I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. You don't look anything like your pictures."

"It's the beard," Noah said, scratching it. "The beard always throws people off. I usually shave after a trip, but I haven't yet from the last one."

"I think you should keep it. It suits you." She smiled at him, a little more at ease. "So, you're the other half of the bromance."

Noah chuckled. "Is that what they're calling it?"

"Yes," she said, smoothing her skirt again. "It's touching, really: big-name photographer takes country boy under his wing and they both live happily ever after. It's like Sawyer's your little brother."

Noah drank. "Little brother, best friend—bromance is a good name for it."

Betsy got up and went to the wall behind them, where more of Noah's photographs hung in white mattes and black frames in a row along the wall. She stepped close to one of the framed photographs, studying it with a serious expression. "You have a beautiful eye."

"Thanks." He watched her; she was dressed more formally than anyone else here, in her light sweater and slim skirt and serious shoes, and while she was pretty, she had a severity to her that said she was determined to be taken seriously above everything else. He hoped she managed to find whatever she was looking for here. Los Angeles was not a kind city.

"You photograph him with such—um—compassion."

Noah raised an eyebrow. "Compassion" was not the way he'd describe it. In the photograph Betsy was looking at, Noah had posed Sawyer in an iron washtub in an abandoned barn, wearing nothing but a cowboy hat, a leather necklace, and a smile. Sawyer had used it for his fourth album, an acoustic one he named Stripped. Wal-Mart had refused to carry it.

It had sold by the truckload.

He said, "Thanks," anyway, and added, "I can get him to play something, if you want."

"Oh, no," said Betsy. "I'm sure he just wants to relax."

"Nah, he loves to play. He's a big show-off." Noah called down the stairs, "Sawyer!" and Sawyer stopped talking to whoever he was talking to and turned to him as conversation fell quiet all around the room.

"What?" Sawyer smiled wryly at him.

"I think it's time for a little fiddle."

"Oh, God, now?" Sawyer said, but his backup band was laughing and slapping one another's shoulders, which meant Noah really didn't have much convincing to do.

"Now," Noah said. "Please."

Sawyer shook his head, grinning. "You are so dead." He waved to the stereo. "Somebody, turn that off." He went into the guest room where the smaller instruments were kept. Kit turned off the iPod on the stereo and B.J. opened the baby grand.

Sawyer came back with the fiddle and acoustic guitar, which he gave to Kit. They both spent a few minutes tuning, Kit following Sawyer's lead, while the three of them discussed what song to play. At the top of the stairs, Noah leaned his elbows on his knees and Betsy joined him on the landing again, while the guests got comfortable on the sofas or the steps below him.

"Okay," Sawyer said, "no microphone, so you'll just have to put up with my mumbling." Chuckles scattered around the room. "We're going to do a little Charlie Daniels, 'cause that's

the best fiddle song ever." People murmured in anticipation and B.J. started hammering on the piano as Sawyer drew the bow across the strings.

They had no drums, but Kit kept the rhythm on the guitar and B.J. on piano, and everyone was soon clapping or stomping their feet in time. Sawyer's voice was low and growly on the verses, his brow furrowed in concentration as he played the violin. When it was the devil's part of the duel, his fingers flew across the strings to make the violin call like demons howling across the countryside. When it was Johnny's turn, the best fiddler who'd ever been according to the story, Sawyer laughed as he played, his head bobbing, his fingers swift and sure, the heels of his boots stomping on the hardwood floor.

They finished the song with a flourish, B.J. pounding the last chords on the piano, and Sawyer bowed as the guests applauded and laughed. His gaze caught Noah's, and Noah smiled with pride and nodded to him. Sawyer rolled his eyes in return and turned to put the fiddle back in its case.

"There," Noah said to Betsy. "He's really very good."
"I'll tell everyone I know," Betsy said, and laughed.

\* \* \* \*

By two in the morning everyone had left but Jeannie, Sawyer's personal assistant, who was picking up glasses and bottles left throughout the house. Wisps of blonde hair had fallen from her French braid and she'd taken off her shoes. She paused to crack her toes and stretch out her ankles before bending to pick up a few more beer bottles.

Noah went to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Jeannie," he said seriously. "Go home."

"It's a mess," Jeannie said, blinking up at him with sleepy brown eyes.

"It's not your job to keep the house tidy," Noah said. "The housekeeper is coming tomorrow and I warned her in advance to bring some help."

"Yes, but-"

"But nothing. Go home. Get some sleep."

"All right, Noah," she said, and put the garbage bag she'd been filling in the kitchen. "Where's Sawyer?"

"Out on the dock." He opened the front door and called in a low tone, hoping not to disturb the neighbors. "Sawyer, come say good night to Jeannie!"

"I thought Jeannie left," Sawyer said as he came inside, carrying a few empty beer bottles and glasses. "Go home already, girl."

"I'm going now. You're due at the studio at ten," she reminded him in a no-nonsense tone.

"I will be there at ten." Sawyer kissed her forehead. "Good night, Jeannie."

"Good night, Sawyer." She turned to go, waving good night to Noah. "Have a good time in Greece, Noah."

"It's Malta, and I will." He shut the door behind her. He turned all the locks and watched out the window for Jeannie's car to pull away, only turning off the porch lights when she was gone.

Noah went back into the living room—which was, Jeannie was right, a mess—where Sawyer was turning off the lights. "You were great tonight," Noah said.

"Party trick." Sawyer nodded to the back door. "Come outside with me." He went out to their dock on the canal, where a few candles still burned in their little buckets and the air smelled of running water. There were a few faint splashes, which Noah assumed were ducks having a midnight snack.

Sawyer bent and blew out all but one of the candles, and then sat on the dock and pulled off his boots so he could dangle his feet in the water. Noah stepped out of his own canvas shoes and lowered himself to the boards, and inhaled slowly as he looked at the hedges and trees across the canal. The lights were off at most of their neighbors', but at least no one had complained about the noise.

"It's a good party trick. It never fails to impress."

"Thanks," Sawyer said, laughing, and nudged his shoulder against Noah's. "Were you impressed?"

"Always." Noah returned Sawyer's smile. "What's left for you to do in the studio tomorrow?"

"Technical stuff. Sound levels, deciding the track order, the usual. We'll get the album to the label by Friday." He leaned closer so he could rest his head on Noah's shoulder. Noah stroked his fingertips through Sawyer's spiky brown hair. "Do you want to come and hang out while we work on it?"

"I've got a shoot scheduled. We can hang out here when you're done for the day."

"Hiding out again." He sighed.

"When you're in a secret relationship," Noah said dryly, "hiding out is inevitable. But since people seem to believe it's just a bromance—"

Sawyer started laughing. "A what?"

"A bromance. That's that the blonde I was talking to called it. Best friends with a little extra spice, I guess."

"Oh, that's fuckin' funny," Sawyer said, and kicked his feet a little in the water. "A bromance." Noah smiled, watching the moonlight ripple on the water, and Sawyer said, "I can believe most people think we're just friends. We hardly get to spend any time together anymore. You've got your photo shoots all around the world, and I'm on tour six months or eight months every year, and you can't always come along, and I miss you." He looked at Noah, far more serious than usual. "I always miss you."

"I miss you, too, kiddo," Noah said. "Next time we'll schedule things better, and maybe you could come with me when I have to jet off to the far corners of the world."

"Or you could say no to the next spoiled movie star who wants only you to photograph him."

"Hey." He pulled Sawyer closer, his arm around Sawyer's shoulder. "David and I are old friends. I've known him since college—I've been photographing him for that long. I'm not going to say no when he asks."

"Okay, okay. No refusing the spoiled movie stars." Sawyer kissed his cheek. Noah inhaled and shoved his fingers deep into Sawyer's hair, making a soft sound in his throat. Sawyer kissed him again, smiling, his tongue darting out to flick the skin by Noah's ear. "Five days," Sawyer whispered. "Five

whole days without you." He sighed and Noah raked his fingers deeper into Sawyer's hair. "Hey. Can you keep a secret?"

Noah laughed. "I should think so, by this point."

"This is a different kind of secret." He lifted his head. "This is something everybody's going to know eventually. Kit's going to ask Jeannie to marry him."

"Seriously?" Noah blinked in surprise—but it made sense, the way they'd been snuggling together during the party, all the times they'd shared a smile that didn't include anyone else. "Wow. That's great. She's a great kid. I knew they'd gone out a few times but I didn't think it was that serious."

"Apparently it is," Sawyer said. "Hey."

"Yeah?" He rubbed Sawyer's scalp with his fingertips.

"Do you ever think about getting married?"

"Oh," Noah said and his hand stilled. "No."

"Not ever?" Sawyer said, lifting his head. "'Cause I do."

That was even more surprising than the news about Kit and Jeannie, and Noah couldn't answer for a moment. "I really haven't. I guess I never thought it would apply to me."

"Oh," Sawyer said. He laid his head on Noah's shoulder again.

Noah moved his hand down to rub Sawyer's back. "But you do think about it."

"I think about it a lot. You and me have been together for a long time—longer than a lot of people I know have been married. And now the laws are changing all over the place, so we could, y'know, actually do it."

"We could," Noah said with wonder. "Do you want to?"

"I don't know," Sawyer said. "I guess I'm just thinking." He traced circles on Noah's knee. "Will you start thinking, too?"

"I'll start thinking," Noah said. He patted Sawyer's back.
"Come on. Let's go to bed."

Sawyer grinned and leaped up, grabbed Noah's hand and pulled him to his feet. "The magic words, brown-eyed handsome man." Noah let Sawyer pull him along, laughing when Sawyer stopped and kissed him and tugged his shirt over his head. Noah grabbed Sawyer's shirt as well and yanked it off, grinning at the sound of buttons rattling on the deck, and Sawyer muttered into his mouth, "I liked that shirt."

"I'll fix that shirt." Sawyer wore a T-shirt under his buttondown, and Noah slid his hands up under it along Sawyer's back.

"Liar. You can't sew." Sawyer's fingers raked through Noah's hair and Sawyer pulled back Noah's head to give him a hard, long kiss.

Noah inhaled and held Sawyer's waist, stroking his back with light fingertips. Seven years and his heart still raced when Sawyer kissed him like this. He whispered, "I hope I never fall out of love with you."

Sawyer laughed and stepped out Noah's arms. He pulled his T-shirt off slowly, sucking in his belly and arching his back like a striptease, and Noah growled and grabbed him for another kiss.

"Fuck, I love you," Sawyer said and pulled on Noah's hips to get him into the house.

Noah kissed him again when they were inside and pushed him against the nearest wall. He'd never dare do this in the day, not with their big windows and the neighbors just across the canal, but at night he could do anything—including pulling down Sawyer's jeans as Noah slid down onto his knees.

"Oh," Sawyer breathed, his hand raking through Noah's hair, "I've been wanting this all night."

Noah chuckled and pressed Sawyer harder against the wall, palms on Sawyer's hips, and slowly sucked Sawyer's cock into his mouth. Sawyer's responding moan was gratifyingly rough, and the way his cock filled Noah's mouth told him it wouldn't be long tonight. Noah pinned Sawyer to the wall by his hips, licking him slowly and thoroughly, until Sawyer clutched at Noah's hair and shouted and fell back against the wall.

Noah pulled off and licked his lips. He stood and leaned into Sawyer's body, his hands on either side of Sawyer's head. Sawyer blinked at him with dark, blissful eyes. "Nice B.J., babe."

Noah laughed and kissed him, licking deep into his mouth and laughing more as Sawyer grabbed his face to kiss him harder. "C'mon," Noah said and cleared his throat to clear out the rasp. "I wanna do stuff to ya."

"Stuff! My favorite thing!" Sawyer said, and chased him up the stairs.

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#### **Chapter Two**

Ten years ago.

It was Sawyer's first real photo shoot, and his leg couldn't stop jiggling. His manager glanced at him repeatedly as they drove through Los Angeles to the studio of Allen Kingston Stone, and finally said, "Sawyer. Calm down."

"What if he makes me take my clothes off?"

"He won't." Terry Silver shook his head, looking even more like a woebegone bulldog than normal. "He's a professional, one of the best in the business. He won't do anything to make you uncomfortable."

Sawyer nodded and watched the streets go by. The record label had sent a car and driver. The record label had checked him in to a hotel that was famous because a comedian had died there, years before Sawyer was born. The record label had bought his demo and was paying a mind-staggeringly huge amount of money for him to record an album in a state-of-the-art studio, and now the record label was paying to have a fancy photographer take his picture for the album cover.

Sawyer wondered when he was going to wake up.

"And if he does do anything you don't like," Terry said,
"we'll go and ask for someone else. We can do that. The label
wants to make you happy."

"Okay," Sawyer said. He leaned forward and asked the driver, "Do you know Mr. Kingston?"

"Sawyer, let the man drive," Terry said.

"I've met him a few times," the driver said.

"What's he like?"

The driver thought about it a moment. "He talks very quickly and he's generous at Christmas."

"Okay," Sawyer said and sat back again.

The photography studio was between an office building and a boutique, and looked square and ordinary on the outside. Inside, they were greeted by a slim, red-headed receptionist, who had them wait on a leather bench in front of a picture window and asked if they would like some coffee or water. Sawyer could only shake his head and smile, and Terry said, "I think we're fine for now, thank you."

The receptionist smiled at Sawyer sympathetically. "I promise Mr. Kingston will be gentle with you," she said. "I'll let him know you're here." She went back to her desk—a massive curve of blond oak that mostly hid her from view—and buzzed through an intercom to inform someone in another room that Sawyer Shaw had arrived.

Sawyer looked around. All the walls curved away, making the building feel enormous, and everything was white and silver. Framed photographs hung along the wall, and Sawyer recognized some of them: actors and musicians, a firefighter in front of a ruined building, the full moon in the desert hanging over a naked Joshua tree.

His leg started jittering again.

"He's going to think I'm a hick," he whispered to Terry.

"He's going to think you're a client," Terry reassured him, and patted his back.

The receptionist came to them again and said, "They're ready for you in the studio. Come with me, please?"

Sawyer nodded again and followed her down the endless wall of photography into the next room, which was even bigger and whiter. It was abuzz with activity, assistants in black bustling around with tripods and lenses. One of the men in black came to them and eyed Sawyer up and down. "Well, you are a tall one, that's good," he said, pushing sleek black hair out of his eyes.

Sawyer smiled uncomfortably and glanced at Terry. The man circled him, peering at him through his horn-rimmed glasses, and Sawyer tried to stand still. "Needs a better haircut, no visible body fat," he poked Sawyer in the ribs and Sawyer swallowed his yelp, "no body fat at all, good skin, good coloring. Okay. We can do something with you."

"Good," Sawyer felt brave enough to say. "It's nice to finally meet you, Mr. Kingston."

The man laughed. "I'm not Mr. Kingston, sweetie. I'm Roddy, his assistant. Mr. Kingston is not here yet."

"Oh," Sawyer said. "Isn't he supposed to take my picture?"

"He'll be here when he gets here. Meantime, we'll take
some test shots and get you into makeup and costume."

"I don't want to wear makeup," Sawyer said quickly, and Roddy laughed again.

"Sweetie, you have to or you'll look like you just woke up from a three-day bender. No one will be able to tell you've been made up, not even your mama." He clapped his hands and the bustle resumed, this time centered around the white sheet-like background where there was a lone low stool. "Test

shots before Mr. Kingston gets here, children. Mr. Shaw, have a seat."

Sawyer perched on the stool and tried to sit up straight. Assistants fluttered around him with little boxes they told him were light meters, aiming the large covered lamps at him and then moving them away, and holding variously colored shirts up against his face. Roddy snapped pictures, both with a Polaroid and a digital camera, while another assistant held the Polaroids and wrote notes on the bottom.

Sawyer caught Terry's eye and smiled gamely. He felt ridiculous, but like mixing the sound levels and meeting representatives from the label, it was just necessary.

A voice carried down the long hallway, and for a moment all the assistants froze. "No, no, what you don't understand is that when I say 'please don't take my car' I mean 'please don't take my car.' I don't mean 'please don't take my car unless you decide you need a hit,' or 'please don't take my car unless you decide to drive down to Tijuana for the weekend without telling me,' I fucking mean 'please don't fucking take my fucking car.'"

The assistants leaped to life, one scrambling to get water bottles from the refrigerator at the end of the room, another to put several cameras in a row on a white Lucite cart, and Roddy to gather the Polaroids and straighten his shoulders. Sawyer straightened up, too, hoping he didn't look like a nervous hick kid, no matter how much he felt like one.

Noah Kingston walked into the room, a cell phone to his ear, the other hand shoving through short dark hair until it stood up in soft spikes. He had dark eyes, a short beard, and

a face that was both weary and kind—not like the pinched look so many industry people Sawyer had been meeting lately wore, like they never stopped feeling anxious and on display. Sawyer supposed you could tell he was the boss because he was the only person wearing a color: a bright blue shirt, mostly unbuttoned, and jeans and work boots, like he felt no need to make the "I'm an artist" statement his assistants did. He doubted Noah Kingston felt the need to make a statement of any kind to anyone.

Noah waved a hand at Roddy, who started showing him the Polaroids, and said into the phone, his voice more exasperated than angry, "Okay, you know what, we're not going to have this conversation right now, because I have to take pictures of a country singer and earn the fucking money to buy a new fucking car since you drove mine into a fucking tree. Yeah, well, fuck you, too." He closed the phone with a snap and told them all conversationally, "My boyfriend is an asshole. You're Sawyer Shaw, right?"

"Yes, sir," Sawyer said.

"Don't call me sir; it makes me feel like you should be saluting me, and they don't like my kind in the military. Okay. You're cute, Sawyer Shaw, which, I'm sure, is why the record label loves you. But cute is not going to move units all by itself: it has to be properly packaged cute. So that's my job here: the label has decided on your image and I'm going to give it shape and form. Okay?"

Sawyer blinked, lost in a sea of verbiage. "Um."

"Exactly. Cute but dumb. Easy. Okay, people, let's get him made up and dressed." A young woman with magenta hair

joined them, carrying what looked like a tackle box. "Anna, do your best with him. Jonathan, I want an inch off the hair all around. We'll start with the basic white T-shirt and jeans and go from there." He turned to the rack of clothes an assistant wheeled over for his approval.

"Hey!" Sawyer said, hopping off the stool. Noah Kingston, Roddy, and Terry all looked at him, Terry's eyebrows drawing together like when he was afraid Sawyer was going to say something he'd have to explain with a "no comment." Roddy looked stressed. Noah just looked interested.

Sawyer fidgeted with one of his rings and said, "I'm not dumb and I don't want to be cute."

"Oh, Sawyer," Terry said, holding his forehead.

"No, no, I get you, kiddo," Noah said. "You want to be unique in a sea of blandness, right? You want to stick around a while, not just be this summer's cute kid in a cowboy hat. Right?"

"Yes," Sawyer said.

"Okay," said Noah, "I'm going to tell you two things, and you can take or leave them as you like. First, you are cute, and there's nothing you can do about that because your mommy and daddy blessed you with some fucking fantastic genes, and you didn't do anything stupid like scrape your face up on a highway in a motorcycle accident. For which I, personally, thank you. I hate seeing beauty messed up. Breaks the heart.

"Second, the record label has done this many, many, many times before, and they know what they're doing. And I know what I'm doing. So I'm going to take some pictures of you

just like how the label wants, but then—and this is the important part—then I'm going to take some pictures like how I want. And I may even take some pictures like how you want. And when we send them all to the label, if you're lucky, they'll choose some of the other pictures for your album cover and publicity pictures instead of the ones where you're merely cute. Deal?"

"Deal," Sawyer held out his hand to Noah.

Noah looked at his hand and laughed as he clapped his hand into Sawyer's grip. "You're really the old-fashioned kind, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," Sawyer said, grinning, and pumped Noah's hand a few times before letting it go.

Sawyer went along with Anna as instructed, and when she was done with him he admitted he looked pretty much like himself instead of like someone who'd had his face spackled with pancake makeup. He was less sure about the haircut, but Jonathan explained what he was doing as he went along: removing flyaways and split ends, giving his hair more shape.

"We could go very short," Jonathan said, pulling his hair back from his face. "I think that would suit you a lot more than this longer look. You're a bit, uh, baby-faced."

"Yeah," Sawyer said, but shook his head. "Just the inch, like Mr. Kingston said."

"Okay. Next time, maybe."

Sawyer smiled and looked at his reflection. Next time. He loved it when people said "next time."

When he walked back into the studio, running his fingers through his hair to get used to the new length, Noah Kingston

stopped talking to Roddy and walked to him. He circled Sawyer and Sawyer watched him, not reacting when Noah flicked his fingers through Sawyer's bangs and trailed them down his shoulder. Up close, Sawyer could see the laugh lines around his dark eyes and full mouth.

"Well," Noah said quietly, "look how good you clean up." He tossed Sawyer a white cotton T-shirt. "Put that on."

Sawyer stripped off his own T-shirt and pulled on the new one, standing still with his chin up as Noah inspected him. "Belt," Noah said to Roddy, who brought him a brown leather belt with a big silver buckle like a champion bullrider's. Noah threaded it through Sawyer's belt loops and tucked his shirt into his jeans, his face nearly cheek-to-cheek with Sawyer's, and then stepped back again. Sawyer tilted his head, waiting for the verdict, and smiled when Noah said, "Nope, not casual enough," and pulled his shirt out again. "That's better. Go take your spot, kiddo."

"Sawyer," Sawyer said, but went to the stool and perched on it again, smiling as assistants swarmed around him.

"Kiddo," Noah said, ambling to him with a camera in hand, "boyo, young'un." He leveled the camera at Sawyer. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen. Sir," he added. Noah lowered the camera and Sawyer raised an eyebrow at him, trying not to smile.

"Very much a kid," Noah said, and peered at him through the lens, and the clicking began.

Posing wasn't hard, it turned out. He had to smile sometimes and look serious sometimes, put his hands on his belt or behind his head, sit on the floor, stand while holding a

guitar. Noah kept up a running stream of patter, which sometimes made Sawyer laugh (which Noah photographed) and sometimes made him roll his eyes and shake his head (which Noah also photographed.)

A few times during the shoot, as he waited for the assistants to change the film and adjust the lights, Sawyer played the guitar and sang a little. It made the assistants smile, which he liked, and Terry looked pleased; but most importantly, Noah paused and listened to him. That made Sawyer happiest of all.

The record label had requested certain props in some pictures, and while the assistants set up scenes, Sawyer asked if there was a place he could wait until they were ready for him again. Roddy directed him to Noah's office, and after a few minutes of just sitting and tapping his thumbs together, Sawyer pulled off his boots and lay down on the low sofa across from Noah's desk. There was a soft knitted throw hung over the back, which Sawyer pulled over himself. He tucked his head on his arm and closed his eyes.

He awoke when someone sat on the couch by his feet. Sawyer opened his eyes, expecting it to be Roddy or Terry, but instead it was Noah, camera in hand. Sawyer grinned, glad it was him instead of one of the others.

"Late night?" Noah said, looking at him through the camera. He lowered it and adjusted the small lamp on a table behind the sofa.

"Yeah, kind of. Lots to do on the album. Is the studio set up?" He started to sit up, but Noah placed a hand on his chest and gently pushed him back down.

"Not yet. You've got a few minutes still." He lifted the camera. "I'll take a few pictures here, though." Sawyer looked at him, puzzled, and started to sit up again. "No, no, stay down," Noah said, so Sawyer lay down, his arm crooked under his head. He closed his eyes and tried not to flinch when he heard the shuttle click.

"What are these pictures for?" he murmured.

"My personal collection, of course. Kidding. A good photographer never passes up a found opportunity, and you look really good right now."

"Thanks," Sawyer said, and smiled a little—smiled a little more when Noah moved closer and took more pictures. "So, you think I'm cute."

"Kiddo, anyone with eyes and preferences for the male of the species thinks you're cute. There's nothing wrong with being cute, especially when you're nineteen years old. When you're forty, you'll probably want people to think you're handsome instead, but take it from someone who knows, handsome is not always better."

"You talk a lot," Sawyer observed.

"And say absolutely nothing. I know. It's a personality flaw. I could shut up."

"No, don't," Sawyer said. "I like it."

Noah chuckled and took pictures in silence. "Now I feel self-conscious. Though I can say I liked hearing you sing. Country music isn't really my thing, but you—your stuff is all right."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Is it original?"

"Yeah. I like writing songs almost more than I like singing them."

"You do both well," Noah said.

Sawyer tucked his head against his arm and tried not to look too pleased. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"If you don't like your boyfriend, why do you stay with him?"

Noah lowered the camera a moment, then chuckled and shook his head and resumed taking pictures. "Because I love him, even if I don't always like him. This is the way grownups do relationships. You make a commitment and then you see it through."

"Even when he crashes your car looking for drugs?" Sawyer asked quietly, and the clicking from the camera stopped while Noah looked at him, frowning.

"You don't have to worry about that, kiddo. It's not going to affect your album cover."

Sawyer sat up slowly, looking into the camera since he couldn't see Noah's face. "I'm worried anyway," he said.

"Well, you're very nice to worry." He reached over to pull the throw lower on Sawyer's body and adjusted the lamp again. "But like I said, it's not going to affect any of this." Sawyer looked away as Noah took more pictures. "What are you thinking, kiddo?" Noah said.

"You're right: nothing that happens with you affects me. You're just taking my picture." It seemed so unfair.

"Don't look so gloomy," Noah said. "You're going to meet lots of people who you'll never see again. It's part of being

famous. You'll sign autographs and get kissed and people will cry on you and tell you how your music changed their lives.

And then they'll be out of your life, even if you stay in theirs."

"It sounds terrible when you put it like that," Sawyer said.

"There are up sides to celebrity, too. Like the money, the gift bags, the stadiums full of fans singing along to your songs..."

"Yeah," Sawyer said. "That ain't bad." He said, when Noah gave him a skeptical look, "I've played bars, you know. County fairs. I didn't drop full-grown into a recording studio."

Noah laughed. "So you've had a taste and now you want more."

"I quess."

"You're going to be fine," Noah said, raising the camera again. "Let me give two pieces of advice, though."

"Okay," Sawyer said, smiling—and smiling a little wider when Noah moved closer, the shutter clicking away.

"One, never sign a contract you don't understand. Get a lawyer as soon as you can and pay him or her well enough to be on your side. And two, save your money. The party never lasts as long as you think it will."

"You learned this from experience, right?"

"Like you wouldn't believe." Noah lowered the camera, contemplative. "My boyfriend used to play bass for a hair metal band. They used to be the toast of MTV, and then grunge came along." He shrugged. "He still thinks they're going to be back on top someday."

"I want to be the next Johnny Cash," Sawyer said. "I want to be bigger than a genre."

"You've got a long way to go for that." He reached over and messed up Sawyer's hair more, and took more pictures. "I have no idea what the label is going to think of this, but they'll get them anyway."

"Maybe I'll write a lullaby," Sawyer said. "They'd suit a lullaby."

"Yeah, they would."

"Something sweet," Sawyer whispered. "Something just for you."

Noah's expression had been detached through most of the photo shoot, but he let it drop as Sawyer looked at him in the dim light of the office, to show someone who was lonely and a little bit sad. His lips parted like he wanted to speak, but he said nothing as he lifted the camera again.

Sawyer put his hand over the lens. He pushed the camera away and leaned forward, took Noah's face in his hand and kissed the man.

Noah inhaled and fumbled the camera onto the sofa table, not breaking the kiss even when the camera clattered against the lamp. Noah wrapped his arms around Sawyer's head, kissing Sawyer fiercely, and Sawyer moved his hand from Noah's face to his hair while he wound his other arm around Noah's waist and hitched him closer. He leaned forward more, trying to press Noah against the arm of the sofa, but Noah pushed until Sawyer was on his back. That was fine with Sawyer: he wrapped a leg around Noah's hip, his fingers raking through Noah's hair, kissing him.

Abruptly, Noah pushed himself up. He looked at Sawyer silently, breathing hard, and then pushed himself off the sofa. "I have a boyfriend," he said shortly, and got off the couch.

"But you're not happy."

"None of your business," Noah snapped, and picked up his camera. "Come out as soon as you have control of yourself again."

"I have control of myself," Sawyer muttered, but yeah, he'd need a few minutes.

"Right. When you do, come on out. We've got more pictures to take and you've got another costume change."

"What is this, number six?" Sawyer folded the throw and laid it over the arm of the couch.

"Yup. And I want you bare-chested before the day is out, kiddo," Noah said to him over his shoulder as he walked back into the studio. "Gotta give the little girls something to swoon over."

"All you have to do is ask," Sawyer muttered, and when he felt he could be around other people without embarrassing himself he followed Noah into the studio.

\* \* \* \*

"So, what did you think of him?" Terry said as they went back to the hotel.

"I liked him." Sawyer started to say more, but while he liked and trusted Terry, he hadn't told his manager everything about himself. When Terry had asked him about girlfriends, Sawyer had just said, "There's nobody special

right now." Terry might throw a fit if Sawyer told him about kissing Noah. It was so hard to tell with people.

"I think he liked you, too. That's good. You need to make contacts in more than just in the music industry; everybody you meet can help you in your career, too."

"Yeah, he took really good pictures," Sawyer said, and looked out the window. He and Noah hadn't had any more time alone during the photo shoot, but he thought sometimes Noah looked at him as more than just a client, and when they'd looked over the proofs Noah had leaned against him for a moment. It had been just a moment, but Sawyer's arm still felt warm from the contact.

"Not just that," said Terry with a chuckle. He paused. "I hope you weren't put off because he's gay, Sawyer. A lot of people in the entertainment industry are."

Sawyer looked at him. "No. I wasn't put off by that at all. Terry, I—" He stopped and swallowed hard. He'd never said this out loud to anyone. No one knew this about him but the guys he slept with, and there were only three of them, anyway. "I'm gay, too, Terry."

Terry didn't say anything for a long time. Sawyer saw the driver glance at them a few times in the rear view mirror, and he wondered if he should have waited until they were in a more private place to say this.

Finally Terry spoke. "Son, I'm—I'm not shocked. I'm touched that you trust me. But—oh, Sawyer, this is not going to make things easier for you."

"I know," Sawyer said. "I've been hiding this all of my life. I've never even told my mother. So, if I need to keep it to myself for a while longer, I'm okay with that."

Terry slowly shook his head. "It's not just keeping it to yourself. You're about to be famous: people will be watching every move you make. They're going to want to know everything about you, from your favorite ice cream to who you're sleeping with. We can keep it a secret, but it won't be easy. People from your past will come out of the woodwork to cash in on knowing you. I need you to think about if you want to keep it a secret forever or be open about it from the beginning."

"I can't be open about it," Sawyer said. "My mother would freak out. Everybody I know would hate me."

"It's up to you, son."

"That's my decision," Sawyer said. He leaned forward and said to the driver, "You'll keep my secret, won't you?"

"Yes," the driver said. "It's part of my job."

"Thank you." He sat back, frowning. Well, that was one down. He'd have to ask Noah not to tell anyone, though Hatch and Peter at home would be easy: they didn't want anyone knowing they were gay, either. Hatch was going to get married soon, anyway. Then there was that guy he'd picked up a few weeks before, whose name he couldn't remember...

He sighed. Somehow he'd thought it would be easier in the big city.

"It's up to you, Sawyer," Terry said. He took out a Palm Pilot and scribbled a note. "One more thing to keep track of." "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Terry said, and smiled at him briefly as he tucked the Palm Pilot back in his jacket pocket. "This is my job, taking care of things for you. Any other surprises in store?"

"That's the big one," Sawyer said. "I'll let you know as soon as I think of something else."

Alone in his hotel room later, Sawyer couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop thinking about Noah Kingston, those soft lips and sad eyes, until finally he threw aside the covers and got out of bed. He got his notebook and a pencil out of his backpack, and his guitar from its case, and sat cross-legged on the bed. There was a song forming in his mind—it had been ever since he kissed Noah in the office, and he didn't think he would sleep until he had written it down.

Sawyer picked up his guitar and started playing and singing to himself, stopping sometimes to write down the chord changes and lyrics. It was dawn by the time he was finished, pale light seeping under the blinds, and he hoped no one would notice the bags under his eyes when he got to the studio.

He tilted his head, reading over the mostly-completed song, and wrote "Lullaby (A Message to Noah)" at the top of the page. Satisfied, Sawyer put the notebook and guitar aside and curled up under the sheets to get a few hours of sleep.

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#### **Chapter Three**

Now.

The diner, probably ironically, played country music. As he read the menu, Noah smiled at Sawyer's familiar voice singing out from the loudspeakers. He loved it when unexpected Sawyer brightened his afternoon.

His partners from the photography studio were at the table with him, and Jonas Allen smirked at the music. "'You wanna eat my apples and drink my gin,'" he sang in a mocking tone, and looked contrite when Noah raised his eyes from the menu to gaze at him mildly. "What's that song about, anyway? Who eats apples with gin? A twist of lemon, that's what you have with gin."

"It's about sex, Jonas." Noah turned a page. Yum, patty melts with kettle fries.

"C'mon. It sounds much too wholesome to be about sex."

"You need to listen to a lot more country music, Jonas."

Bailey Stone tilted her head thoughtfully as she listened, and then laughed. "No, I hear it. It's not just about sex—it's about lust, especially that line about biting the skin and drinking the juice." Her eyes got wider. "Oh, Noah, this song is about you, isn't it?"

Noah sighed. "I think I'll have pancakes. I'm in the mood for something comforting."

"I had no idea country music could be so dirty," Bailey said.

"You could just tell yourself it's just about apples and gin," Noah said as soothingly as he could.

"No, I'm just going to remember it's about you and your cute boyfriend. How is he, anyway?"

"He's great," Noah said. "He's polishing the new album and happy as a clam."

"Ugh, Noah, I think I know too much about your sex life," said Jonas, wincing.

"Speaking of the kid," Noah said, ignoring him. "Sawyer wants to get married."

Bailey shrieked and jumped up to come around the table. She kissed him and patted his cheeks, beaming. "Sweetheart, that's the best news ever."

Jonas just sat there, his mouth open until Noah reached over the table to gently push it shut. "Wow."

"Yeah, I know," Noah said, smiling, and kissed Bailey back.
"Thanks, honey."

"When are you doing it? Where are you doing it? Do you know who you want to perform the ceremony?"

"I haven't said yes yet, Bay."

"What about his career?" Jonas said in a serious tone.

"This is going to change things for him."

"I know," Noah said. "This is why I haven't said yes yet. We're still talking about it. He's optimistic, but his management people emphasize his looks so much, you know? If girls think they can't sleep with him, are they still going to buy his CDs? I think they will, but I can't tell people what to do."

"Silly management people," said Bailey, shaking her head.

"You are taking this seriously, right?" said Jonas to Noah.

"We're both taking it seriously." He opened the menu again. Definitely pancakes.

"Well, I think it's a wonderful thing to do," Bailey said.

"And I think we should take the pictures for your wedding present. Don't you?" she said pointedly to Jonas, who just spread his hands in surrender.

"Thank you, Bay," Noah said, meaning more than just for the pictures, and the way she smiled at him said she knew.

\* \* \* \*

On the way home that night, Noah stopped to put gas in his car and get some cash, and on the way out of the convenience store he paused to look at tabloid headlines. They were amusing sometimes, trumpeting affairs and possible pregnancies and how shocking it could be to see a celebrity act like a normal person. Just imagine! They shopped and ate and walked their dogs!

Shocking photos! shouted one headline and he nearly passed it, except that the house in the photograph looked familiar...

He picked the tabloid up, frowning. Inside, country star's double life exposed! Nashville's favorite son in Venice Beach love nest!

"Shit," Noah said out loud, and plunked down a few dollars to pay for the paper. He hurried out to his car and opened the paper to the article, dreading what he would see even though he knew already what it would be.

That was his house, their house. Someone had taken pictures, probably from right across the canal, hiding behind the neighbors' hedges, using a night-vision camera. The pictures were dark and some were hopelessly out-of-focus, and the editors had blurred out the action just enough to not be obscene, but there was no mistaking the man against the wall was Sawyer Shaw.

Noah closed the paper and stared at nothing, feeling like his heart had stopped. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and repeated, "Calm blue ocean, calm blue ocean," to himself a few times before taking out his cell phone and dialing Sawyer's number.

"Hey," he said when Sawyer answered. "Have you been to a news stand today?"

"Nope, I've been busy in the studio. What's up?"

"Somebody got pictures of us the other night, after the party."

Sawyer said, "Out on the dock?"

"After," Noah said.

"Shit," Sawyer said, more subdued than Noah had ever heard him.

"I know. Where are you?"

"I'm on my way to Terry's. I'll be there in about ten minutes."

"Okay," Noah said, "here's what we'll do. I'll meet you at Terry's and we can talk about what you want to do and how you want to handle this. Some kind of statement about the paparazzi and invasions of privacy, to start with."

"Okay," Sawyer said.

"And, kiddo?" Noah said. "It's going to be fine. We'll take care of this. I love you."

"I love you, too," Sawyer said and hung up the phone.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm not from Nashville," Sawyer said as he read the article.

"Not a priority right now," said Terry, who had not stopped pacing since Noah arrived.

"We could say they mean somebody else. I probably look like a lot of people." He rubbed his jaw, which was raspy with dark blond stubble. "Don't I look like other people, Noah?"

"No, babe," Noah said. "You don't look like anybody else in the world."

"Well, fuck." Sawyer closed the tabloid. "Guess we'll just have to 'fess up."

Terry rubbed the back of his neck. "Noah, help."

Noah shrugged. "I could say that was a bad Photoshop manipulation and we're deeply, deeply insulted that our innocent friendship is being exploited in order to sell newspapers."

"Yes, yes, that's perfect. Perfect."

"Or," said Sawyer, "we could just say, yes, Noah and I are in love and have been for years and we're going to get married."

"Sawyer, no," said Terry in a way that reminded Noah of disciplining a puppy. He thought if Sawyer kept this up, Terry would bop Sawyer on the nose with the newspaper.

"Why not?" Sawyer tossed the newspaper onto the dining room table. "You know I've been thinking about doing it anyway. We've started talking about getting married." He looked at Noah, hopeful and nervous. "This makes it easy. We just say yes."

Terry looked at Noah, too, appealing for help, but Noah just shook his head. "Sawyer," Terry said, "the label doesn't want you to come out."

"Oh." Sawyer leaned back in his chair. "Why not?"

"It'll ruin your sales," Terry said bluntly. "There has never been an out, gay, country singer. The label believes the public will never accept it."

Sawyer clenched his hand into a fist and then released it. "I don't believe that."

"Country music is cowboy culture," Terry said gently. "No matter what the movies say, people aren't ready for their cowboys to be gay."

Sawyer blinked a few times. "Noah?"

"I hate to say it," Noah said, "but I think he's right."

Sawyer pressed his lips together, eyes glistening. "Oh. Okay. If that's really what you think, I guess we'll just deny it, right? What'd you say, a bad Photoshop?"

"That's right."

Sawyer said in a small voice, "You know what makes me really angry, though? That they took something wonderful and loving and made it look cheap and sleazy. That's what I hate."

Terry patted Sawyer's shoulder. "I'm sorry, son."

Noah leaned closer to him and put his hand on Sawyer's knee. "It'll be okay, babe. I promise. The time will be right eventually. It just isn't yet."

"Okay," Sawyer said, and tried to smile. "I still have stuff to take care of here. See you at home later?"

"I've got to get to bed early tonight," Noah said. "The flight leaves at seven."

"It won't be much longer." He leaned over and kissed Noah briefly. "I'll see you at home."

Noah patted Sawyer's knee and stood, and Terry saw him to the front door. "He'll be fine," Terry said. "He's disappointed now, but with the state the music industry is in, we have to think about the bigger picture."

"I know," Noah said. "I'll be fine, too, thanks."

"Oh, yeah, of course," Terry said, already distracted, and closed the door behind him.

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#### **Chapter Four**

Nine years ago.

It was tradition to have a jam session after the awards ceremony. It was two a.m. and the vast Caesar's Palace auditorium was still packed with people—not just the musicians, but industry people as well, all as delighted as fans to watch their idols have fun onstage.

Sawyer had thought, for his first country music awards, that at most he'd meet a few more musicians and maybe have his picture taken for tomorrow's news, but instead he was on the stage with a guitar and a microphone. He'd already sung backup for Grace May and Bryan Collins, sung a duet with Kevin Harvey, and impressed the audience with his picking skills by playing "Dueling Banjos" with Hamilton Combs.

Sawyer was having the time of his life.

The record label had persuaded him to bring a date instead of his mother: they'd found what Terry called a suitable girl for him, an actress from a television drama who was pretty and a country music fan, and he'd had a decent time with her. They'd been photographed on their way into Caesar's Palace and during a few audience reaction shots during the broadcast, and she'd kissed his cheek before he went on stage to accept his awards. Sawyer hoped that would be enough to keep the label happy. Tomorrow there would be gossip about them dating, but he wasn't too concerned. He

was only twenty-one; no one expected him to settle down anytime soon.

Hamilton Combs said into his microphone, "Let's have the new kid play a song," in his basso profundo voice. People applauded and laughed, and Sawyer grinned at Hamilton in thanks.

"Gonna slow things down in the house a little." Sawyer braced one foot against the floor to prop up his guitar. He started to adjust his microphone and then backed off to let a stagehand do it. "This is my latest single," he said and people whooped. He laughed. "Thanks. I just heard yesterday that it's hit number one on the country chart, so thanks for that." The stagehand adjusted another microphone in front of his guitar. "Thanks," Sawyer said. "Okay. This is the song."

Sawyer began to strum, and the audience went quiet at the soft notes. He sang, pitching his voice soft and low, "Lay down your head, close your eyes, we're hiding where no one can see..." He looked out at the audience as he sang, letting his gaze rest on his date for a moment, on the many familiar faces in the audience—not just singers like himself, but industry people he was getting to know, promoters and A&R and journalists—

His gaze landed on someone in particular and he nearly fumbled the lyrics, but managed to recover without losing his place. Noah Kingston was there.

Sawyer managed to get through the song and bow to the applause, and then he gave the guitar to a stagehand, and left the stage to find Noah. Before he could get far into the audience, his date rushed up to him. "Oh, Sawyer, that song

is so beautiful! And it feels like you were singing it just to me!"

Sawyer smiled, distracted. "Good, Brenda."

"It's Brandi," she said, pouting.

"Right," Sawyer said, "Brandi. Do you mind waiting for me a while longer? I just noticed someone I haven't seen for a long time and I want to say hi."

"Oh," she said, even more disappointed. "Sure. Okay." He smiled again and started to walk away, and she called after him, "If you take too long I'm finding someone else to take me back to the hotel!"

"Okay," Sawyer said, and went into the crowd to find Noah. When he reached the part of the auditorium where he'd seen Noah, though, Noah was nowhere to be seen, and he was detained even longer by singers he'd been listening to for years congratulating him on his album and his awards. He smiled and nodded and said thank you, and left as soon as he could politely get away.

But where could Noah have gone? Sawyer stood up on his toes and looked around, but didn't see a familiar dark head anywhere. He stood back and sighed, and then smiled and turned when someone touched his back. "Hey," he said, and Noah smiled at him.

"Hey." They hugged each other, slapping each other's backs. Noah pulled back, holding Sawyer's shoulder, and looked him up and down. "You're taller."

"I'm standing up straight. Hey, um, there's something I wanted to—" A giggling couple edged past them, and Sawyer

had to step closer to Noah. Noah looked after them, visibly annoyed.

"Do you want to go somewhere we can talk?"

"Yes," Sawyer said fervently, and followed Noah out of the auditorium. They had to show their passes to security— Sawyer's performer's pass and Noah's press pass—and then went through the casino to the nearest bar.

"So," Noah said once they'd ordered, "look at you. A big star."

"A little star," Sawyer said.

"I bet at least one person will ask you for your autograph while we're sitting here," Noah said as he tugged open his bow tie.

Sawyer shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I've had an album that's sold pretty well and a couple singles on the chart. I'm not Johnny Cash yet. Anyway—thanks," he said as the bartender put a sparkling water with maraschino cherries in front of him. "I just wanted to say hi and thanks and that I'm really fucking glad to see you."

Noah chuckled and took out the olives from his martini. He ate them quickly. "Thanks for what?"

"For taking such great pictures of me. You were right about the little girls swooning. The label chose one of those pictures you took of me in the office for the last single, did you see? And the video was based around it. You've helped make my image."

"If you think you should be thanking me for that, you're very welcome." Noah drank his martini. "I'm really proud of you, you know."

"Thanks."

"I have to ask you something, because this has been driving me crazy for a couple months now. That song at the end of the album, the lullaby. That's for me, right?"

Sawyer drank and caught a cherry on his tongue. He crushed it against his teeth. "I wrote it that night. I didn't even go to bed for hours."

Noah exhaled and had a long drink. "Okay," he said gently, "here's the thing. People write songs about their fathers and brothers and sainted mothers, but not about guys they met once who took a few pictures of them. You know?"

"But I did write a song for you," Sawyer said. "I wanted to say something to you and I didn't know how else to say it."

"Sawyer," Noah said, "a song about someone who hides behind words and pictures? You could get me in so much trouble if Geoff ever listened to country."

Sawyer frowned at his glass and nodded. "Okay."

"If I were a girl I'd swoon over that song," Noah says. "But I'm not a girl. I'm a gay man in a committed relationship, and you're a kid with his whole life ahead of him who doesn't need people thinking—"

"They'll only think what's true," Sawyer muttered into his glass.

Noah stopped talking. He sipped his martini, looking like he didn't know what to do next.

"I'm sorry," Sawyer said miserably. "I really am. I never see you so I couldn't say it to your face, and the song— everybody has songs about the one who got away."

"You're not out, Sawyer."

"No, sir."

Noah sighed and sipped his martini. He patted Sawyer's back in the same fatherly way Terry did. "You're just a kid," he said. "You're a sweet kid, and a smart kid, but you're still just a kid. You'll find somebody of your own soon."

"Noah," Sawyer began, but Noah was already off the stool.

"Don't, okay? Please, don't. Let's have a drink the next time you're in L.A., and you can tell me all about the next love of your life, okay?"

"I think you should leave him," Sawyer said desperately, and Noah's face was sad and tired.

"So do a lot of people, kiddo. Call me the next time you're in L.A." He left the bar, his head low.

Sawyer frowned and turned so that his back was to the entrance, and slowly finished his drink.

When he went back to the auditorium, his date was necking with a backup singer for McKenna & Price, so he told his driver to make sure she got home okay and walked down the Strip to his hotel.

No one recognized him. Not even when he stopped in a bar that looked promising and picked up a kid not much older than himself and took him back to the hotel. The kid just said, "Sawyer who?" and Sawyer said, "Exactly."

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#### **Chapter Five**

Now.

In the morning, Sawyer drove Noah to the airport himself. He had the radio playing and sang along at the top of his lungs, tapping his hand on the roof of the cab through the open window.

"No need to use your lights," Noah said. "Everybody can hear you coming."

Sawyer grinned at him and sang even louder, "'You say you're faithful, but you're not my horse!'"

Noah shook his head and looked out the window, smiling despite himself.

When they reached LAX and Sawyer turned off the truck's engine, they both sat for a moment, looking at each other. "Guess I kiss you goodbye here."

"Yeah." Noah leaned closer and kissed him chastely. "No need to see me inside."

"Don't you want me to wait with you in the security line?"
He grabbed hold of Noah's shirt and kissed him harder. "I like waiting with you in the security line."

"No, babe. After yesterday people are going to notice you, even at this time of the morning."

"Right, yeah," Sawyer said as he opened the door and climbed out of the truck. "Gotta keep up the illusion."

Noah shook his head and got out of the truck, too, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "I love you, kiddo."

"Love you, too, brown-eyed handsome man. C'mon." He put his arm around Noah's waist and they walked through the parking garage to the entrance of the airport.

Sawyer, Noah knew, was not the biggest star in the world. He wasn't recognized everywhere they went; there were some bars where Sawyer would be sent drinks all through the night, and some parties where the guests hung on Noah's every word. Still, at places like this with a large cross section of the public, there would surely be two or three of Sawyer's fans.

Sawyer dropped his arm from Noah's waist as soon as they were inside the building, and sure enough, they'd hardly gone ten steps when two girls, slender and lanky as colts, ran up to Sawyer, giggling. "Aren't you Sawyer Shaw?" said one, while her friend hid behind her and continued giggling.

"I am, darlin'," Sawyer said with that famous smile, and both the girls squealed and fumbled for their camera phones.

"Are you going to Nashville? We're going to Nashville! Maybe you'll be on our flight! Grandma will die if you're on our flight!"

"Sorry, ladies," Sawyer said, arms going around their shoulders. "I'm just dropping off my friend."

They both looked at Noah as if they hadn't noticed him before—which was likely, he often felt invisible to anyone under the age of twenty—and one said, "Would you take our picture, sir?" and he felt very old indeed.

"I don't know. These new-fangled cameras are so hard to understand."

"Be nice," Sawyer said, and Noah shook his head, smiling, and took the little camera phone and took pictures, both the girls clinging to Sawyer and kissing his cheeks. They had to run back to the security line after a few minutes: their mother was calling to them, and didn't seem much impressed when they showed her the pictures.

"You realize that's going to be on MySpace as soon as they can log in," Noah said to Sawyer. "Quite possibly before they get on the plane."

"Maybe it'll counter the tabloid," Sawyer said in a resigned tone. "All publicity is good publicity, as you've been telling me all along."

"My own words, come back to haunt me." He punched the buttons on the self check-in machine and picked up his boarding pass. "Okay. This is me."

Sawyer looked at him, those famous green eyes patient and tender, and said, "I wanna kiss you goodbye one more time."

"Well, you can't. Just hang onto it and give it to me when I come home."

"Oh, I'll give it to you, all right," Sawyer said, picking up Noah's bag, and they walked together to the security line. "Don't fall in love with some starlet and decide not to come back."

"No fear," Noah said, smiling. "Call me."

"Will do." He gave Noah his bag and sighed. "See you."

"Not if I see you first," Noah said, and that got the smile he hoped for before Sawyer turned away to leave the terminal.

#### \* \* \* \*

Twelve hours, three airplanes, and a boat later, Noah was outside of Valletta, on the set of David Campbell's latest movie, waiting for a break in filming to say hello. The movie was a romantic comedy-adventure, according to the publicity material David's people had given him, a combination of words that made Noah wince. The magazine had sent Nicola Frost for the interview, which was good: she'd interviewed David many times before, and David always did better with people he already knew. A production assistant took them to David's trailer and got them bottles of water—"I had no idea the Mediterranean was so hot!" she said cheerfully—and as soon as they were alone, Nicola said to Noah, "Tell me everything."

"About what?"

"About that gorgeous boy you're kissing in those pictures." At Noah's shocked look she huffed and got out her iPhone, and she showed him a gossip website. "From yesterday."

More pictures, then. The tabloid had gone with the most explicit, it would appear, and now other sources were publishing the rest. There was no denying it was them, kissing on the dock and then in the house: the camera had caught both their faces fully, even the way they smiled at each other.

"Well," he said. "That's me, all right."

"Obviously. Who's Sawyer Shaw? I don't know the name but a lot of the people in the comments do. They're having a

huge argument about whether that's really him or just somebody who looks like him."

"He's a country singer. We've been friends for a long time." Noah gave the phone back to her.

"Oh, come on," Nicola said. "You've been out for as long as I've known you. Don't tell me you're dating someone who's still in the closet."

"I plead the fifth," Noah said, smiling at her. She was a New York woman, slim, pale, given to wearing black even in ninety-plus heat; her only concession to the heat, in fact, was her dark hair bundled back in a French braid instead of cascading down her back as it did in New York or London. At least her long-sleeved T-shirt was silk instead of wool.

Women he knew, Noah had realized long ago, came in three flavors: the New York woman who ate heartily and walked everywhere and expressed her opinion fearlessly; the Los Angeles woman, who ate nothing and exercised frantically and mostly talked about whatever branch of the entertainment industry she worked in or wanted to work in; and the Nashville woman, round and suntanned, who knew music as well as she knew the recipe for her grandmother's cornbread.

Jeannie, thank God, was a Nashville woman, even though technically she was from Texas. It helped keep Sawyer sane, having as many grounded people around him as possible.

"Admission of guilt, in other words," Nicola said, and bent to take off her shoe and shake sand out of it. "I can't believe you kept this a secret. No, that's not true. It's you, of course you kept it a secret."

"Hey, now," Noah said. "I'm not that bad."

"Noah, I've known you for eleven years and I'm not even sure when your birthday is. It's just the way you are.

Anybody who wants to know you needs to know your pictures first."

Noah frowned, thinking she was more right than she realized. He disliked interviews; people had made overtures to him over the years about features or even a documentary, and he'd always declined. His life was his life; his photography was the only record he wanted to leave.

"Anyway," Nicola said, "about the article. There's a ruined temple not far from here. I think you ought to photograph David there."

"I'll scope it out. He looks good next to ruins." Rumor had it David was up to play Marc Anthony in a one-two punch of Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra. Noah hoped it was true: he'd seen David do Shakespeare in college, and he was perfectly suited for it. "He looks so timeless."

"Good. So, Sawyer Shaw." She readjusted her enormous sunglasses on the top of her head and gave him a frank look. "Spill."

Noah sighed. "He's in the closet, yes. Nashville is not quite ready yet for cowboys who are secretly fond of each other. We're still working on what to do about it."

"I hope you figure it out soon." She looked at the iPhone, smiling faintly. "Have to say, Noah, the two of you together are incredibly hot."

"Thanks," he said, closing his eyes.

"For some reason I've always thought your boyfriends were fey boys in black turtlenecks."

"Good God, no."

"But a country singer? No matter how pretty he is, he's still a country singer in the morning."

He was about to launch into his usual explanation of Sawyer's musical genius and how country was one of the few purely American art forms, when the door to the trailer opened, and David Campbell came in with his publicist, bigger than life and already talking.

"Noah! Nicola! I love it when friends visit." He kicked off his shoes and started pulling off his costume, unabashed by the presence of Nicola, his publicist, or the P.A. "What dark and dirty secrets do you want me to spill today?"

\* \* \* \*

David loved the idea of photographing him at Hagar Qim, the megalithic temple, so after the interview they left Nicola behind and just took the cheerful P.A. and David's publicist out to the cliff where the temple overlooked the sea. David posed beside weather-worn altars and in front of carved animals, wearing silk shirts that made his eyes look as blue as the ocean behind them; or just a pair of jeans, worn at the hem and torn at the knee, his eyes sleepy like a lion dozing in the afternoon sun.

"That'll be wank fodder," Noah told him, and had to capture David's resulting bark of laughter, too, because David unfettered was a beautiful thing.

When Noah had taken enough rolls of film to satisfy himself, David held out his hand for the camera and said, "Your turn," and Noah only put up a token protest. This was David for you: he loved taking pictures of the people who took pictures of him. He talked about collecting them in a book someday, but given everything else he had on his plate, Noah didn't think it would come about any time in the next ten years.

He handed over the camera and took David's place on the sandy stone stairs that led down into what had once been an inner sanctum, obeying when David said, "Off with the shirt, too, mister." Noah lounged back against the stone, feeling loose in his muscles, warm in his skin, and closed his eyes as David snapped the shutter over and over.

"What are you thinking about?" David asked him.

"Nothing," Noah said. "Well. Decisions I've made and their consequences."

"Good decisions?" Snap snap snap.

"I thought so at the time." He opened his eyes and looked into the camera, and David whistled.

"Do that again. You're hot when you're serious."

"Aren't I hot all the time?" He smiled.

"You used to just be pretty," David said, and the camera captured nearly every second of Noah smiling and pushing his hair out of his face. "And I say that as both your old friend and the guy who likes looking at you shirtless."

"As your old friend, I appreciate it, and as the guy who's currently shirtless, I doubly appreciate it. Particularly since I'm not aging as gracefully as you are." Noah pulled up his

legs and wrapped his arms around his knees, looking into the camera. No coy gazing off at nothing for him.

"Moisturizer," said David.

"Botox," Noah said, smiling, and David had to stop photographing to laugh again.

"You've gotten hotter as you've gotten older, and I've got the pictures to prove it."

"Me in Izod shirts and with bad Eighties hair."

"Like I said," David said, "you've gotten better."

"Thank you." Noah leaned back on his hands. "Tell me something. When you decided to come out, everybody knew. You didn't hold it back from anybody: your agent, the public, everyone knew. Right?"

"That's right." David knelt in front of him, the camera whirring, and Noah didn't point out David was probably getting really good pictures of his pores.

"How long did you think about it before you did it?"

"A few years. My family knew, of course, and most of my friends. But telling the world—that was hard."

"Yeah," Noah said.

"This is about the kid, right? I heard about the tabloid article."

"It's always about the kid." He looked out at the ocean beyond the cliff's edge. "There's not much I don't do for the kid."

David put the camera down for a moment. "Look, Noah. If he's ready and you're ready, then do it. He won't be doing himself any favors by denying it, and you'll both be happier in the long run. And you can tell him I said so."

"Yeah," Noah said quietly and lowered his head, and David photographed him as he thought.

\* \* \* \*

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon in California, and Noah thought Sawyer would probably be in the studio—but he was experienced enough to turn the phone to vibrate if they were mixing, so Noah dialed his cell phone as he lay in the bed in his hotel room.

The city outside was ancient and beautiful. He and Nicola and a few of the P.A.s had gone exploring and found a restaurant and bar that wasn't infested with tourists. Nicola had drunk too much and teased him about his country singer, and the P.A.s made out with each other and tried to dance.

It was a relief to be alone.

The phone went to voicemail. Noah sighed and said, "Kiddo, it's me. And I miss you and you're not answering. There are more pictures up on the Internet now. I can't imagine what a pain in the ass it is for you at home. Call me. Miss you." He hung up.

\* \* \* \*

Noah photographed David around the city, in front of buildings made from creamy stone, in the harbor standing beside boats painted bright blue and gold, and up to his knees in the Mediterranean surf. A few tourists recognized David and wanted to get pictures or autographs, and he was patient with them, signing and posing for pictures taken with their camera phones. Noah photographed him with the

tourists, enjoying the sight of him laughing and making people laugh, until David's publicist made noises about getting back to the city.

"Promise me," David said as he dusted sand off his feet before getting back into the car, "that you'll talk to the kid about going public."

"I promise." Noah packed away his equipment carefully, counting rolls of film. "I imagine we don't much choice right now."

"Best to do it on your own terms," David said. "I mean, I guess he could say it was just goofing around, or you could say it's not him. But do you want to?"

"No," Noah said. "I don't."

"C'mere," David said, and hugged him, and Noah took a deep breath and felt better about the whole thing.

\* \* \* \*

Noah finally reached Sawyer that afternoon, and after they'd caught up about the city and the island and the album, Sawyer said, "So I was thinking."

"Yeah? What were you thinking?" Noah was in a lounge chair on the balcony of his hotel, and tilted his head as he looked at the shadows cast by the cliffs onto the beach. That might make a nice black and white image...

"I was thinking about my dad."

Noah straightened up at this, the cliffs forgotten. "Yeah?" he said again, more gently.

"You know, he used to take me out all the time, hunting and fishing and riding and stuff. My brothers, too, of course.

We'd all go. Even when I whined and complained and said I didn't want to be there, that I'd rather be messing around on the piano or the guitar, he'd bring me along. He even bought me a hiking guitar, did I ever tell you that? A little one that fits into a knapsack, so I'd go camping and wouldn't complain about not being able to make any music. We'd sing around the campfire and everything."

"Well," Noah said, not quite understanding where this was going, "I've always thought you had a pretty good childhood."

"Yeah, yeah," Sawyer said. "But it wasn't until years later that I realized why."

"Because he was your father and he loved you."

"Exactly," Sawyer said. "He knew I was different. Hell, my whole family knew I was different, even if they never said so 'til I told them myself. But Dad, he never treated me different, even when my brothers or my granddad did. Not for one second. And when I played my first county fair, he was right there in the front row and applauded every song."

"I'm glad about that."

"It just makes me think, you know, that people who love me? They'll always love me. No matter what, they'll always love me."

"They will," Noah said. "There are a lot of people who love you a lot. Not even fans, just friends, even."

"I know," Sawyer said, a smile in his voice. "I'm not looking for reassurance, babe. I'm thinking out loud. I think I need to remember that with everything else—that, yeah, it's scary but it's worth it to be completely honest with everyone. My family, my friends, the public—the ones who love me,

they'll always love me. And the ones who can't accept it, they never really supported me in the first place."

"I think you're right," Noah said. "So, what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I'm still thinking. But I think it's not going to be impossible, you know?"

"I know," Noah said. "You know what I'd prefer, but whatever you decide, I'm with you."

"I know." He paused. "The pictures they took were kind of hot, weren't they?"

"In a completely violating our privacy way, yeah, sort of." Sawyer chuckled dryly. "The ones of us on the dock, though. They were kind of sweet."

"I think that's why the tabloid just published the ones of me blowing you. They didn't want sweetness. They wanted scandal."

"Well, they got scandal. But I like sweet better." Sawyer sighed. "I have to go, Terry's making the wrap-up signal at me. I love you. I'll call you later, okay?"

"You'd better. I love you, too," Noah said, and turned off his phone.

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#### **Chapter Six**

Seven years ago.

Touring was exhausting under normal conditions, and this time around Sawyer had a project. His first album had been primarily acoustic, just himself and sometimes a session musician; then he'd had a backup band on the next two, and sometimes brought in an electric guitar or a synthesizer to augment the banjos and fiddles and slide guitars. On one memorable track he had even gotten a string quartet, but while the sound was rich and luxurious, he didn't think he'd want to experiment with classical/country fusion again anytime soon.

But he'd noticed, during the little shows at clubs and bars while he warmed up for the tour, how much people loved it when it was just him and his guitar again. While they toured, he made a point to stop at some famous studios and record a few songs completely on his own.

So far he had five tracks, two covers and three originals, just him and his guitar or a piano or a mandolin. "Is this going to be an album?" Terry asked him.

Sawyer shrugged and said, "Probably."

He wasn't sure what he was going to do with the tracks, really. If it was just an experiment—and the need to experiment got very strong sometimes—he might just keep the tracks as a reference.

It had been a good tour all around: big and enthusiastic audiences who sang along to the older songs and sometimes

even the new ones; no disasters with equipment or staff or the band; no canceled shows because the numbers were too low. Sawyer still didn't feel like a Big Star—he got tongue-tied when he met George Jones, for instance, at least for the first few minutes—but there was no denying he was on his way. Even when he played a surprise show at a smaller venue, it was standing room only.

"The label has an idea for you," Terry said as they eat breakfast on the bus while brown and green cornfields rolled on outside. "They want to send a photographer to get the last leg of the tour."

"For what? Publicity?"

"Yep. They want more photos of you to send out when magazines run articles about you. They're getting requests from more than just Country Music Magazine. Rolling Stone wants you, for instance."

"Rolling Stone doesn't cover country that much," Sawyer said.

"They want to cover you. You're a crossover artist now, Sawyer. You're catching up to Garth Brooks."

Sawyer frowned and looked out the window again. "I'm not as influenced by pop as he was."

"No, but you are a little influenced by pop. Genre lines aren't as strict as they used to be, and I, for one, don't mind it much. It keeps the music interesting. Anyway, you're fresh and new to Rolling Stone, and they want to feature you, and I think you should say yes."

"Country purists would argue with you," Sawyer said. "We've had a photographer along before and it wasn't anything special. Why this time?"

"Because," Terry said, leaning back in the seat and looking pleased as a proud papa, "the photographer the label wants to send is Noah Kingston, and nobody's photographed you better than he has."

"Noah Kingston." Sawyer smiled at his plate. "Ain't that something." Terry was right, no one had photographed him better than Noah; Sawyer was even willing to forgive him for passing off his last two album covers to a partner at the photography studio because Bailey Stone had obviously learned a few things from Noah's style. Noah's reasoning had been that Bailey was better at landscape shooting, and Sawyer wanted outdoor settings, and Sawyer figured there was no reason to argue about it.

He missed Noah, even so. Bailey was nice enough, but she wasn't Noah.

"Yes," he said to Terry. "I'd love to have him along."

\* \* \* \*

Whatever he expected when Noah arrived, it wasn't what he got. Noah had lost weight and shaved his beard; his hair was longer and his clothes more severe. None of the bright shirts Sawyer had seen him wearing in pictures with his boyfriend Geoff—just black, black, and more black.

He was all business, too, being an unobtrusive observer instead of talking like he was afraid he'd lose his words if he

didn't use them all, his camera flash far more noticeable than himself.

Nothing Sawyer read said anything about Geoff Daugherty being in trouble or breaking up, though, so he supposed it was just Noah missing him.

Noah split his time between the band's bus and Sawyer's own while they traveled from city to city—mostly because, Sawyer suspected, the band members and staff did the same, and Noah knew they'd never be alone.

One night as they drove down to San Antonio, all the band was either on their bus or asleep in the back of Sawyer's. Sawyer was in the front of the bus with his guitar and notepad, and Noah was doing things with his camera at the small table that Sawyer thought looked more like alchemy from some book than merely cleaning and organizing.

"We haven't had a chance to talk much," Sawyer said over the hum of the highway.

"I'm just here to take pictures." Noah blew a breath of air across some little piece of machinery.

"Yeah," Sawyer said and stuck his pencil behind his ear.

"But you and me, we've always had stuff to say to each other."

Noah sighed and put down the lens on the table before him. "I know it's been a long time." He picked up another lens and started cleaning it.

Sawyer watched him, then sighed himself and took the pencil from behind his ear. "Guess we're boring," he said. "We're not like a rock band, throwing TVs out of hotel

windows and shit. Most of my guys call their wives every night."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"I still bet it's not what you signed up for."

"I just wanted to take some pictures." Noah was quiet, rubbing the lens with a cleaning cloth, and admitted, "Okay. Maybe I've missed you a little."

Sawyer looked up slowly. "Yeah?" he said, trying not to sound like this was exactly what he'd been hoping to hear since Noah joined the tour.

"Yeah." There was silence again. "I left Geoff."

Sawyer felt his chest grow tight and his heartbeat speed up. "I'm sorry," he said, not meaning it in the slightest.

The corner of Noah's mouth lifted a tiny bit. "No, you're not. You've never even met him and you don't like him."

"That's because the first thing I learned about him was that he crashed your car," Sawyer said. "It's hard to get a good impression from that."

"Yeah, I know." He looked at Sawyer, and Sawyer could see the weariness in his face. "I don't want to start anything," he said. "I just want to take pictures."

"Yeah, of course," Sawyer said.

"I don't know what's going on with you—and neither does anybody, for which you should thank your publicist with the finest champagne—" Sawyer smiled, because that sounded like the old Noah, "—but like I said, I'm just here to do a job. It got me out of L.A. when I needed to get out, but beyond that ... You're still a nice kid. I don't mind being around a nice

kid whose band calls their wives every night. No problem with that at all."

"We're so clean we squeak," Sawyer said with a small returning smile. "Okay. I'm not going to bug you or anything." He wrote a few words on the notepad. "And nothing's going on with me. It's not just my publicist doing a really good job, it's just I'm too busy to get into trouble."

"Not dating anybody at all?" Noah said. "Not even the blonde cupcake you're photographed with lately?"

Sawyer shook his head. "She's just a friend. Her name's Jeannie. She works for the record label, but we're talking about her becoming my personal assistant. I need help keeping track of everything."

"Oh, okay," Noah said. He started cleaning another lens. "I was wondering if you'd changed your mind about liking boys."

"No," Sawyer said. "That's still true."

"Okay. You're still just deep, deep in the closet."

"Yeah, I guess so." He looked out the window. It was so dark outside—not a town for miles—he couldn't see anything beyond the bus itself, and it looked like they were driving into nothing.

"Your choice, of course."

"I know. And whatever you're thinking, it's not that bad. I make plenty of friends."

Noah nodded, looking over the neat spread of his cleaned equipment, then looked at Sawyer, serious. "Kiddo, you really are one of my favorite people in the business, and I don't want to ever cause you harm—but I find it hard to believe

you're really happy this way. Geoff hid his sexuality for years, and look what it did to him."

"He came out," Sawyer said, "and he was still an asshole. Not really your best example, there."

"No, but the principle stands. You're a nice kid, an honest kid, a great kid, except you're hiding one thing. And that's the thing that could hurt you most."

"You have no idea," Sawyer said wearily. "I know, okay? I've heard the arguments. I've talked to people about it. I always come back to the same place: I can't come out. Not when my family is so dead set against it. Meantime, I'm okay with how the rest of my life is going. Where'd you grow up?"

"San Francisco," Noah said.

"Yeah. I grew up in Wyoming. Where men are men and queers don't exist."

Noah cringed a little. "Queer, Sawyer? Is that really how you think of yourself?"

"Would you rather I said fag?"

"No," Noah said, "and okay, I get it, Wyoming is not the city. But you're out of Wyoming, kiddo. You've got the whole world at your feet. You can be yourself and tell anybody who threatens you that they can just talk to your friends the security team."

"If I thought it worked that way," Sawyer said, "maybe I would. But I've got brothers, too, who think sodomy's as bad as murder. I'd never be allowed to see my niece again. My granddad, my mom—" His face twisted and his throat stung. "Anyway. No. I'm staying deep in the closet so I can hang onto what's important."

"Okay," Noah said. "Okay."

Sawyer stared very hard out the window and closed his eyes when he heard Noah get out of his seat. He sighed and leaned back when Noah slid into the seat beside him and wrapped an arm around his waist.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"No problem," Noah said. "We're friends, right? Friends can do stuff like this."

"Yeah," Sawyer said. He was quiet a moment. "So, when you get sad about Geoff, you'll come see me, okay?"

"Okay," Noah said, a little amusement in his voice, but the way his hand stroked Sawyer's stomach through his T-shirt said it was more than okay.

\* \* \* \*

The following days gave Sawyer exactly what he'd been hoping for with Noah along. Noah rode on his bus most nights, and there was a lot more laughing and joking between him and the band. Sawyer loved looking down during shows and seeing Noah at the edge of the stage, camera in hand. It was hard not to give him a wink and a smile every time their eyes met. It was hard, whenever Noah let him look at negatives or proofs, not to lean into him or relax against him. It was hard not to go to his hotel room when they stopped somewhere for the night and see if he wanted to talk or go for a late-night swim.

Of course, there were nights when Sawyer had other people on his mind. His band might call their wives every night, but he had no such obligations, and the world was full

of such beautiful things. Most of Sawyer's groupies were girls, of course, but one mouth was very like another when his eyes were closed. Sometime he was lucky enough that a boy came backstage or into the hotel, someone young and slim-hipped, who'd smile at him shyly and kiss him eagerly when they were finally alone.

Sometimes Sawyer got reckless. Sometimes he fucked a boy in his dressing room or even backstage, minutes before he was due on stage. He didn't fall in love with any of them, though, and sometimes wished he would. Falling in love with somebody who wasn't Noah would make his life so much easier.

He had a boy in his dressing room one evening—they were in Oakland, and the boy was lovely, Latino, with big brown eyes and a lovely full mouth—and his hand was thrust deep into the boy's thick hair as the boy sucked his cock, when the door to the dressing room opened. Sawyer opened his eyes to see Noah standing there, his face blank as he looked at the boy at Sawyer's feet.

"Sorry," Noah said shortly and yanked the door shut, and the boy flinched, making Sawyer yelp. He pushed on the boy's shoulder and scowled at him.

"Sorry, Sawyer, oh, God, I'm sorry," the boy babbled, wiping his mouth with his hand.

"Whatever. Get out of here." All hope of coming anytime soon was gone: he'd gone flaccid the moment his eyes met Noah's.

"Really, Sawyer, I'm so sorry, let me finish, let me make it up to you."

"No," Sawyer said. "Get out." The boy looked close to tears but obeyed him anyway, and Noah came in as the boy scurried out. He watched the boy with his usual expression of detachment, and shut the door behind him.

"Cute," he observed.

"Bite me," Sawyer said, zipping up his jeans.

"You're getting careless," Noah said. "You didn't even lock the door."

"Everybody knows not to bug me half an hour before show time," Sawyer said shortly, "which you also know, so what are you doing here?" Noah opened his mouth and started to answer, then shut it and sighed. Sawyer tilted his head, and said, "You're jealous."

"Bullshit," Noah said. "You're getting careless and people are starting to talk."

"No one's talking," Sawyer said. "No one cares what I do. I'm the headliner, Noah. If I wanted hookers and blow, they'd bring me hookers and blow. But I don't want hookers and blow—all I want is somebody to touch me sometimes."

"People care very much, and if you keep fucking these kids who come around, one of them is going to talk. And then what are you going to do? Pay him off? Then you'll have to pay off the next one and the next one and—"

"You have no right to be jealous," Sawyer said. "You're the one who wanted to only be friends."

Noah narrowed his eyes a moment, then moved to where Sawyer was sitting and straddled his thighs. He held his camera, hanging from a strap around his neck, up to his

eyes. Sawyer glared right back at him, trying not to blink as Noah started snapping the shutter.

"I'm just trying to look out for you," Noah said, camera still clicking and whirring. "You decided to stay in the closet, so I'm just trying to help. I could have taken a lot more compromising pictures of you than I have, kiddo."

"But you haven't," Sawyer said, his hips arching up,
"because you're nuts about me. And so fucking jealous. Can't
believe I didn't see that before."

Noah leaned closer, the lens pressing right into Sawyer's cheekbone. "I'm not jealous."

"Look at me and say that."

Noah lowered his camera. "I'm not jealous."

"You're also a liar," Sawyer said and pushed Noah off his lap. Noah slid off him gracefully and stood in front of him, hands on his hips.

"Just trust me on this one, would you? If you're going to fuck groupies, don't do it where people can catch you."

"Admit you're jealous and I'll never fuck another groupie again."

Noah gave him an exasperated look. "Grow up."

"Noah," Sawyer wheedled, "Noah, Noah, Noah."

"I said grow up. Fuck whoever you want. Just be more careful about it." He jerked open the dressing room door and slammed it shut behind him.

That night was not one of Sawyer's better shows. Noah's usually comforting presence at the foot of the stage was only a distraction, and the energy from the audience felt off, as if they'd come expecting to see someone other than this skinny

kid from Wyoming. Sawyer did his usual encores and escaped to the bus as quickly as possible, and was glad only Terry and Jeannie decided to join him for the ride back to the hotel.

He skipped the usual after-show party and tried to sleep, but when it was three a.m. and his thoughts were still racing, he gave up and threw back the covers. He pulled on a T-shirt and went down the three floors to Noah's room, and knocked on his door.

It was a short wait until Noah opened the door, looking like he hadn't slept much either, and he waited for Sawyer to speak, blocking the narrow opening with his body.

"I'm sorry," Sawyer said. "Okay? I'm really fucking sorry. Say you forgive me."

"I don't care what you do," Noah said. "Or who."

"Yes, you do," Sawyer argued, "or you wouldn't tell me to be careful. Say you forgive me."

Noah looked at him with those big dark eyes, and Sawyer, who wasn't often given to introspection, hated himself for believing his own hype.

"Okay," he said and turned to go. "Never mind. Good night."

"Sawyer," Noah said and caught him by the back of his T-shirt. Noah pulled Sawyer into the room and shut the door, and Sawyer stumbled to the mussed bed and sat down heavily.

Noah stood in front of him, hands on his hips. "Okay. Listen. I'm going to tell you two things, and I hope to God you listen to at least one of them. First of all, you're right, I'm jealous, but that doesn't change anything because you and I

will never be the kind to date. Sleep together, maybe, but I could never date somebody in the closet because I like to live my life in the open, and I can't do that if my boyfriend is hiding. So get any idea of you and me having a great love affair out of your head. Not going to happen."

"For something that's not going to happen you've thought about it a lot," Sawyer said.

"Shut up and listen, because I am imparting wisdom and you aren't in the habit of listening. The second thing is this—"

"You know what?" Sawyer said. "I'm tired of your two things. Why is it always two? Why not one, or three? Here's my two things: one, I want you, and two, I've always wanted you. If there's anything more that needs to be said, I don't know what it is."

Noah looked at him, lips pressed together, and then opened the door. "Go to bed, kiddo."

"Sawyer. Call me by my name for once."

"Sawyer, fine, right, whatever," Noah said and rubbed his eyes with one hand. "Just go to bed. You just want to get laid and I can't tell you what a bad idea that is for both of us right now."

"But will it ever be a good idea?" Sawyer said. "That's the real question."

"No," Noah said. "It won't."

Sawyer stood, feeling like nothing would scratch this itch under his skin, and left Noah's hotel room, passing as close to Noah as he could.

He did not sleep that night. He wrote, instead.

Four months of touring, publicity in the shape of contributing to countdown lists or tribute albums or interviews with local papers, and now a video to shoot. The idea presented to Sawyer involved old, abandoned barns and black-and-white cinematography, which sounded fine to him, so one August morning he and his entourage joined a camera crew on a farm in Oklahoma. It had the desired barn and farmhouse, surrounded by overgrown fields of buckwheat and wildflowers. There was also a model to cavort with as they filmed, and pretending to be madly in love with her as the lyric dictated wasn't too hard. They just had to walk through the fields and give each other wildflowers, and then Sawyer was filmed bathing in an old iron tub while the model poured water over him from a stoneware jug, and then he had to drive a tractor and look toward the house like his whole life was inside. Not a bad day's work.

There was a giant oak in the middle of one of the fields, and Noah said, when they took a break from filming, "Let's go out there and get some pictures."

They took a golf cart the crew had brought, Noah driving, and Sawyer said as he climbed up the tree, "I didn't think you wanted to be alone with me again anytime soon."

"My desire for art overrides my desire to keep you out of trouble. Though if you fall out of that tree, it's your own damn fault." He climbed right up after Sawyer, camera swinging around his neck.

"I'm not going to fall out. God, like I've never climbed a tree before." He found a branch sturdy enough to support his

weight and swung his legs, hanging onto another for balance. Noah followed him fearlessly, his legs wrapped around the branch as he started snapping pictures. "So tell me something," Sawyer said.

"My turn for confessions, is it?"

"Yup. Are you still nursing a broken heart or are you messing around where I can't see it?"

Noah didn't answer for a moment or two, just took pictures. "I'm not nursing a broken heart. I'm not messing around, either. I'm just taking pictures."

"That's always your excuse."

"Some of us have to make a living, kiddo."

Sawyer looked up at the brittle oak leaves, dark green in the summer sun, and leaned back as far as he dared. It was tempting to let go and fall. "If you and me just knew each other from a party or something, you wouldn't fight it so much."

"Maybe not."

"Can't you pretend we just know each other from a party?"
Noah lowered the camera and looked at him, exasperated.
"Sawyer," he said in his "I'm only telling you this for your own good" voice, "have you ever thought about how inexplicable this is to me? You're more than a decade younger than I am. You could have anybody. You could have that girl in the video." He nodded his head back toward the farmhouse, where undoubtedly the model was getting primped and sprayed for the next scene. "What you want with me—"

"Seriously?" Sawyer said, all but gaping at him. "Don't you look in the mirror?"

"Not enough, apparently."

Sawyer swung himself closer, and when Noah started to raise his camera again, Sawyer said, "Don't. For God's sake, for once, just talk to me."

"What do you want me to say? That you're on my mind as much as I seem to be on yours? Because you are. Don't gloat about it," Noah added when Sawyer started to smile. "And maybe I have—and I swear to God if you use this against me I'm going to kill you—I have been thinking about what I'd give up to be with you."

"I have no idea how I'd use that against you," Sawyer said as seriously as he could. "Though how come it'd be giving stuff up? Fucking someone you want should be a good thing."

Noah shook his head. "I like you too much for it to just be sex, kiddo. That's the trouble. That's always been the trouble. If I didn't think you were a great person and so fucking talented it's scary, I could just fuck you and get over it. But— "He shrugged. "Then you have to go and write these great songs and they're all about me and I can't tell anyone. That's cruel. It's like you're daring me to say something."

"Oh." Sawyer swung his legs. "I don't mean to."

"Well, you're young. Consequences are something you learn about as you get older."

"Stop that. I'm not some wide-eyed child who doesn't know a thing about sex. Or love, for that matter. Are we talking about love? Because I could talk about love. I could talk about loving you and how hard it is to love someone who doesn't want to hear it."

Noah waved a hand at him. "At least you understand why this is hard for me."

"Yeah, I understand."

They looked at each other, and Noah sighed. "Oh, I knew it," he said, "I knew it the second I saw you in my studio. You're going to wreck me, Sawyer Shaw."

"No, I'm not," Sawyer said, and jumped down from the branch, crouching as he landed. Noah followed him more slowly, swinging down hand over hand until he reached the ground. Sawyer grinned and took the camera from around Noah's neck, putting it carefully away in the golf cart, and rested his hands on Noah's shoulders. "Tell me what you'd give up for me."

"Everything," Noah said with a sigh, and mostly seemed resigned when Sawyer kissed him.

\* \* \* \*

"I used to be scared of this," Sawyer said as he pulled off his shirt.

"Scared of what?" Noah said absently, concentrating on setting up candles around the bare, stone-floored room.

"Being naked in front of you. Before I met you, I mean, I was scared of it. Then I wanted it." He pulled off his boots.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of." Noah gave him an impassive once-over, but Sawyer didn't mind. If an artist could look at you objectively, it was an honor, not an insult. "You're a long, tall drink of water, kiddo."

"Are you ever going to stop calling me that?"

"Maybe after you grow up." He looked at Sawyer through the camera lens. "All of it off."

"Yeah, yeah," Sawyer said, and stripped off his jeans. He plucked up a white cowboy hat—stolen from the props table for the video—and put it on his head. "How do I look?"

"Obscenely hot," Noah said. "Fuckable."

"That's what we want, right?"

"That's what I want. I don't care what anybody else wants. Give me a smile, cowboy."

Sawyer laughed, and the camera started clicking, and it felt so good. They had hours more of shooting to do for the video, but after that—oh, after that—there'd be the hotel and he'd be alone with Noah at last, and it was hard not to look at the camera with every ounce of desire he felt for the man behind it.

"It all makes sense, though, right?" he said as he lowered himself into the washtub again. "The whole album concept?"

"It makes sense to me. And people should know your sense of humor by now." Noah stopped the camera. "Stay right there, I need to find something." He left the farmhouse, heading toward the trailers.

"I'm naked in here!" Sawyer called after him. "Don't forget that!" He leaned back, his hands behind his head, and grinned at the rafters.

Noah returned after a few minutes, scowling. "No jewelry at the props table, can you believe it?"

"I know I saw a couple gold necklaces there earlier."

"They must be on the girl. They wouldn't be right for what I have in mind, anyway." He pulled a necklace from under his

T-shirt, undid the clasp and draped it around Sawyer's neck. Sawyer touched it: it was just braided leather, barely thicker than a shoelace, and still warm from Noah's skin. "That's what you needed," Noah murmured and got behind the camera again. "Now, about that smile—" Sawyer leaned back with his arms propped on the rim of the tub, and Noah muttered, "Oh, fuck, you are liquid sex," which made Sawyer laugh.

Filming the video didn't stop until nearly two in the morning: the director wanted scenes of dancing in the moonlight, of Sawyer and the model rolling around in bed, of the two of them looking deep into each other's eyes in candlelight. Whenever there was a break, Noah stole Sawyer away to photograph him around the farm, with as few lights as possible sometimes, or with a light borrowed from the video crew, or the room that was still lined with candles.

Finally the crew broke for the night, and everyone piled into buses to ride back into town. Noah sat a few rows away from Sawyer, but Sawyer still felt aware of him, like he knew every time Noah breathed.

At the hotel, Sawyer went to his room. He turned down the sheets and brushed his teeth, made sure he had condoms and lube, and waited for Noah to knock on his door. They'd agreed on an hour: it would be enough time for everyone to settle into their own rooms or wherever they intended to spend the night.

It was a very long hour.

At last the soft knock came. Sawyer threw open the door and pulled Noah inside. He kissed Noah hard, holding his shirt, thrusting his tongue deep into Noah's mouth.

Noah pulled away, gasping. "Jesus, let me breathe," he whispered, and held Sawyer's face to kiss him more tenderly. "Hi, you."

"Hi, you," Sawyer said and tugged on Noah's shirt. "Come to bed. Fuck me."

"That's what I like about you, Sawyer Shaw," Noah said, pulling off his shirt. "Your sense of romance, your willingness to seduce me."

"I've been seducing you for three years, Noah." He kissed Noah's shoulder, hands on his waist. Noah was solidly built, muscled but not ripped, his chest deep. Dark hair was scattered over his chest, down his belly, and he breathed deeper as Sawyer touched him.

Sawyer thought he was beautiful.

He pulled Noah back to the bed and fell back, grinning up as Noah fell onto him. He raised his head for a kiss and couldn't stop smiling.

"You still think this is a bad idea?" Sawyer said, shoving a hand through Noah's hair.

"Oh, God, yes." Noah kissed his neck, his hands on Sawyer's chest.

Sawyer pressed his lips together. "Then why are you here?"

Noah pushed himself up, resting on his elbows. "Because I have been doing the right thing for far too long, and look

where it got me. For once I'm going to do the wrong thing and maybe I'll finally be happy."

Sawyer pulled Noah's head down for another long, deep kiss, loving the feel of Noah's stubble and warm skin. Noah wrapped his arms around Sawyer's head, his mouth hot as they kissed. Sawyer whispered, "I'll be bad with you anytime you want," and pushed Noah onto his back to kiss his body.

Noah was so strong, Sawyer marveled as he ran his hands over Noah's skin; he'd seen hints of it when Noah wore T-shirts (and wouldn't Noah laugh to know how Sawyer catalogued his clothes, knew every time he did laundry because the first shirt he wore was always the green one from a bowling alley) but touching was so much better than merely seeing. Noah was strong and beautiful and breathing slowly, watching Sawyer with dark, hot eyes, and his legs trembled when Sawyer licked down his stomach. Sawyer pulled off Noah's jeans, fascinated with the jut of his hip bones and the muscles in his legs. He rubbed his face against Noah's thighs, kissed his kneecaps, licked his cock where his flesh was hotter than hot.

Noah thrust a hand into Sawyer's hair, fingers clutching as he moaned. "Gonna spend all night down there?"

"I could," Sawyer said, crawling back up his body. Noah held his shoulders and rolled them over, kissed him hard.

"Not this time," Noah said, his voice gruffer than Sawyer had ever heard. "Some other time."

Sawyer laughed, legs going around Noah's waist. "I knew it," he said as he held Noah's face. "I knew you'd want to keep me."

Noah growled and kissed him hard. "Just tell me where to find the lube and condoms, kid—sorry, Sawyer."

"Thanks." Sawyer rolled away from him to get the condoms from the nightstand. He paused and looked at Noah: naked, flushed, nipples dark and cock jerking on his belly. "You're gorgeous," he said quietly, and Noah laughed.

"Sure, sure. C'mere." Sawyer jumped onto the bed and shoved off his jeans, Noah's hands in his pockets to help, and he knelt to let Noah drape over him and slide his fingers into him, slowly, as if Noah were afraid to push too hard. Sawyer arched his back and flexed his hips, telling him "yes" and "deeper" and "more" until Noah pulled out his fingers and rocked into him, his palm flat on Sawyer's belly and Sawyer holding Noah's hip.

They were point and counterpoint. They were two notes making a perfect chord. They breathed in time.

\* \* \* \*

They watched each other, Sawyer's hand on Noah's chest to feel his heartbeat, to feel him breathe. Locks of soft dark hair tumbled in Noah's face and his eyes had lost that weary look for the first time that Sawyer could remember.

"Still think this was a bad idea?" Sawyer said.

"Yeah. Worst idea I've ever had." He straightened out his arm to pillow his head, and Sawyer removed his hand.

"Oh," he said, and started to roll over.

"Hey," Noah said, and pulled him back, fitting their bodies together. "It's like I said. I'm going to do the wrong thing for

a while and see where that takes me. So far, I'm liking it a lot."

Sawyer smiled and let himself relax against Noah's body. "You did say next time."

"I did. I meant it. Though, God, kiddo, how we're going to do this I have no idea."

"I could go public," Sawyer said, and shivered down his entire body.

Noah held him tighter. "You could, but would you?" Sawyer closed his eyes with a sigh and Noah kissed his hair. "I know. Once you get used to hiding it's hard to stop."

Sawyer swallowed. "I know you don't want to date somebody who's still in the closet."

"I did say that, didn't I?" Noah sighed, too. "Yet I want to date you."

Sawyer sat up and looked at him again. "You're breaking your rules for me?"

"Yes. You're just that hot, Sawyer Shaw."

"I'm going to make you love me, you know," Sawyer said.
"I'm going to make you never want to leave me. You won't want to live a day without me."

"And country stars are supposed to be so humble and down-to-earth," Noah said, and started laughing when Sawyer pounced on him and peppered him with kisses. "Oh, Sawyer," he breathed, "I don't want to live a day without you already. Don't you know that?"

"I do," Sawyer said, "I do, I do."

\* \* \* \*

When the article came out in the fall, reporting on the tour, the video shoot, and the acoustic album, Sawyer noticed that Noah's editor chose more photos from the last part of the tour than the first. It made sense, though: the photographs felt more intimate and more personal than the nearly detached feel they'd had early on.

Not only had Noah felt free to capture Sawyer at his most unguarded moments—half-asleep backstage after a long day's drive, kneeling down to speak with very young fans, composing with his guitar on his lap—he'd felt more comfortable with the band as well, getting pictures of them on the phone to their wives or playing with their children during a visit, or jamming together after a show when no one was ready to sleep. Even the pictures of the audience felt like peeking into someone's private world, from their excited, happy expressions while they waited for the show to start to the tears on some faces during the ballads.

This, Sawyer thought, is what happens when Noah allows himself to feel.

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#### **Chapter Seven**

Now.

The ring of Noah's cell phone woke him, and he lay blinking for a moment before he picked it up. "What?"

"Babe, I know it's, like, ass o'clock right now," Sawyer said, "but I couldn't wait until morning."

"It's three a.m."

"Yeah, I know, and I'm sorry, but this is important. Will you be able to watch Rooney Turner on Thursday?"

"Today's not Thursday." Noah shook his head to wake himself up.

"No, it's Tuesday. But on Thursday, here, I'm going to be on the Rooney Turner show. Will you be able to watch it?" "Why?"

Sawyer sighed and said, enunciating each word carefully, "I am going to be on Rooney Turner on Thursday. I want you to watch it. It's important."

"Right, yes, okay."

"Don't forget. I'll call you again tomorrow. Tomorrow for you. And I guess for me, too. Will you be able to watch it? Promise you'll find a way to watch it."

"I'm coming home tomorrow," Noah said. "I think I'll still be coming home Thursday. I'll be in London at some point on Thursday. Well, their Thursday, which is Saturday for us, right?"

"God, you're more sensible when you're drunk. I'll call you on Thursday. All possible Thursdays. I love you, now go back to sleep."

"Yeah, I know," Noah said and turned off the phone. He fell back onto his pillow and was asleep in an instant.

\* \* \* \*

Noah forgot about Sawyer's phone call right up until his flight landed at LAX and he checked the messages on his cell phone. His inbox had filled with people congratulating him or saying, "Oh, my God, I can't believe he actually did it!"

Noah had no idea what they were talking about, though as he listened he realized it wasn't hard to figure out.

Nicola's message said, "Noah, I just heard about your boyfriend. High time. Good for you. He's cute, even for a country singer." David called: "I knew he'd do the right thing—he loves you so much, Noah, you're a very lucky man." His mother even called: "Noah, baby, I just saw Sawyer on TV. I guess I can tell people now that you're not single, right?"

Sawyer's mother didn't call, but that didn't surprise Noah.

It took too long, though by his watch it was the same amount of time as ever, to get home from the airport, even after he told the driver to floor it and get him home. The television was on and the front door was unlocked when Noah opened it. This would worry most people, he supposed, but no thieves would turn on the TV to the country music video channel and also make vanilla-infused coffee while they were robbing the place.

He called, "Sawyer?" as he put down his duffel bag by the door. Unpacking would happen later. He continued calling as he put down his camera bag and stepped out of his shoes. "Sawyer, I'm home. I'm home from Malta." He peeked into the kitchen: no Sawyer. "I'm home from Malta and I took lots of pretty pictures." He started climbing the stairs to the master bedroom, which took up most of the top floor. "You up here, kiddo?"

Sawyer popped up over the wood railing and beamed down at him, looking like a naughty cherub with his hair sticking up in all directions and no shirt to be seen. "Hi! Jeez, man, you are sunburned."

"I remembered the sun block," Noah said as he continued upward. "It's not as bad as all that, is it?"

"Maybe sunburned is too much. Tanner, though. Lots tanner." He jerked his head to the bedroom. "C'mere. I've just made the bed."

"You made the bed?" Noah said. "You made my bed? For humble, little me?"

Sawyer snorted and disappeared from view. "My mama would disown me if I ever forgot how to make a bed. Or wash a plate. Or brew coffee. There's coffee, by the way."

"I know. I can smell it." Noah reached the top of the stairs and smiled at the sight of his bed. Sawyer had put on a fluffy white duvet and piled on the pillows. It looked as cool and inviting as a mountain lake. He threw himself onto the bed and rolled around for a minute or two, laughing. "Oh, this feels so good."

Sawyer threw himself onto the bed with Noah and wrapped his arms around him. "Hold still, you! Let me kiss you hello."

"Wait a second." Noah put his hands on Sawyer's shoulders. "When I got off the plane I had about a thousand phone messages, and most of them were about you. And do you know why?"

"Why?" Sawyer blinked innocent green eyes.

"That's what I'm asking you. Don't pull that innocent act with me, Sawyer Shaw. You did something and now I'm getting congratulated all over the place. So. Tell."

Sawyer tucked his head against Noah's neck. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm just glad you're home."

"Okay, I'm going to guess." Noah stroked his back and watched the overhead fan slowly spin. "I seem to remember a phone call about the Rooney Turner show..."

"Yes, there was a phone call, and I was on the show."

"So what did you do?"

"I sang."

"Sawyer."

"I sang 'Apples and Gin' and 'Lullaby' and one of the new ones."

Noah sighed and pushed himself upright. He looked at Sawyer, who was beaming at him like a kid who'd pulled off a spectacular prank. "You did it, didn't you?"

"Did what?"

"You came out! You went public! While I was in transit, you got in front of everyone who watches Rooney Turner—which is a whole lot of people, last I heard—and told them you're gay. Right?"

Sawyer continued beaming, and rolled off the bed. "C'mon. I recorded it on TiVo for you. Do you want coffee while you watch it?"

"Just tell me what you said," Noah said, getting out of bed to follow him.

"I sang 'Forever' and talked about the new album." Sawyer flashed him a smile over his shoulder as he started down the stairs.

"The new album that won't even be in stores for another three months."

"Yep," Sawyer said cheerfully. "Did you want coffee or not?"

"Yes, I'd love some coffee. It smells great," Noah said, resigned, and Sawyer laughed as he went into the kitchen. Noah followed him downstairs, sat on the couch in front of the television, and turned on the TiVo. He skipped through the programs until he came to that morning's Rooney Turner, but waited to start it until Sawyer returned with coffee and got comfortable at his side.

"Okay," Sawyer said. "Ready?"

"Ready." He pressed play.

It was a typical episode at first: some jokes and banter between Rooney and his producer, the list of guests, ending with, "And country sensation Sawyer Shaw!"

"Country sensation," Noah muttered as he sipped his coffee. "You're a crossover sensation now. And movie star."

"He gets to that," Sawyer said, stroking Noah's hair.

Noah smiled in anticipation despite himself. Sawyer on talk shows was always a good time: Sawyer had made a movie

after the tour for his fifth album and before he started work on the sixth, and had honed his interviewing skills on that publicity circuit. He'd cooked with Martha, danced with Ellen, and stared down Dave, and they all loved having him. The movie hadn't set any records or broken any new artistic ground, but it had proved Sawyer could act.

He'd come such a long way from the cute but dumb boy Noah had originally taken him for, Noah thought proudly.

Noah waited patiently through the first few segments of the program: jokes about the day's news, a TV actor promoting his show, a cooking lesson, a comedy sketch about paparazzi—and this segued into the segment with Sawyer as Rooney Turner showed some of the pictures that had been in the tabloid and on the gossip blogs, and then brought out Sawyer.

Sawyer looked well-rested and relaxed on the screen, wearing jeans and boots and an emerald-colored shirt that made his eyes look even greener. He shook Rooney's hand and waved a few times to the audience, who started cheering the moment he stepped out onto the stage and didn't stop until he'd been sitting on the stool a few minutes. A stagehand gave him a guitar, and he played and sang one of the new songs with Kit and B.J. behind him on piano and electric guitar.

Noah had heard the song before, of course—Sawyer had composed much of this album at the piano in the Venice house—but he'd never heard it so polished and lovely. Sawyer's voice sounded strong and sweet as he sang, "'I'm

the kind who falls in love forever," and he winked at the audience when someone cheered that line particularly loudly.

"People love your love songs, babe," Noah said, and Sawyer leaned his head on Noah's shoulder.

After the song and a commercial break, Sawyer joined Rooney, who complimented him on the song and the new album and the movie, and they finally got to talking about the photographs.

"These pictures must have been shocking and upsetting," Rooney said seriously.

"Upsetting, yeah, but mostly I thought they were hot," Sawyer said and leaned his chin on his hand, smiling, as the audience started whooping again.

"But a bunch of photographs doctored to make it look like you're kissing your best friend," Rooney said.

"Rooney, could I interrupt you there," Sawyer said. "I came on the show today to set the record straight. Those pictures aren't doctored. Noah Kingston, the other man in the pictures, he's been my boyfriend for almost seven years. I'm gay."

Rooney grinned and started applauding him, as did some of the people in the audience, though a few made "oh, no!" sounds. Sawyer smiled—it looked determined to Noah—and nodded.

"That's very brave of you, to come out in public like this," Rooney said when everyone had quieted down again.

"I don't know from brave," Sawyer said, "but I do know it's necessary. If people are going to try and use my sexuality against me, then I can't let them. I love Noah and I hate how

upset this has made him, so I figured it's better to be honest than to hide."

"Noah Kingston," interjected Rooney, "is, of course, a renowned photographer. He did all of your album covers, isn't that right, Sawyer?"

"Four of the six," Sawyer said, and the screen showed the first album cover, with a baby-faced Sawyer at nineteen. There were more wolf-whistles. "That's the first one. We met at that photo shoot."

"Was it love at first sight?" asked Rooney, and Sawyer laughed.

"For me it was. Noah took a few years to come around."

The screen showed another picture—not a professionally posed one this time, just Noah and Sawyer on vacation together, Sawyer handsome and suntanned, Noah unshaven and wet from swimming. They leaned against each other on a beach blanket, and Sawyer's head was on Noah's shoulder and his eyes were closed. Neither of them were smiling, but they both looked happy and comfortable.

"Oh, my," said Rooney.

"That's from last summer," said Sawyer. "He took me to Belize. It was awesome."

"It sounds like the two of you have a lot of fun."

"We do," Sawyer said. "Oh, we do. He's the most important thing in my life."

"Is Noah watching right now?" said Rooney, looking touched.

Sawyer looked at the camera and said, "I hope so."

Noah looked at the flesh-and-blood Sawyer at his side, who was watching him with a hopeful smile. "Well?" Sawyer said. "What do you think?"

"I," Noah said, "think I love you."

Sawyer smiled wide and kissed him. "Good to know you still love me," he whispered. "And—that thing I asked you? Have you been thinking about that, too?"

"Yeah," Noah said. "I've been thinking."

When he didn't go on, Sawyer said, "That song? The falling forever song? That'll be the first single. There will be a video and everything. And." He swallowed. "The song's about you. All my love songs are about you. And I don't want to sing to another model in the video and I don't want to pretend the song is about someone else. I'm sick of pretending, Noah. I'm sick of it. I don't want to pretend anymore."

"I know," Noah said. "And you won't have to, now. What did Terry say? What did the label say?"

Sawyer rolled his eyes. "Terry said I had to follow my heart, and the label is going to wait and see what the sales are. If they're too low, the label may drop me." He shrugged. "Whatever. Things have changed. I'm a different person than when I was twenty-two. I want different things now."

"What do you want?"

Sawyer got onto his knees, sweet and beautiful, still so young it made Noah's heart hurt, and said seriously, "Will you marry me, Noah?"

Noah swallowed, then took hold of Sawyer's face and kissed him. "I think I'd like being married to you."

Sawyer pulled away with a slow smile. "Cool. Is that a yes?"

"That depends." Noah smiled and tilted his head in challenge. "Where's my ring?"

Sawyer laughed. "You think I don't have one."

"Oh, shit, you do not."

"I do so!" Sawyer put his mug on the coffee table and ran upstairs, taking the stairs two at a time. After a few minutes he tromped back down and proudly held out a black velvet jewelry box.

"You do nothing half-hearted, babe," Noah said.

"Part of my charm." He opened the box and got down on one knee. "Stop laughing," he added when Noah chortled. "This is totally serious."

"I'm serious, I'm serious." Noah cleared his throat and tried to stop smiling.

"Noah Kingston," Sawyer said earnestly as he opened the jewelry box, "will you marry me?"

"That's a very good ring," Noah said, honestly impressed. The ring was patterned with gold and brown stripes like a tiger's back, with a small yellow gold and white gold X in the center.

"Just answer the question."

"So impatient," Noah murmured and took the ring out of the box. It looked at home against his skin.

Sawyer swallowed, watching him. "Do you like it?"

"Yeah," he said and looked up at Sawyer. "Yeah, Sawyer. Let's get married."

Sawyer whooped and leapt onto him, kissing his face over and over as they both laughed and Noah clutched the ring in his palm. "Ready for this?"

"Not in the least," Noah said, his arms around Sawyer's waist, "but I'm not going to let that stop me."

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#### **Contributors**

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Jenna Jones writes contemporary m/m fiction, and sometimes dips her toes in other genres like historical or urban fantasy and horror.

She lives in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town in the Wasatch Mountains. By day she is a fearless web monkey; by night, she writes, reads and watches a lot of movies. She has a small but treasured collection of autographs from sci-fi actors and an ever-growing personal library.

Jenna has a BA in humanities and has half a master's in comparative literature. Her favorite job was a radio announcer at a classical music station in college.

- J.J. Massa
- J.J. Massa reads a lot, writes whenever she can, and spends most of her free time with her yellow lab and two cats. She has two lovely daughters that make her very proud and keep her on her toes. She enjoys the company of good friends and family as well as peace and tranquility whenever she can find it.

Gay male romance is one of her favorite genres to write in because it offers so much opportunity for the unexpected. Every relationship offers so much. You just never know...

Alexa Snow

Alexa Snow is an emotional person who appreciates practicality in others. She's prone to crying at inconvenient times, drinking too much coffee, and staying up too late

playing with words (either reading or writing.) A background of schooling she wasn't all that interested in resulted in a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and a vague sense of wasted time. Alexa lives in a tiny old house in New England with her husband, young son, and a small collection of pets.