

The book cover features two muscular men in the foreground. The man on the left is wearing a dark grey tank top and looking directly at the camera. The man on the right is shirtless and looking slightly to the side. The background is a composite image showing a city skyline at night and a large, ornate bell. The title 'SILVER BELLS' is written in a large, stylized, outlined font across the middle. The author's name 'HUNTER RAINES' is at the bottom. The publisher's name 'Loose Id' is in the top right corner.

Loose Id

# SILVER BELLS

HUNTER RAINES

# *Silver Bells*

*Hunter Raines*



## **Silver Bells**

**Copyright © December 2009 by Hunter Raines**

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-488-6

Editor: Maryam Salim

Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Printed in the United States of America

**Loose Id.**

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

## **Warning**

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

\* \* \* \* \*

**DISCLAIMER:** Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

## About this Title

**Genre:** LGBT Paranormal

Jud Hess has loved Derek Gentry since they were children. When they became lovers in college, he thought they were destined to be together forever. All that changed with Derek's tragic death only four years later, on Christmas Day.

Now, more than a decade after that horrible event, Jud clings to a promise he made the night before Derek died: he vowed that he would never, *ever*, be with another man. And he's clung to that vow with every bit of what's left of his heart.

But Derek's death brought an unlikely gift. After his lover died, Jud began to see spirits. Yet although ghosts have become his constant companions, the one spirit he longs to see only appears to him at Christmas. Or at least, he used to.

This year, Derek doesn't come. But someone else does; a man who brings with him the kind of erotic temptation Jud is helpless to resist.

To end a decade of loneliness, Jud will have to give in to the sultry seduction of a stranger...and betray the spirit of the man who should have been the love of his life.

***Publisher's Note:*** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices.*

## Prologue

*December 24, 1999*

“Honey, I'm home!”

Jud Hess barely had enough time to poke his head around the side of the kitchen door before Derek Gentry flew into the room and swept him off his feet.

Walnut cabinets and pink flowers on white backsplash tile blurred around him as Derek twirled him in the air, manhandling him like he weighed nothing at all. Derek wasn't even breathing hard, despite Jud outweighing him by at least twenty pounds. Even the laws of nature and physics seemed to bow to Derek's iron will.

Ever since they were kids, there'd been something larger-than-life about Derek Gentry, something hard to pin down. He was joyful, carefree, and unpredictable, yet possessed a sharp intelligence and a wit that could cut like a blade. Every boy wanted to be Derek's friend; every girl wanted to be his *special* friend. Jud's father had once said that even a person who'd only known Derek for five minutes could pick him out in a coal mine without a torch. Embarrassed, Derek had brushed off the compliment with a laugh, mumbling something about his animal magnetism.

He might have been joking, but Jud didn't think he was far off. Derek was, quite frankly, the sexiest man Jud had ever known. And even after all these years together, he still couldn't quite believe Derek was his.

The kitchen was hot and airless, and Jud staggered when Derek finally released him. His head reeled, and he leaned against the edge of a countertop to get his bearings. Desire swelled from within, surging through him at an alarming rate. He should have been used to it by now. Derek had only to look at him a certain way and Jud's body responded with fierce need. When they touched, the chemistry between them threatened to set him ablaze.

"You're home early," he replied at last.

"Yeah, well, Christmas is the time for miracles, they say."

Jud drew a hand across his face, still struggling to lift the erotic fog. "The Simmons case goes to trial next week. How'd you manage to leave the office before midnight?"

"You're kidding, right? It's our first night in our new apartment." Happiness lit Derek's face when he grinned, but even the unbridled joy couldn't disguise the circles of exhaustion and worry shadowing his eyes. "I'd have liked to see someone try to stop me."

Jud smiled wryly and gave a light shake of his head. "No one could ever say no to you."

"Oh yeah? I know a few Las Vegas county judges who'd prove you wrong."

Jud waved off the comment with a flick of his hand. "You know what I mean. Not judges. *Normal* people."

Derek's sudden laugh floated through the apartment, filling it with life in a way Jud's presence alone hadn't come close to doing. "You'll get no argument there. I haven't met a normal judge yet." With a wink, Derek ducked out of sight into the hallway, then returned holding a grocery bag in each hand. A fresh baguette peeked out from the top of one, and the bulging shape of a bottle strained the plastic of the other. "Hope you're ready to celebrate."

Dismay caused Jud's shoulders to slump. "I haven't had time to put together the dining room table yet. And the glasses are still packed away." He gestured at the cardboard boxes stacked around the room. The rest of the apartment didn't look any better. "The place isn't exactly fit for a civilized dinner."

Derek dropped the bags and moved fluidly, each step deliberate, to close the distance between them. "Who said anything about being civilized?" He slid one hand around Jud's neck and drew him close, then captured his mouth.

A thrill of excitement startled Jud's cock into stiffness, and he gasped against Derek's lips. Need swelled inside him, fueled by intoxicating passion. He must have shared a thousand kisses with this man, yet the rush of discovery and anticipation shot through him every time their lips touched. He'd never been with anyone who could keep him on his toes like Derek did. The man had a gift for the unexpected. It was only one of a million things Jud loved about him.

Derek's tongue swept between Jud's parted lips. Jud relaxed into the kiss, his body molding to familiar masculine planes and valleys. Derek might have been the one who'd just walked

through the door, but Jud felt like *he* was the one coming home. He belonged here, locked in his lover's arms.

Derek's nimble fingers brushed against Jud's throat and headed straight for the buttons of his dress shirt. He had them unfastened in seconds, allowing his palms to glide across Jud's ribcage, down his stomach, then up to his chest. Jud's nipples hardened as Derek's thumbs skimmed them. A sharp tweak caused a deep growl of need to slip from his throat.

With a self-satisfied grunt, Derek released Jud's mouth. "I have something for you."

Jud muttered a curse under his breath. "I thought we said no gifts this year. The apartment's expensive enough, and between the student loans and the—"

"You worry too much."

"So you tell me. Every damn day." He couldn't resist softening the harsh words with a smile. "All right, I'll bite. What do you have for me?"

Derek was already bending over the bags he'd set on the floor. The position gave Jud a perfect glimpse of taut cheeks beneath tan pants, stirring a flutter of need low in his stomach.

"This." He turned with a flourish, holding a blue velvet box.

Jud grasped it with trembling fingers. His heart skipped a beat. It was too big to be a ring, and anyway, he wasn't expecting one. Perhaps one day they'd exchange wedding bands, but until then, jewelry hadn't been high on their gift list. Still...there were only so many things that would fit inside a velvet box.

A watch, maybe?

He flipped open the lid to reveal a set of twin silver bells cradled in a nest of blue tissue paper. They were tied together with a red satin ribbon that had been knotted in a tiny bow.

A flicker of disappointment jabbed at Jud's chest. He shoved it aside. What had he expected, anyway? "They're...nice," he managed. "Thoughtful. We don't have any Christmas decorations."

"I thought our first set of ornaments should be special. They're real silver. And they made me think of us...two of a kind, you know?"

When Jud didn't answer, Derek shifted his weight from foot to foot. "You hate them, don't you?"

“No, no, not at all.” He lifted the bells from their tissue bed. A light, silvery tinkle filled the room with an unexpectedly melodious sound. “They’re nice. Really.”

“If you ‘nice’ me one more time, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Jud set the bells on the countertop and crossed his arms over his chest. “Ring my bell?”

Derek’s laugh filled the room, brighter and warmer than the dulcet tones of the bells. “Something like that,” he said and dropped to his knees.

Jud’s belt didn’t put up a fight. Neither did his zipper or the button clasp of his suit pants. The garment yielded quickly to Derek’s expert attention, as did his boxers, and soon Jud stood naked from the waist down, only his shirt still hanging off his shoulders.

“Damn.” Derek let out a low whistle as he ran his hands up Jud’s thighs in a maddeningly slow caress. He was careful to avoid Jud’s cock, though it jutted out just inches from his lips. “Is this *my* Christmas gift?”

An incredulous laugh slipped from Jud’s throat. “Is this all you want?”

Derek looked up. The teasing hint of amusement dissipated from his face like morning mist. In its place flared an earnest seriousness he rarely showed outside the courtroom. “I just want you to stay with me, baby. Forever.”

Shaken by the pleading edge in Derek’s voice, Jud sucked in a breath and released it on a soft sigh. “I will. You know that.”

“Then promise me. Swear it, Jud.”

Jud reached down and trailed his fingertips across Derek’s cheek. He looked breathtakingly beautiful just then, black hair slightly mussed, cheeks flushed, mouth hovering just over Jud’s rampant erection.

“I’d promise you the world if I thought I could deliver.”

“Forget the world. Just promise me that nothing will ever tear us apart. That you’ll love me, always. That no matter what happens, you’ll never be with anyone else.” Dark, sooty lashes framed brown eyes that widened, taking on a desperate sheen. “Promise me.”

The anguish in Derek’s voice lifted the hair on Jud’s arms. “What’s gotten into you?”



Derek had to know that what he asked was beyond ridiculous. Jud would never stray. He'd loved Derek his entire life. As kids, they'd been inseparable. In college, they'd come together in a way that had shocked and fulfilled them both. And now as adults, they were committed to one another. They'd moved in together. It was yet one more step toward a lifetime together.

Being with someone other than Derek had never crossed Jud's mind. Even his fantasies revolved around this man. Yet as ludicrous as the request was, how could he deny Derek anything he asked, especially when the man knelt on the cold tile floor begging for the promise of eternal love?

"I need to hear you say it. Please."

"Okay." Jud cupped Derek's face and held his gaze. "I promise...nothing will ever separate us."

"And you will never be with another man?"

"I will *never* be with another man." Humor laced his voice at the absurdity of the thought.

"No matter what?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Derek." Jud fisted both hands in his lover's hair and drew him closer to his aching cock. Still holding his gaze, he spoke again, ensuring each word came out precise and distinct. "I swear to you that there will never be another. Never. Not for as long as I live."

Derek released a long, shuddering breath. The tension eased from his features and another lopsided grin chased the lingering seriousness away. "Well, then. You've earned a reward."

He let his fist glide down the length of Jud's shaft, tightening his grip close to the base with an intensity that verged on pain. His lips clamped around the tip and his tongue swirled just beneath the head, tormenting the sensitive skin. At Jud's soft moan, Derek took him in deeper, coating the shaft with moisture and dragging his lips down, down, down, until Jud's cockhead nudged the back of his throat.

The sensation of being engulfed in tight, wet heat sent an unexpected tremor through Jud's legs. Tension zinged up his spine. Derek's mouth slid back up the glistening surface to the tip, then down once more. His rigid fist followed each motion with exquisite precision, doubling the blissful sensation.

Jud's hips rocked to the rhythm of Derek's lips, undulating in small, eager movements. He fought for control, struggled to keep from plunging his cock deep into Derek's mouth again and

again. He let his lover set the pace, but the sight of Derek greedily devouring every inch of his shaft brought him perilously close to climax.

He hissed through gritted teeth, gripped a fistful of Derek's hair, and yanked the man's head back. "Not like this." His voice came out gritty and uneven. "In your ass."

Derek obeyed without a word of protest, rising to his feet in one smooth motion. His hand flew to his belt buckle, and he shucked his pants and briefs down his legs in a flurry of fast, efficient movements. When he'd bared his gorgeous cock, he turned around and gripped the countertop with both hands, then curved his spine and thrust out his toned ass with a flourish.

Ripples of satisfaction ratcheted through Jud at the sight of his lover offering himself to him. There was something almost magical about having Derek submit this way, in the kitchen of their apartment. For once, neither of them had to make a concession. He hadn't gone to Derek's place. Derek hadn't come to his. This year, their Christmas gift to one another was the start of a life together.

He reached out to caress the warm, smooth surface of Derek's ass. The man groaned and tossed his head back, casting a lusty glance Jud's way from beneath long lashes. "Are you going to fuck me already, or are you just going to stare?"

Jud's fingers dug into the firm flesh. He pinched, eliciting a sharp cry from the other man's throat.

"Serves you right for asking questions you already know the answer to."

A lock of black hair flopped over Derek's brow as a husky laugh slid past his parted lips. Jud fought the urge to tuck it back into place. Instead, he ran the tip of his finger down Derek's spine, then trailed a path between the valley of his cheeks.

A visible shiver raced through Derek at the contact. His mirth vanished instantly, turning into a soft moan of unmistakable pleasure. "Lube?" he asked, the word hitching on a strangled breath.

"I unpacked that first." Jud pressed his cock against the snug valley of his lover's ass. He leaned forward, then reached for the handle of the cabinet just to the right of Derek's head.

"I love a man who has his priorities straight."

Jud squeezed a dollop of clear liquid into his palm. He coated his cock, then slipped some around Derek's anus before finally sweeping the pad of his finger over the hot rosette of his lover's tightly puckered entrance.

"Oh God." Derek arched his spine and thrust his ass out farther, grinding against Jud's hand.

Jud pressed gently, and his slick finger slipped in past the knuckle. "You *are* hungry for me, aren't you?"

"I've been thinking about nothing else all day."

"What about the trial?" Jud added another finger alongside the first.

"Fuck the trial." This time when he turned to look back, his dark eyes blazed with hunger. "Fuck *me*."

The ring of muscle guarding Derek's tight anus flexed and contracted as Jud slid his fingers out. Savoring his lover's slight tremor of anticipation, Jud grabbed on to his hip. With his other hand, he parted Derek's cheeks and positioned the tip of his cock against the well-lubed entrance.

On a swift intake of breath, Derek braced himself against the counter. Jud thrust forward, and his cock slipped easily inside his lover's channel. Ecstasy gushed from Derek's low sigh of pleasure. Jud remained motionless for a moment, waiting for Derek's body to adjust to the intrusion.

Derek began to move first. He ground against Jud slowly at first, nudging the shaft in his ass deeper with each careful movement.

A flurry of sensation raged through Jud's body, twisting in the pit of his stomach. *God!* At this rate, he wouldn't last long.

He gripped Derek's hips with both hands and yanked him roughly against his body. The flesh-on-flesh slap of Derek's ass slamming against his stomach joined the mounting sounds of their pleasure. Jud increased the pace, tightened his hold, and burrowed deep in Derek's passage with each desperate thrust.

Derek's arm moved in swift, jerky movements, an unmistakable sign that he was jerking his cock in tandem with the rhythm of their frenzied fucking. Jud wished he could see the way the skin of Derek's beautiful shaft reddened with each rough tug. Derek had never been gentle with his dick—with either of their dicks, for that matter.

“Mine,” Derek ground out between his strangled moans. “Say it. You're mine.”

Jud could barely think through the pleasure rushing through him. His release built and built, an incoming tide he was powerless to control.

Jud braced himself against Derek and felt him squirm with urgency. Derek's orgasm began as a soft shiver, quickly transforming into a powerful spasm, and he cried out as creamy jets flowed down his hand and splashed against the kitchen floor.

“Mine,” he repeated, desperate now.

Jud struggled to form the words, to give Derek the vow he ached to hear, but by then coherent speech was almost beyond him. He came in a rush, flooding his lover's ass with spurt after spurt of hot cum.

“Yours. Oh—*God*. Yours...forever!”

## Chapter One

*December 25, 2009*

Jud lay on his back and stared at the faded figures on the painted ceiling. In the flickering candlelight, their eyes glistened with a mixture of judgment and pity. The first time he'd walked into the sacristy of the Holy Outpost church a decade ago, he hadn't even noticed the intricate artwork. Much later, when he'd learned that the place of his deepest agony also summoned his greatest desire, he'd seen the saints for the messengers they were.

Though their once vivid colors had grown dull and discolored over the decades since their creation, the painted saints' enigmatic frowns sprinkled comfort down from their lofty perch. As Jud's wait stretched from mere minutes to long, unbearable hours, they kept silent vigil alongside the spirits who served as his constant companions.

"He'll be here."

Anxiety hit Jud like a fist to the gut. The pastel-colored saints swirled and blurred in his field of vision. He blinked back the sting of panicked tears and glanced in the direction of a familiar Texas twang.

A nearly transparent cowboy perched on the wide, shallow edge of the sacristy credens cabinet where Father Chuck Keenan kept his vestments. A ten-gallon hat drooped over the ghost's right eyebrow, casting most of his ethereal features in shadow. He'd been handsome at one time. The slant of a chiseled jaw was unmistakable even through the filmy fog that now made up his form.

Despite his appearance, Neil Woods was no cowherd or ranch hand. Before his passing, he'd been a lieutenant with the Las Vegas Police Department. He'd also been Jud's first ghostly encounter, all those years ago. And his toughest case. A case Jud had yet to crack, despite working on getting to the bottom of the mystery surrounding Neil's death for nearly a decade.

"I know, Neil. But today feels different. I'm just not sure—" Jud bit off the rest of that sentence. Voicing his doubts would make them real, and he wasn't ready to accept that his lover wasn't coming.

"He always comes," Neil insisted.

Ten years. In all that time, Derek had never missed a Christmas encounter. He showed up at midnight, as though summoned to Jud's side by love itself.

Jud's body ached inside, hurt in places his agonized emotions had scraped raw. "What time is it?"

"Four in the morning," another ghost answered. This one sported an antique soldier's uniform. The gray frock coat hanging to the spirit's mid thigh looked like something that might have been worn by the Confederate soldiers in the Civil War, but Jud was no expert on American history. He'd have to ask the man for his story someday.

Not today, though. He was off duty.

Despite the half dozen spirits who flittered around the sacristy, today Jud didn't belong to them. They had him the other three hundred and sixty-four days of the year. On Christmas, he was Derek's.

Jud gritted his teeth and forced his breathing to slow to something resembling normal respiration. But the mounting panic wouldn't ease.

What if Derek didn't come? What if he never came again?

He sucked in oxygen through his nose and forced himself to let it out slowly through his mouth. Father Chuck had taught him that technique ten years earlier, after Jud had stumbled from the church in a sickened daze, the image of Derek's broken body flashing like something out of a horror movie against his eyelids each time he blinked.

He breathed in the cloying scents of hot wax, burning wicks, and incense. Somewhere else in the church, someone slammed a door. Father Chuck usually locked up around midnight, except during the month of December, when he left the main entrance unlatched around the clock. People who'd have otherwise spent the holidays with Jack Daniels, or gambling their last dime at some low-rate casino, turned to Father Chuck and the Holy Outpost instead. Some came to find peace. Others, to find acceptance.

Then there were those like him, who came to find someone.

Jud's eyes drifted closed. He wouldn't sleep; he *couldn't* sleep, not with the icy dread trickling through his veins, but he could rest a while and imagine all the things he'd do when Derek finally came to him.

Fantasizing about how they'd spend what little time they had together eased some of the apprehension coiling in his chest. His muscles relaxed a fraction, though his cock stirred as desire pooled low in his groin. He clung to the memories of Derek's strong, sinewy body, of his magical mouth, his wicked hands.

*We'll be together again, soon. Very, very soon.*

He still didn't know how Derek did it. In the last decade, Jud had been visited by thousands of ghosts. Tens of thousands. All of them came to him in their ethereal forms, as insubstantial and otherworldly as any supernatural being.

But not Derek. Death hadn't turned him translucent. He didn't float, or drift through walls. He also didn't shadow Jud at all hours of the day and night.

He came once a year: on Christmas Day. He arrived as fully corporeal as he'd been in life, and he never wanted to talk about anything but Jud. For twenty-four hours, it was like being reunited with a lover who'd been gone somewhere far away—like in outer space, maybe.

Sometimes he even told people his lover was an astronaut. It was sure as shit a lot easier than explaining he fucked a dead man every three hundred sixty-fifth day and remained celibate the rest of the time.

Hell, when he put it that way, the whole thing sounded preposterous, even to him. He might have believed he hallucinated the encounters, perhaps overwrought by grief on the anniversary of his lover's death, except that the ghosts saw Derek too. All right, so a bunch of spirits weren't exactly reliable authorities on the state of his mental health, but Father Chuck was. And he'd seen Derek too.

"What time is it now?" Jud asked no one in particular.

"Four fifteen. Still well before dawn. He'll be here."

Even Neil's low Texas drawl held a hint of doubt now. Funny, how ghosts could still lie to the living even once they had nothing to gain from the deception.

“You know men,” a husky female voice said. “They like to keep you waiting so they can make a grand entrance. They want to be sure you’re properly motivated to be grateful they showed up in the first place.”

Jud didn’t have to open his eyes. He remembered that voice, and he could picture the four-inch heels, the black tights, the deep V of her low-cut sweater. The ghost had a beehive of blonde hair that did more for her height than the shoes, completing the Jersey Girl look. Her eyes were rimmed with dark eyeliner and her eyelashes reached impossible lengths. In life, she must not have been one of those women content to strut what God gave her. Judging by the size of her ethereal tits, he’d bet his life savings that the word “natural” had never touched her lips.

A knock on the door saved him from having to answer. His heart leaped into his throat and he went from lying on the floor to standing upright in less than half a second. Even the spirits stopped their aimless drifting long enough to cast curious glances toward the door.

His world shrank, blanking out everything but that knock. Derek never knocked. He simply appeared, like something out of a fairy tale. One moment he wasn’t there, then the next he was. *Poof*. Just like that. Prince Charming come from the beyond to fuck him senseless.

“Uhh...enter.”

The door handle angled downward. Someone was clearly manipulating it from the other side, but damn, he was taking his sweet time about it. Maybe Jersey Girl had been right. Making an entrance, indeed.

Jud’s pulse raced like accelerated thunder. He’d ached for this moment for so long. Each year seemed to grow lengthier, extending the time between Christmases, making the insufferable wait even more unbearable. And after the endless lonely months he’d been forced to endure, it was no wonder he was frazzled and antsy.

And horny. God, so very, very horny.

The door finally swung open. Jud took a step forward, then another. His knees wobbled, and he could barely think through the rush of euphoria cascading through his veins. Somehow, he managed to keep from staggering forward and throwing himself into the powerful arms awaiting him.

The candlelight flared brighter, casting a golden glow over the gap in the door. A shadow loomed there, dark and menacing and...tall.



Too tall. And too broad across the shoulders.

Jud squinted into the blackness. “Derek?” he asked, though every cell in his body told him otherwise.

The newcomer stepped inside the sacristy, and suddenly the room felt smaller. Jud backed up a step. The scent of ginger soap and coffee hit him first. Then, as the stranger stepped closer, the full impact of the man slammed into him, stealing his breath.

His first impression had been spot on. This guy was *big*, in a powerful, dangerous way. He wore a black T-shirt that molded over his firm chest. Strong, muscular arms stretched the sleeves to bursting. He had a rough-looking face, nothing like Derek's smooth, handsome features. His nose was slightly crooked, like it had been broken once—or maybe more than once. Full lips flattened into a serious line.

Despite the many other obvious differences, his eyes reminded Jud of Derek's. Dark and intense, they pinned him into place and seemed to look right through him.

A sharp jolt of awareness wrung an instant reaction from his neglected cock. His erection raged painfully against the seam of his zipper. Damn, but he needed Derek.

And he needed this man gone.

“You Jud Hess?” Even his voice was gruff, with a hint of something dark and elemental lingering beneath the ordinary words.

“Yeah. And you are?”

“Tyson...” He hesitated for a moment, then extended a large hand. “Ty Sullivan.”

Instinctively, Jud slid his palm out and folded his fingers around Ty's hand. He realized his mistake as soon as their skin made contact and the hairs on his arm lifted as though tugged by waves of static electricity.

A sudden rush of heat pummeled Jud's groin. He set his jaw against it, but it was no use. Air slipped through his teeth in a hiss of raw need. He saw Ty's bottomless dark eyes grow round, while his lips parted in an “oh” of surprise.

Jud's entire body trembled. Lust hit with a force that shocked him, but he couldn't stop the potent rush of heat from blasting straight into his balls. Waves of pleasure took him sharply to the edge of control, so close he suddenly understood that if he didn't do something right this very

moment, he'd lose the battle over his own body and shake this man's hand right into a wicked orgasm.

He jerked his hand out of Ty's grasp and wrenched himself away, stumbling backward. He would have kept moving if he didn't hit the wall at his back.

Ty made no attempt to follow. He, too, looked dazed, and his breath came in sharp, uneven pants.

They stared at each other from a safe distance, neither one willing to speak first.

"I hadn't realized..." Ty murmured after what seemed to Jud like the longest two minutes in human history. "You're...I can't believe...I mean, that was..."

Jud's emotions sizzled. A lightning storm of longing and confusion raged inside him. "What are you talking about?"

Ty lifted his head as though coming out of a trance. "You're a real person."

"Last I checked." He took a deep breath and fought to stay calm. "Look, I think you've got me confused with someone else. And this isn't a good time, anyway. Maybe we can talk about this...whatever it is, next week. Or next month. Make an appointment with my secretary. Come see me during office hours."

The man didn't need to know Jud hadn't had a secretary for over a decade. Or an office. Or anything resembling a real job.

Ty's voice lowered to a growl. "You don't understand. I need you."

Jud's gaze pinned him in place, and Ty was struck by the color of those enthralling eyes. Neither blue nor gray but a shade in between, as enigmatic and peculiar as the rest of the man. What was he doing here at this hour, anyway? Father Chuck had said that Jud always spent Christmas sealed inside the sacristy. Alone.

Ty gave himself a mental shake. It wasn't any of his business if this guy chose to spend his holiday atoning for a year's worth of sins, sleeping off a hangover, or praying to each saint, one by one, in Latin. The only thing that mattered was that he'd finally—*finally*—found someone who could free him from the curse he'd been living under for the past year.

“No. No way. You have no right to ask me for anything after barging in here like an inconsiderate prick!”

Jud's fury only served to fuel Ty's own barrage of emotions. “I knocked,” he gritted out between clenched teeth. “And I didn't see a 'do not disturb' sign on the door.”

“It's a *church*, not a hotel room.”

“Right.” Ty glanced at the candles splashing soft golden light against the religious artwork on the walls. A blanket and two pillows lay on the floor. A bottle of champagne sat in an ice bucket at the edge of the sacristy credens cabinet. “Maybe you're the one who needs to remember that.”

A red stain crept up the column of Jud's throat and flooded his cheeks. He averted his gaze, and Ty took the opportunity to step forward.

Jud shifted his weight from one foot to another and darted a glance toward the door. Ty snorted. Damn if the guy wasn't gauging if he could make a run for it. God, but he looked like a startled deer. And Ty had never been a big, bad wolf.

Nor had he ever wanted to be one. Not until now. Yet standing just inches away from this man, his feelings raged out of control. The closer he got, the more muddled his thoughts became. He wanted to grab a fistful of Jud's shirt and shake the man until he promised to help him. He wanted to lean in and capture Jud's mouth, to ravish those full lips until he begged for mercy.

Most of all, he just wanted to *touch*.

His fingertips itched. On impulse alone, he reached out and splayed his palm against Jud's chest.

The shock that careened through him this time was nothing like the first intense jolt of lust. He'd experienced the raw scrape of bone-numbing need enough over the past twelve months to recognize a supernatural reaction when he felt one.

But this...*this* was different. The emotion that surged through his veins wasn't as much aimless lust as deep, desperate desire. The kind of fathomless longing that built and built when hopeless, intense worship turned into denied yearning.

If Ty had been caught off guard by the sensation, Jud looked utterly stunned. He paled and his pupils dilated, black seeping into the blue-gray of his eyes until Ty stared into a darkness as deep as night.

Jud's lips parted. A flash of tongue drew Ty's attention, and he found himself leaning in, desperate for a taste of that sultry mouth. Jud snarled a warning, his breath caressing Ty's lips. The warm, cinnamon-scented heat sent sizzles of unnatural erotic ferocity straight to the ever-growing hardness between Ty's legs.

"What are you doing?" Longing that sounded every bit as potent as the ache burning through Ty tinged Jud's hoarse voice.

"Proving a point." It took all of Ty's resolve to yank his hand away. When he did, he took two deliberate paces backward, putting some much needed distance between them.

Jud shook his head. "I don't understand. What just happened?"

"You, my new friend, just experienced what I've been living with for a year."

A moment of silence stretched into two. Jud ran a hand through his disheveled brown hair, tugging some of the stray strands low over his forehead. "You feel *that* every time you touch someone?"

The laugh that escaped Ty's lips held nothing but resentment. "No. Actually, tonight's the first time it happened when I touched a real person."

Jud gave him a once-over, clearly skeptical. "So why me?"

"Hell if I know. But until five minutes ago, I'd only gotten that jolt from touching things. A chair, some old curtains, a Christmas tree ornament, the damn window in my apartment...random stuff."

Jud cast a suspicious frown at him, but finally abandoned the sanctuary of the wall at his back, stepped around the blanket, and emerged into the center of the sacristy. Candles cast golden highlights across the dark blue T-shirt molded to his lean, willowy frame. Worn jeans hung low on his hips, held up by a frayed leather belt that had seen better days. A silver belt buckle with a bell embossed on it drew Ty's attention down.

Down to where it had no business going.

His gaze locked on to the bulge at the apex of Jud's thighs. The man was hard as a lead pipe and just as thick. His own cock gave an answering throb and lengthened, pressing against the seam of his jeans.

"I still don't get what this has to do with me."

Ty jerked his head up. Heat rushed into his cheeks, but Jud didn't seem to notice his momentary loss of concentration.

"Yeah, well, that's what you and I are going to find out."

Jud's long lashes shaded his eyes for a fraction of a second before he turned away to stare at a tall bookshelf that held a series of leather-bound journals. Church records, most likely. "I think you should leave."

*Shit.* Jud couldn't turn him away. Not after all the effort Ty had put into tracking him down. He'd have to lay all his cards on the table. Even the ones that would make him sound insane.

"I have a ghost," Ty blurted out.

"Congratulations." Jud lifted a hand and waved it aimlessly in the air. "Join the club."

Relief sucked the breath out of Ty like a vacuum. At least Jud believed him. He'd thought convincing the man he wasn't a nutcase would be the hard part in all of this, but Jud didn't seem to need any persuading at all.

Ty cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, whether you're aware of it or not, most folks don't have this problem."

Jud lifted a shoulder, but didn't turn around. His raised arm dropped back to his side. "You get used to it."

"Not a chance in hell. That's the reason I'm here. I don't want to get used to it. I want it gone."

"Then hire an exorcist. Father Chuck can give you some excellent recommendations."

"I tried that. Didn't work. In fact, it made things worse. Look, the damn thing's made my life a living nightmare. Either I find a way to get it away from me, or I lose my mind. Three guesses which one I'd rather have happen and you won't need two."

"Even if I could help," Jud said, tracing a fingertip along the spine of a journal, "this isn't a good time. I'm in the middle of something."

Ty glanced around him at the empty sacristy. Annoyance swelled in his gut. Over the past twelve months, he'd tried everything he could think of: Wiccan house cleansings, exorcisms, new

age rituals that used rat blood, rabbit fur, pigeon claws, and other ingredients he'd rather never think about again.

And after all that...nothing. His houseguest remained. As did Ty's unbearable reaction to random inanimate objects. Since he'd never as much as gotten a stiffie from a Christmas ornament before the ghost showed up—much less ride out an orgasm that left him shaking and in need of clean underwear—he could put two and two together well enough to determine that if he could just rid himself of the evil spirit, he could go back to having a normal life.

And Jud Hess was the answer to doing both.

Until a few days ago, Ty had just about given up on finding someone who could rid him of his maddening problems. And then he'd found a copy of the *Vegas Times* on his doorstep. Which was strange, because he didn't subscribe. That day's lead story focused on the corporate attorney-turned-medium who'd solved his fifteenth cold case this year by doing nothing more scientific than communicating with spirits.

Unwilling to ignore anyone who could potentially help him, Ty had set to tracking him down. Finding the man hadn't been easy, but he'd managed. And now here he was, so close to peace he could almost taste the normalcy of an ordinary life.

“I hate to break it to you, pal, but your bizarre Christmas ritual ain't that important. I don't care if you're sacrificing virgins in here. It can wait.”

Jud whirled around and pounced on him with a speed Ty hadn't expected. The man stopped himself just short of grabbing Ty by the collar of his shirt; no doubt remembering what happened the last time they touched. His fingers hovered in the air, an inch away from Ty's chest. Even at that distance, Ty's skin practically hummed a proximity warning.

“I'm waiting for someone.” Jud's mouth twisted into a menacing sneer, and he dropped his hand. “You wouldn't understand.”

“Oh, I understand just fine.” Ty forced a casualness he didn't feel into his words. “I understand loverboy ain't coming.”

Jud made a noise in the back of his throat. Mournful and grief-stricken, that low keening sound communicated more than words could have said. And it made Ty's gut wrench.

He'd kicked a puppy once, by mistake, when he was six. He still remembered the animal's startled wail, the way the tiny creature curled around itself in agony. And he remembered how rotten he'd felt, how malicious, even unintentionally.

This felt worse.

Jud didn't have to ask him to leave a second time. With a mumbled apology that sounded idiotic even as the words slipped past his lips, Ty turned and headed for the sacristy door.

It slammed behind him with a *thud* that echoed through his bloodstream. He sucked in a breath, shook his head, and waited for the swelling in his groin to ease. Now that he was outside Jud's immediate proximity, the raw, desperate hunger *had* to lessen.

When it became clear that the sizzling in his veins had no intention of diminishing on its own, Ty cursed, loud and vehement. Then he crossed himself, murmured a second apology in just as many minutes, and staggered down the church steps.

## Chapter Two

Sitting on the floor with his head pressed between his knees, Jud closed his eyes and thought of Derek. Only instead of long black hair, he saw spiky brown strands. And in the place of a narrow, clean-shaven face with twin dimples, he glimpsed prominent cheekbones, an angular jaw shadowed with stubble well past five-o'clock, and startling full lips.

A growl tickled the back of his throat. His nostrils flared and his head lifted, smacking against the wall behind him. The rhythmic *thud-thud-thud* of his skull whacking brick scattered some of the irritation jabbing at him.

That still left the lust. Ty had been gone for over ten minutes, yet even now hunger clung to Jud like a second skin, enfolding him in need and soul-deep longing. The echo of the man's touch still lingered on his palm.

Ty's handshake had been strong, his hands large and powerful. Images of those hands roaming his body consumed him, making it impossible to think of anything else.

Pining after someone he couldn't have wasn't new to Jud. He felt like that most nights, when he lay awake until the wee hours of the morning, thinking of the way things could have been. Of the way things *should* have been.

But that was different. He thought of his lover then, and the desperate desire was no more than what he'd always felt for Derek.

Tonight's lustful sensations put every indecent thought he'd ever had about Derek to shame. Derek had been able to arouse him with a look or a careless touch, but never like that. Never so he couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but fear he'd come on the spot from the ridiculous tremors and wicked, wicked need.

“Well...he was handsome.”



The woman again. Her deep voice rumbled with a soft purr that made him picture her kneeling before Ty like an attention-starved kitten, rubbing her cheek on the inside of his thigh. For some absurd reason, the image socked him with a wallop of jealousy.

He pushed himself off the ground, heedless of the ghost standing right in front of him. He walked through it, shivering slightly at the feel of cold, ethereal matter against his skin. “Yeah, well. That's all he had going for him.”

“Really?” The woman drifted toward him. “He seemed nice enough from where I was standing.”

“Maybe you should have been sitting down.”

Her face took on a soft, emotive glow. She circled him, her head cocked ever so slightly in what he interpreted as an inquisitive challenge. “So what you're saying, then, is that you didn't like him. Not one bit.”

The raging turmoil still sizzling in Jud's groin tightened his sac. His cock ached, begging to be touched. He gritted his teeth. The infernal longing would go away just as soon as he could do something about the maddening lust.

Derek would take care of everything when he finally arrived. One touch, one kiss, and the turbulent desire Ty had awakened would turn from aimless lust into an emotion fueled by tenderness and true intimacy. Soon, it would no longer be just hollow sexual frustration. It would mean something. It would be *real*.

“Not one bit.”

Even as the words left Jud's mouth, he knew they weren't true. If Jud had been someone else, someone less devoted, someone less concerned with keeping a promise he'd made—a promise that meant *everything*—he wouldn't have hesitated in agreeing to help Ty with his supernatural problem.

Not to find the ghost. Ultimately, his abilities made such tasks trivial. No, it wasn't the rogue spirit that intrigued Jud. It was the way Ty had looked at him.

Beneath the unnatural hunger that the handshake had awakened lay another emotion. He'd seen it in Ty's dark gaze when the man had turned to walk away. It had been brief, no more than a flicker of reaction, but it had unsettled Jud even more than his body's response to Ty.

*Pity.*

An anxious flutter beat against Jud's stomach. He'd thought he hid his loneliness so well. He'd worked hard at keeping up pretenses, and he believed he'd gotten pretty good at acting normal in social situations. Hell, even his friends no longer interrogated him about his lack of a love life.

Although, that was probably because he no longer *had* any friends.

Now it was just him, and the ghosts, and Father Chuck. Damn if that didn't sound like the pathetic start to a bad joke. *A hermit, a ghost, and a priest walk into a church—*

“He would want you to go.”

There was something in Jersey Girl's voice that made Jud's pulse hammer a little faster. “Who?”

The woman's ghostly form winked out of existence, and for a moment Jud feared he'd lost her. But then she reappeared, right beside him this time. Her ruby red lips curled into a small smile. “You know who.”

Something within Jud's chest went hard and cold. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

“I do.” Her eyes, a pale green color, turned paler still. “Better than you know. Many of us never had what you and Derek shared. And yet...some of us did. But we left it behind. We moved on. So should you.”

“You're saying I should just give up?” Anger jolted him, blending with a sorrow so unbearable it felt like the last decade's worth of grief pooled together in his chest. It pressed down against his lungs, making it hard to breathe. “That I should leave the church and abandon Derek?”

“Derek's not here, is he? But someone needs your help, Jud.”

“I don't want to help.” His voice sounded sullen and raw, even to his own ears. “I want to sit here until my dead lover shows up, then I want to suck his cock and let him fuck me into oblivion. That's what I want to do.”

The ghost inclined her head. They'd gathered quite a crowd now, Jud noticed. A small gaggle of spirits closed in around him, their colorful garments at odds with their nearly transparent forms.

“Be that as it may, your ability is a gift. You should use it to help others.”

“Fuck them. Who are they to me? I never asked for this *gift*,” Jud spat out, fury turning to dismay. “It came to me the night when...when—”

“When Derek died.”

Jud's head snapped up. “Yes,” he murmured. “You all came, but he didn't. Not for another year.” And God, how he'd hated that never-ending year. Suddenly alone, bereft of the only person who'd meant anything to him, Jud loathed the emptiness that his life became.

After Derek's death, his life had changed beyond recognition in less than three months. He lost his cushy job as a corporate attorney, moved out of the apartment he should have shared with Derek, sold his car. Only by the grace of Father Chuck had he found a new place to live. His one-room bachelor pad was a converted attic just above the Holy Outpost church. Father Chuck said it was good for him to be so close to the spirits he helped.

Jud had only wanted to be close to the place where Derek took his last breath.

At first, he resented the ghosts that gravitated toward him. They looked to him to settle old scores, solve murders, give messages to loved ones. All he wanted—all he'd *ever* wanted—was more time with Derek.

And then, as though by magic, he had it. For twenty-four hours, once a year, he had the happy ending that had been snatched from him.

Life became more bearable, just like that. Knowing all he had to do was survive the year, Jud started looking for ways to make time pass quicker. He offered his services to the LVPD, and was at first greeted with skepticism and a heavy dose of mockery, but soon earned the officers' grudging respect.

But through all those changes, one thing remained constant: his devotion to Derek, cemented by the promise he'd made.

*“I swear to you that there will never be another. Never. Not for as long as I live.”*

And there hadn't been. Not once in those ten long years had Jud broken the most important vow he'd ever made. He'd been tempted a few times, but lust was a fleeting sensation. It came and went, meaning about as much as an involuntary shiver in the wake of a cold breeze.

His erection gave a slow throb. Jud gritted his teeth, reached down, and palmed the length of his cock. A shudder passed through him, culminating low in his balls. Waves of desire lapped at his groin. If he didn't know any better, he'd say his own body mocked him.

"Tell me he's not coming," Jud said, fixing Jersey Girl with a fierce stare. "Tell me you know that beyond a shadow of a doubt."

The woman shook her head, loosening a few blonde strands from her teased updo. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not my place to divulge the secrets of others."

A candle fizzled and died out, plunging the sacristy in deeper shadows. Jud rubbed his eyes. "Derek has secrets now?" In life, they'd never kept anything from one another.

The woman lifted a shoulder as though in apology. Her red lips stretched into a thin, hesitant smile. "We all do."

"Right. And you're bound to keep them. Dead men...err...women...tell no tales and all that."

"Just because we can speak to you, doesn't mean we can tell you everything you wish to know. There are rules against that sort of thing. And the price..." She shuddered, her brows furrowing. "The price we pay for breaking them is steep indeed. So understand what I risk when I tell you to go after this man. Find Ty. Help him."

Caught up in the urgency of the ghost's words, Jud didn't realize he'd started moving toward the door until his hand closed around the knob. He hesitated briefly, then turned and pinned Jersey Girl with a hard stare. "You stay here. When Derek comes, tell him...tell him I'll be back. Make sure he doesn't leave."

Although he'd spoken to one ghost in particular, the half dozen spirits who'd gathered around, including Neil, the cowboy police lieutenant, nodded in unison. Jud had grown used to the otherworldly sight of ghosts drifting around him, but the choreographed movement of all those bobbing unearthly heads chilled him.

As he stepped outside the sacristy, something loosened in his chest. The grief that had been his constant companion for so long eased a little, giving him room to breathe unfettered. He quickened his pace and headed for the exit.

He'd descended the ten steps down to the sidewalk before he realized he had no clue where to go from here. Ty hadn't exactly left a forwarding address on his way out.

Unnerved, Jud glanced down the street toward the Strip. The fluorescent glow of casinos in the peak of their trade, even at this ungodly hour, made him squint. Electronic billboards glistened against a sky that would have been black if not for the rainbow-colored neon tubing splashing its signature lights across it.

From where he stood, Jud could see Tom Jones's giant lightbulb head. It stood out plainly among a multitude of throbbing, flickering, twinkling billboards. There were other sights too, this time of the year. One of the casinos shot red and green fireworks into the sky at close intervals, while another had propped a skimpily clad fifty-foot-tall Mrs. Santa on their roof.

Jud cringed. He'd lived here his entire life, and he'd yet to understand the allure of so much excess. This is where people came to party, lose their life's savings, and give in to the temptation of indulging in extramarital affairs with cheap hookers.

Jud had once asked a tourist to describe the appeal. "*Vegas is where you go to make fantasies come true,*" the man had replied as he slammed another fistful of cash onto the blackjack felt. That much, Jud hadn't been able to argue with. He knew better than anyone that impossible dreams came to life around here.

*Great. Now what?*

Annoyed, Jud kicked at a clump of grass eking out from between a crack in the sidewalk. And froze when he felt someone's breath on the back of his neck.

"Looking for me?"

He darted a quick, frantic glance toward the church. He could still say no. If he had half a brain, he'd turn around, stroll back into the sacristy, and wait until daylight. He owed Derek that much.

He might have done just that if Ty hadn't picked that moment to step around and stand in front of him. One glimpse at the fevered hope written so plainly on Ty's features, and Jud lost the battle before it even really started.

"Yes," he heard himself say. "Take me home."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ty had always thought his ancient Jeep pickup was perfect, with its wood-paneled dashboard and beat-up leather seats. Cozy, comfortable, unpretentious—sending just the right message of ruggedness and old-time charm.

And until Jud Hess had climbed into the passenger's seat, he'd had no reason to doubt that belief. Now, with Jud sitting just inches away, he realized just how *old* the damn thing looked. Jud belonged in an expensive sports car, something sleek and gorgeous like a dreamy little Miata or an exquisite Aston Martin.

It wasn't that Jud had said anything unflattering about Ty's ride. He didn't even make a face when he caught a whiff of the lingering aroma of fast food drifting through the cab. But there was something about the man...a sophistication and natural poise that made Ty feel suddenly inadequate.

He cleared his throat and groped for small talk, needing to fill the distance between them with something he could control. "Thanks for coming." He grimaced at how lame that sounded, but pressed on. "What changed your mind?"

Jud glanced down at his hands. "I realized you were right."

"About?"

"The guy I was waiting for. There's a good chance he's not coming tonight, so I thought I'd make myself useful." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It was either that or go mad."

Ty tightened his fingers around the steering wheel and focused on changing lanes. Traffic was lighter at this time of night than he was used to, but he had to be even more alert than usual. Whether tourists or locals, those behind the wheel at this hour were likely inebriated, otherwise entertained by whatever overpriced passenger they'd picked up, or both.

"Look, I'm sorry about what I said. I don't know your situation. It just seemed to me that whoever convinced you to spend Christmas alone in a church didn't have your best interests in mind."

Jud's fingers twitched, and Ty caught sight of his hands clenching into fists on his knees. "You're right. You don't know a damn thing about me."

"Fair enough," Ty conceded. "But I'd like to."

The air thickened between them. He could practically feel the tension rolling off the other man, and he fought the urge to roll down the window.

It seemed like hours before Jud spoke again. “Bad idea,” he said at last. “I’ll help you with your ghost situation, but that’s all.”

Ty nodded and struggled to ignore the brick of disappointment settling heavy in his gut. He’d known all along this was a business arrangement, nothing more. Just because he hadn’t brought a man to his apartment in over a year didn’t mean this was anything resembling a date.

He shifted in his seat, his jeans pulling at the swell of his groin. Damn this infernal lust, anyway. He never had problems focusing on the matter at hand when he hired a plumber or an electrician. “How much do you charge?”

Jud cocked his head. It was the first time he’d looked at Ty since they’d climbed into the Jeep. A promise-filled thrill shot up Ty’s veins when their gazes met and held. A moment later, he had to force himself to turn back to the road.

“I don’t do this for money. It’s a gift.” Jud practically spat the last word, and the venom in his voice startled Ty. “I’m told I owe it to the world to use it.”

Ty opened his mouth to reply, but Jud bolted upright and gestured out the window. “Where are we going?”

He brought the Jeep to a stop at a red light and turned to face his passenger. “I live in a high-rise on East Desert Inn. It’s not too far from here.”

Jud gaped, openmouthed. He had lips to die for, Ty noticed, as another jolt of need darted straight to his cock. It would be so simple to slide his hand behind the man’s head and pull him close so he could possess that luscious mouth.

The color drained from Jud’s face. “W-what floor?”

“Seventh. Why?”

Jud groaned and let his head fall back against the seat. “What apartment number?” He held up a hand before Ty could answer. “No, wait, don’t tell me: 732. And you’re at 150 East Desert Inn.”

Now it was Ty’s turn to gape in astonishment.

“Am I wrong?”

Ty shook his head, perplexed. He slid the Jeep into gear and made a right off Las Vegas Boulevard onto East Desert Inn. The building he'd called home for almost a decade rose up before them, light gray against the backdrop of the well-lit night sky.

"How did you know?"

Jud was silent for a long time. Ty turned into the tenant parking area and brought the Jeep to a stop in his designated spot.

It wasn't until they were in the elevator that Jud said, "I used to live here."

"In this building? No shit."

A small smile touched the edges of Jud's mouth. Ty's heart did an uncanny little flutter at the sight.

"No shit," Jud said. "It's been a long time, though. When did you move in?"

"Almost ten years ago."

Jud sank his teeth into his lower lip. The fluorescent overhead light scattered pale highlights in his hair when he ducked his head. "That was just after I moved out."

A jolt of understanding slammed into Ty, so forceful it nearly knocked him off his feet. He tightened his fingers around the railing that ran along the perimeter of the elevator car. "The furniture, the boxes...that was all your stuff in my place."

Jud lifted his gaze, and the turmoil in his eyes knocked Ty for another unexpected loop. Ty's pulse sped. The agony in his groin shifted, transforming into a slow, steady throb.

"I had no choice," Jud said as the doors slid open. "I couldn't stay there, and I couldn't be near all those memories."

Ty yearned to ask more, but Jud walked out of the elevator and turned left down the hall. He came to a stop in front of a cream-colored door. The number 732 stood out in coppery contrast to the light colors of the walls and carpet.

Neither man spoke as Ty slid his key into the lock and turned it, then pushed the door open.

Jud took a tentative step forward. He hesitated and cast a glance over his shoulder at Ty, as though asking for permission.

Ty nodded. "Yeah, go ahead."



Jud stepped inside and flicked on the light. Just like in the Jeep, Ty was once again struck by how damn *plain* his stuff was. The living room that opened right off the small entryway was sparsely furnished. A coffee table sat between a well-used leather couch and a TV. There were no pictures on the wall, no pieces of art, no colors anywhere with the exception of a tiny plastic Christmas tree he'd rescued from work and decorated with sad-looking pieces of tinsel.

He should have replaced the furniture with more modern pieces a long time ago, but function over form had always been his motto. He'd chosen this apartment partly because it was already furnished, though it was clear by the boxes stacked up everywhere that whoever had intended to live here hadn't done so. Ty had left his last place with nothing but the clothes on his back and a few bruises to show for a relationship that had lasted two years. He'd wanted no reminders, just a clean slate.

The building's super had been in the process of carting out boxes from the apartment and hurling them in a Dumpster out back when Ty had gone to see the place. He'd quickly stopped the man, asking if he could keep them instead.

The super didn't mind, and Ty had been grateful he didn't have to spend his meager savings all at once to make the apartment habitable. The large furniture pieces were in good shape: clean and inviting. He'd also gone through the boxes and kept what he needed. Dishes, pots and pans, a few other items. Most of the stuff looked new. He drew the line at clothes and bedsheets, so he tucked the rest of the boxes in storage.

"You kept this," Jud said, running a hand along the back of the couch.

Ty grunted a vague reply and folded his hands behind his back. He knew what would happen if he touched the wrong item, and since the damned ghost had moved in, nothing was safe. The last thing he needed was to blow his load in his pants in the span of three seconds flat while his guest looked on. So he stood ramrod straight, far away from anything that could be deemed even remotely threatening.

Jud's jaw tightened. His gaze slid over each item individually as though cataloging everything in the room. Aside from a few furniture items and a handful of odds and ends, much of the stuff belonged to Ty. Magazines lay scattered across the coffee table: woodworking trade periodicals and a few back issues of Maxim. A coffee mug still held the cold remnants of that morning's brew.

The foot-tall Christmas tree sat on a wooden chair in front of the window. Jud gravitated over to it, as though drawn by the glint of tinsel and the shiny metallic flicker from the sole real decoration Ty had been able to find—a set of two silver bells, small and delicate, tied together with a strip of red satin ribbon.

A light tinkling sound carried through the living room when Jud nudged the bells to ringing. He drew his hand back as if he'd been burned. "Those are mine." There was no inflection in Jud's voice. Only the slight flaring of his nostrils betrayed his inner turmoil.

Ty grimaced, no longer certain bringing Jud here had been a good idea. He'd been curious about the last tenant when he moved in, but as years passed and no one came to claim any of the abandoned items, he'd stopped wondering. "Right. I gathered most of these things were yours."

"I don't want anything else." Jud uttered each word slowly, adamantly. His tone left no room for discussion. "Just the bells."

Ty's composure wavered under Jud's fierce gaze. "They're yours. Just as soon as you rid me of my ghost."

"These bells belong to me. I don't need to work for them to take what's already mine."

"True enough. So humor me. Can you help or not?"

Jud rolled one shoulder in a half-shrug. "I can feel your spirit. It's..." A flush crept up the column of his throat. "Sexual in nature."

Embarrassed by the strength of his response to energy put out by a damned ghost, Ty averted his gaze. The longing had been bad before, but Jud's presence made the unfiltered lust sizzling through his bloodstream a thousand times worse.

"I know," he whispered at last. "That's the problem."

"Ah." Jud swallowed audibly, looking as uncomfortable as Ty felt. "The...sexual cravings. They're the ghost's doing."

"Until tonight, the effect has been limited to inanimate objects in this apartment. If I touch just about anything while I'm here, I end up teetering on the brink of..." He made an embarrassed, throat-clearing sound. "Well, you know."

Jud sat on the edge of the sofa. He leaned forward, arms braced on his knees, hands clasped in front of him. "Maybe that's a good thing." He fixed Ty with a steady gaze, and some

of the awkward tension between them dissipated. “Maybe we can use the spirit's erotic connection to you to lure it out of hiding.”

Too many possibilities flittered through Ty's head, and all of them suddenly seemed like very, very good ideas. He struggled to maintain an impassive pose, when all he really wanted to do was reach down and ease the torment in his cock. “What did you have in mind?”

Jud leaned back, splaying one arm out along the back of the couch. “You may not like it.”

Ty raised an eyebrow. “Tell me anyway.”

“How do you feel about getting naked?”

## Chapter Three

Every part of Jud's body burned with hunger. His chest, every time he breathed. His lips, wanting to be kissed. And his cock—*oh God*, his cock was on fire. Ty's touch had woken something in him, something deep and dark and dangerous, something that wouldn't go away.

He'd never been this aroused in his entire life. And certainly not for such a prolonged period of time. He couldn't remember ever wanting someone so much, and a stranger...God, *never*. He hadn't even felt this hopeless need with—

*Derek.*

Guilt blended with the intolerable lust to form a miasma of emotions Jud couldn't control. He needed to escape the shameless need thundering through his body. Then he'd be able to think straight, focus on the task at hand, and get the hell out of here before things got any worse.

“You want me to strip down to nothing?”

*Too late.* He was so far outside his comfort zone, it wouldn't have surprised him if he glanced out the window and saw the red dust of Mars instead of the Vegas skyline.

He nearly groaned when Ty's hand went to his belt and hovered there. “Jud?”

Part of him didn't want to answer. He could still back out of this with some dignity intact. It would mean rubbing his cock raw to rid himself of the searing heat of arousal that had torpedoed its way into his groin, but it would be preferable to the alternative.

*What if the need doesn't go away? What if it's tied to this man, this ghost, this night?*

“Yes,” he heard himself say before his mind could spiral into a swirl of questions with no answers. “Let's give our friendly ghost what he wants.”

*Give me what I want.*

The sound of Ty's belt buckle snapping undone brought a flush to Jud's skin. He sank further into the leather couch. The fabric seemed to recognize him, molding to his form.

“He's seen me naked before, you know. The ghost.” Ty clarified when Jud didn't answer. “Are you sure this will help?”

“It'll help.” The words came out harsher than he'd intended, but if he'd softened his tone, he was certain Ty would be able to see right through the thinly veiled pretext. The ghost might have seen Ty naked, but Jud hadn't. And he desperately wanted to.

He'd only watch. That was all. He'd break no promises, shatter no vows. He'd walk out of this apartment with a clean conscience.

And a hell of a painful hard-on.

“Ghosts are predictable creatures,” Jud said, glad for the ability to focus on something he knew a lot about. “Especially carnal spirits like yours. They're attracted to any sensation strong enough to penetrate the veil between worlds and arouse them. Longing, lust, sexual intercourse.”

Ty's eyes widened and turned smoky with unrestrained hunger. He dropped his hand from his belt, and his jeans pooled around his ankles. Only a thin pair of worn boxer shorts covered his erection, and his cock pressed against the blue silk, straining for release.

Jud realized his mistake instantly.

“Sexual activity of any kind,” he said quickly, scrambling to undo the damage his careless words had done. “Masturbation, I mean.”

Ty's face creased with the force of an unexpected grin. It was broad and genuine, and damn near took Jud's breath away.

“So let me get this straight. First I strip for you; then I wank off. This is *quite* the exorcism. Anything else you want me to do? Maybe I can bring out my favorite dildo and fuck myself into a frenzy.”

Jud had trouble forming a coherent reply. He gaped as images of Ty thrusting a dildo between his perfect ass cheeks flittered through his mind.

Ty chuckled and kicked off his jeans. He was tall and muscular, perfectly proportioned without encroaching on bodybuilder territory. Damn near flawless. When he moved, his well-defined muscles shifted smoothly beneath his tan skin. It took him three steps to close the distance between them.

He came to a stop in front of the couch, close enough that Jud's knees bumped his shin. Before Jud could move away, Ty leaned forward and propped one hand against the armrest and the other on the back of the couch, effectively trapping Jud between his brawny arms.

He bent his head and his breath slid along Jud's earlobe, sending a shudder through his body. "It's big and black," Ty whispered. "The dildo, I mean. It takes a bit of lube to work it into myself, but it's worth the effort. Do you want me to show you?"

Jud closed his eyes and swallowed a groan. This had gone far enough. With each second that passed, he slipped closer to the point of no return. The point where the ghost wouldn't matter. Where Derek wouldn't matter.

And he couldn't allow himself to go there. Already he could feel his hesitation melting away, and he clung to it fiercely, desperate to maintain control.

"N-no." He almost sighed with relief when the word left his mouth. Until that moment, he wasn't sure he had it in him to deny Ty anything he asked.

"I don't believe you." Teeth closed around his earlobe, tugging at the sensitive flesh.

The burst of sensation he'd experienced the last time Ty touched him now amplified, buzzing through his veins like a siren's song. It drew him forward, until his mouth grazed Ty's cheek. His lips sizzled, trembling with a deep humming sensation that had him wondering what would happen if their lips met. If they kissed.

Suddenly, he couldn't wait any longer to find out. With a groan, he trailed his lips along Ty's jaw. Stubble tickled his mouth and he relished the rough texture until he found Ty's mouth. Glossy silk replaced the coarse bristles.

For a paralyzing moment, he feared the raw sexual energy would lead to something wild and uncontrollable. He thought there'd be gnashing teeth, blood, pain.

And then Ty opened for him, and all concerns fled Jud's mind—along with every last logical thought. The kiss was slow and careful. It started as a leisurely exploration of tongues and bloomed into an intoxicating caress. Each slip of Ty's tongue seemed connected to a magical string that had been tied around the base of Jud's shaft. Every lick tugged at that string, fueling his desperate need.

He reached up, his hands twining around the back of Ty's head. The man's hair was too short to grip, so Jud massaged his scalp, then ran his palms down Ty's neck to broad shoulders,

where his fingertips dug into hard, muscular flesh. He was intimately aware of Ty's every breath, of the man's throbbing cock against his hip.

In the past, Jud had always kissed with his eyes closed. This time, he couldn't. The nuances flickering over Ty's face enthralled him. He deepened the kiss, thrilled with the way Ty's skin creased around his eyes, the way his eyebrows furrowed—even the small birthmark at the man's left temple fascinated him.

Through it all, the connection that had formed between them at their initial touch lingered, but was less abrupt now. Perhaps Jud had grown used to it, or perhaps the sensation itself had shifted, transforming into something else. But whatever the reason, it *felt* different. Deeper. More of a rich, rapturous throb in the pit of his stomach, spreading through his groin, his legs, his chest, like the slow burn of aged whiskey.

Ty broke the kiss first. He ducked his head, avoiding the eye contact Jud so desperately craved. Instead, he slid his stubble-covered cheek against the column of Jud's throat and whispered, "What if I asked you to watch?"

Jud bit down on the inside of his cheek. Ty's taste still flooded his mouth, rich and exotic, like espresso with a hint of spice.

"It might draw out the ghost," Ty continued. "And it'll give us both what we want."

"This isn't what I want."

"Oh? What do you want, then?"

*I want you. All of you. Inside me, around me, in my mouth, in my ass...everywhere.*

"I want..." Jud's voice trailed off, and he squeezed his eyes shut. Images flashed across his eyelids, each more guilt-inducing than the last. Derek, on his knees, in the kitchen that lay just beyond the wall of this living room, less than six feet away. Derek, bent over the kitchen counter. Derek, lying broken in the sacristy.

"I want to turn back the clock ten years." Jud opened his eyes and found Ty watching him. "Do you know what that's like? Have you ever wanted a second chance?"

Ty lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. "Life's too short for regrets."

"Yeah." Jud agreed, a lump forming in his throat. "Life's too short."

Ty ran the pad of his thumb across Jud's bottom lip, drawing a startled gasp. The man's slow, gentle strokes aroused as much as they soothed his tormented soul.

"So give in. Just this once, live your life as though you weren't going to regret a damn thing in the morning."

The lingering burn of dark desire simmering in Jud's veins made it impossible to think straight. No regrets? What would it feel like not to have second thoughts, not to wonder *what if*?

No sorrow. No guilt. Just pure, selfish pleasure. He could do what he wanted, when he wanted, to whoever he wanted.

His gaze raked over Ty, who stood back, letting Jud look his fill. Ty's T-shirt hung down over the top of his boxers, obscuring his chest. A dark sprinkling of hair shadowed his legs, defining lean calves and strong thighs. Beneath the silk of his boxers, his cock jutted out proudly, pressing into the fabric. A drop of moisture turned the light blue fabric a dark shade of sapphire.

Ty followed the line of Jud's stare, and the corner of his mouth quirked up. "The way I see it, we each have a big problem. I've got a ghost I need banished back to hell, or wherever it came from. And you need a good, long fuck."

A shiver rolled down Jud's spine. He pressed his lips together, unwilling to utter the word he so desperately wanted to shout out.

*Yes.*

Ty slid his hand beneath the waistband of his boxers. The silk tented, bunching against the added bulk. Jud could make out the shape of Ty's fist as he pumped his cock in slow, maddening strokes. "I think we can help each other."

"I can't..." Jud's tongue darted out to moisten his lips. "I gave my word I wouldn't be with another. It's not you. It's just that I—"

"Whatever, man. I don't have to fuck you." Without warning, Ty spun around and stormed out of the room.

Jud's mouth hung open. He bolted to his feet and stared at the darkened hallway where Ty had disappeared. This was it? What about the ghost? And the strange chemistry he and Ty shared? What about the promise of a "good, long fuck?"



Disappointment settled bone-deep, crushing in its intensity. For a moment, Jud found it hard to breathe.

And then he heard Ty's steady footsteps against the hardwood floor, and his knees wobbled. He fought to regain his equilibrium, but before he could grab on to the couch, an object flew at his head.

Reacting on instinct alone, Jud caught it in midair. His fingers wrapped around something cylindrical and smooth. Heart thudding against his ribcage, he lowered his hand and ogled the item he held. Black, just like Ty said. At least nine inches long. Sturdy, with a soft jelly surface and exaggerated veined texture.

"I've never seen anyone more in need of a rough fucking in my life." Ty's voice boomed through the room, unnaturally loud. "But you're not ready for me to bend you over and take you the way I think you should be taken. I get that. So...fine. Do it yourself."

If Ty hadn't been so damned turned on, the look on Jud's face would have made him howl with laughter.

Jud held the dildo in one outstretched hand, as far away from his body as he could get it while still clinging to the offensive object. He'd hooked his thumb and forefinger just beneath the flared head of the faux cock, and if not for the fact that his mouth hung open in bewildered shock, he'd have looked ready to stroke the thick length of the toy.

"Don't worry, it's clean," Ty assured him in a sultry whisper. "I take good care of the cocks I play with."

Jud just stared at him. His mouth worked as though he struggled to say something, but couldn't find the words.

"It's been a while, huh?" In two short heartbeats, Ty had crossed the living room floor and dropped to his knees in front of Jud. "Here...let me help."

He pinched Jud's zipper tab and lowered it. The sound of the metal teeth grinding against one another caused a sharp edge of lust to bite into his groin. Before Jud could protest, he'd made quick work of the fastenings.

He tugged sharply on the waistband. The breath left his lungs in a *whoosh* as Jud's jeans slipped down his thighs, baring the most beautiful cock Ty had ever seen.

“No underwear.” He'd meant the observation to come out casual, but his voice pitched up a few octaves, like that of a teenager coming face-to-groin with his first lover's dick.

Jud brought the dildo down between them. He brandished it like a sword, as though the toy could keep Ty at bay. If anything, the sight of Jud gripping a cock in his white-knuckled fist only served to fuel the lust wound tightly around him.

The musky scent of Jud's groin floated to him, amplifying his urgent need for release. Wanting nothing more than to bury his nose in the dark curls, Ty leaned forward and nuzzled his cheek against Jud's thigh. The texture of soft hair against his skin made him sigh in contentment. But his bliss only lasted a moment.

Jud pulled away sharply, leaving him empty and bereft. “I thought you said you wouldn't—”

“Fuck you?” Ty finished for him. Frustration gnawed at his gut. “Yeah. I meant it too. But I didn't say anything about not sucking your cock.”

A ripple ran through Jud's legs, and he visibly struggled to hold himself upright. He took two steps backward, moving not so far that Ty couldn't reach him just by stretching out a hand, but far enough.

The tip of Jud's pink tongue swept over his lower lip, and Ty nearly groaned. He remembered how that tongue felt as it caressed his lips, how much he'd loved sucking on it, how silky and hot it had been inside his mouth. And he couldn't help but picture it sliding up and down the length of his shaft, swirling just beneath the head, lapping at his balls.

“I'm”—Jud shook his head, then tried again—“I'm not sure I can move any farther. Not without”—his voice dropped to a barely audible whisper—“embarrassing myself.”

Ty grinned. Damn, but Jud was too cute for words. He'd been with inexperienced men before, but none of his other lovers had ever been so wonderfully timid.

“Then let me embarrass you.”

He slithered forward on all fours, crawling the few steps it took to reach Jud. The man's battle with restraint showed in every tense muscle. His thighs quivered, his belly rippled beneath his shirt, and he held the dildo like his life depended on that death grip.

Ty clutched Jud's hips and raised his head. He expected another protest; hell, he wouldn't have been surprised if Jud had thunked him upside the head with the dildo. But he took the risk

anyway, knowing that nothing would ease the torment streaming through his veins like tasting Jud's perfect cock.

Flushed red with agonized arousal, the head of Jud's rod seeped clear precum. A drop spilled over the top and ran the length of the shaft under Ty's lustful gaze.

He slanted his mouth over the tip, then leaned forward and brought his lips down on the silky skin. Heat sizzled through him. Jud arched his hips and let out a wild, unfettered cry, something between a growl and a sob. A wave of guilt hit Ty so hard that for a moment he mistook it for his own and nearly drew back.

The emotion fled as quickly as it had slammed into him, leaving behind the welcome burn of raw lust. He slid down farther along Jud's thick shaft, taking the man's cock as far as he could down his throat.

Jud shuddered. He reached out to steady himself and his free hand cupped the back of Ty's skull. The sleek silicon surface of the dildo smacked against Ty's temple as Jud held onto his head.

And then all bets were off. Jud gave up the last remnants of his tightly corded control and bucked savagely, fucking Ty's mouth with a fury and intensity Ty hadn't thought him capable of.

Not that he had any time for thinking. Clinging to the rhythmic suction was all he could do just to keep breathing. Jud's cock drove into him, sliding between his lips and along his tongue. Coarse hair smacked his nose, and he breathed in lungfuls of Jud's earthy scent with every thrust. The flavor of salty precum flooded his taste buds, and he sucked harder, yearning for a closer, more meaningful connection.

His soul cried out for something he couldn't name. A craving unlike the predictable lust worked its way through him, making him hunger for an intimacy he couldn't reach through sex alone.

Stunned by the intensity of the longing, he focused on something else. Like the way his body reacted in tandem to each one of Jud's thrusts. His shaft throbbed, and his balls drew up, painfully tight.

He sucked and sucked, pouring every ounce of that unexplainable longing into each long pull. Jud let out a startled cry, then pumped his hips forcefully once more before he stilled, his muscles turning to stone.

Ty braced himself for the rush of hot seed, and when it came a heartbeat later, he wasn't disappointed. The taste of musk and heat and man flooded his tongue and raced down his throat. He swallowed, but didn't bother to suck Jud's cock clean.

The still erect shaft slipped from his mouth with a *pop* and a dribble of semen and saliva. Before Jud could say a word, Ty lunged to his feet, grabbed his wrist, and shoved him facedown onto the couch. He climbed on top of Jud's splayed body, straddling the back of his thighs.

Jud wriggled beneath him, but must have realized that his struggles were useless against Ty's much larger, stronger physique. He stopped moving and darted a glance over his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"I lied," Ty ground out between clenched teeth. "I *am* going to fuck you."

## Chapter Four

The right side of Jud's face pressed into the couch. Old, worn leather squished his cheek, forcing one eye closed. Anxiety and euphoria wound through him, tightening every muscle. Cum covered his spent cock, smearing the wetness against his stomach as Ty's body pressed down on him from above. Through the myriad uncomfortable sensations, one thought dove to the surface.

*My ass is his for the taking.*

"Ty..." He gasped for air, unsure what he wanted to beg for, but as certain as he'd ever been that it wasn't for Ty to stop.

The other man leaned over him. "I'm going to get up. While I'm gone, I don't want you to move a muscle. You get me?"

The huskiness in Ty's voice heightened Jud's hunger another notch. Lust coiled in his lower belly, stirring his docile shaft back to semihardness. "Yes," he croaked out.

The pressure on his spine eased. He felt the man rise, heard him leave the room. If there was ever a time for Jud to flee, this was it. He could scoop up his jeans and be out the door in ten seconds flat.

Somewhere in the apartment, he sensed the presence of Ty's unwelcome ghost. It wasn't a malevolent feeling like he'd expected, but it was strong, calling to him with an abrupt blast of bright emotion.

*Encouragement.* The spirit wanted him to stay.

So he stayed. Not that he'd really considered leaving for longer than a fraction of a second. He told himself he was here to use his "gift," to set a soul at ease. But he knew, deep in his heart, that the only peace he wanted to find was his own.

When Ty returned, the world around Jud blurred. His eyelids drifted closed. He didn't want to see what the man had in store for him. Right now, he just wanted—*needed*—to feel something beside the grief and loneliness that had been his constant companions for much too long.

A solid palm clutched his hip, pulling him off the couch just far enough to slide a pillow beneath his groin. His cock settled into the downy softness, and he sighed with unexpected contentment.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Ty said. He spoke slowly, quietly, as one might address a frightened animal. "And if at any point you want me to stop, you just say that. All right?"

Jud nodded. He was way past stopping. He needed this. Needed to be touched, and wanted, and loved. Today was supposed to be sacred: a day to spend with his lover, a day to savor.

Whether Jud liked it or not, Derek was dead, and he wasn't. From communing with the spirits, he understood better than anyone that the divide between their two worlds was permanent. It could be breached temporarily, but it could never be sidestepped completely.

Ty's hand on his hip felt real in a way that Derek's touch hadn't in over a decade. Jud hadn't realized how much he'd missed that connection until now.

The scrape of Ty's fingernails over his exposed balls caused a deep shiver to start low in his groin and spread outward, until he shuddered with a violent quiver.

"Easy there," Ty soothed. He pulled his hand away, and when his fingers returned, they were coated in lube. His grip tightened around Jud's hypersensitive sac and he squeezed, causing Jud's hips to lift from the pillow.

"I—"

"Shh..." Ty shifted down the length of the couch. "I know."

And he did. Jud couldn't wrap his brain around how it was possible, but Ty understood him like no one else had for years. Ty figured out just what he needed: when to be harsh and forceful, when to take it slow.

Right now, Jud needed his lover to go slow. He craved the intimacy of sweet, lengthy lovemaking, and it seemed that was exactly what Ty intended to give him.

Ty's lips pressed against the base of his spine. Jud started at the contact, his muscles twitching as Ty's determined tongue swept a trail down to his ass. Once there, Ty veered off course and dragged his mouth down Jud's left cheek. The hard scrape of stubble against his sensitive skin had Jud biting his lip to keep from groaning.

Ty left long, wet kisses in his wake. At random intervals, he added a quick bite or a gentle scratch with his teeth, never lingering, giving equal attention to both buttocks. He delved down farther, running his tongue along the crease where Jud's cheeks connected to his thighs, then moved lower still, all the way to the back of his knees.

The maddening kisses drove Jud weak with wanting. His passage clenched in eagerness, and he couldn't help but picture the sleek length of Ty's dildo, or—better yet—Ty's cock, seeking out his sorely neglected entrance.

Ty's breath wafted hotly against Jud's skin. “You could end all this. All you have to do is beg me to fuck you.”

Jud bit down on his lower lip. He wasn't ready to give in yet. Not if begging meant Ty would stop this slow infliction of mind-blowing pleasure.

“No begging, huh?” Ty sighed, but Jud thought the displeasure in his voice had been faked for his benefit. “Guess I'll just have to work harder.”

Jud's nostrils flared. The scent of his cum permeated the room, but he could smell Ty's excitement as well, a mix of male musk and sweat that made his mouth water. It took all his self-control not to say anything that could break the spell Ty had woven around him.

Ty's hand sneaked back to Jud's balls. He urged his thighs apart, and Jud obeyed without making a sound. Ty must have grabbed more lube, because his fingers were moist again as they sought, and found, Jud's puckered entrance. With his other hand, he lightly tugged on Jud's sac, causing a jolt of heat to slam furiously into his cock.

Jud moaned, faltering in his resolve to keep from begging. He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take, and he had the maddening feeling that Ty was only getting started. If he wanted, the man would do this all night. Jud could be at his mercy for hours while Ty toyed with him, awakening sensations he'd forgotten he could feel.

Light strokes in the valley between his cheeks didn't help Jud keep his composure. Ty applied just enough pressure to the sensitive area between his clenching hole and his balls to nudge another burst of ecstasy through his now rock-hard shaft. Precum dotted the tip of his crown, and Jud could feel it smearing against his belly. In a brief moment of clarity, he summoned a perverse illusion of Ty sleeping on this pillow, drawing in Jud's scent long after he was gone.

Carefully, Ty spread Jud's cheeks apart. Jud held his breath as the man pushed his index finger inside. When it slid in past the knuckle, Jud gasped and relaxed his muscles.

Waves of euphoric bliss crashed into him. With Derek, he'd always been the one on top. He loved to fuck his lover's perfect ass, but there'd been times when he would have given anything to have a hard cock buried to the hilt inside him too. Derek hadn't been interested, and Jud hadn't pushed.

But oh, how he'd missed this.

Ty added a second finger, stretching him wider. Jud felt the ring of muscle loosen, then contract, around the intrusion. And just when Jud feared he couldn't take anymore, Ty withdrew. The return of that hollow emptiness sliced him like a knife. Before he could protest, Ty returned, pressing something much bigger against his entrance. The dildo, no doubt.

"Relax," Ty said when Jud clenched instinctively. "I'll be gentle."

Jud knew he would. Despite having only met the man, he trusted him. "All right," he said, surprised to hear the breathless grittiness in his own voice.

"He speaks," Ty teased, brushing his knuckles against Jud's balls.

Jud grunted. Slick moisture coated his inner walls, and when Jud pushed the dildo inside him, pain and pleasure mixed together in an exotic blend that nearly made him come again. His body lurched, and he came up onto his knees, the underside of his erect cock now just brushing the pillow.

Ty hooked an arm around his waist, steadying him. "Easy, now. It's been a long time. We'll take it slow, yes?"

Jud's pulse jumped. He rocked back against the dildo, desperate to be fucked. "No. I need...fast and hard...please."

The muscles in Ty's arm tensed as he worked the dildo inside Jud with long, smooth glides. Jud's muscles quivered. He struggled to keep himself propped on his elbows.

"I know what you need," Ty whispered. "And when I finally have you impaled on my cock, I promise you'll get the ride of your life. For now, you're just going to have to deal with going at my speed."



He pulled the toy out of Jud's ass entirely, only to push it back in again even slower this time. Ripples of ecstasy erupted through Jud's veins as his ass shuddered around the thick length. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so open with someone other than Derek. So...*exposed*. Not just physically, though that had been hard enough, but emotionally as well.

Damn the man for having guessed the depth of his desperation; the acuteness of his need. Though the dildo filled his channel and his cock throbbed with the mounting pressure of another impending orgasm, it wasn't enough. He craved the unmistakable sensation of being stretched by a hard dick, being taken in rough ways; being filled with the warm rush of cum when his lover finally gave in to wild, feverish bliss demanding his complete surrender.

Jud licked his dry lips. He opened his mouth to ask for what he desired most. "I..." The words wouldn't come.

Ty grunted but didn't press Jud for more, though he had to be aching for his own release. He simply worked the dildo in and out of Jud's passage with infinite patience, varying the speed and depth of the strokes. Shallow then deep, two fast strokes followed by a slower one—it was enough to drive Jud out of his mind.

"I think..." Jud bit down on his lip. The abrupt flare of pain served to ground him. "I want—"

"I know."

Relief suffused Jud's veins. Maybe he wouldn't have to say it. Ty would just know, and he'd take him right here and now. After all, Jud was in no position to resist...not really. And as long as he didn't say the words, perhaps he could fool himself into thinking he was doing everything in his power to cling to a promise that should have long ago weakened its hold on him.

"But I still need to hear you say it."

Every muscle in Jud's body corded. He trembled, racked by excitement, and need, and guilt. Oh, God...so much guilt.

And still, the fevered desire built and built. It rose up in him like a tidal wave, constricting his lungs, making it hard to breathe. His knees quaked, and he found himself falling onto the pillow beneath his waist, crushing Ty's arm between the soft fabric and his body.

Ty didn't protest, didn't even pause in his slow, leisurely thrusts. He simply slid his arm out from underneath Jud and used his now free hand to cup Jud's balls.

"Your secret's safe with me," Ty murmured. "No one will ever have to know what we did here tonight."

Something sizzled down Jud's spine and the knots in his stomach loosened. The floodgates opened inside him, as though Ty's words had given him permission to speak.

"I want you. Fuck me..." He swallowed hard, gathered his courage and said, "Please."

Ty made a noise low in his throat, a sound full of wanting and eager playfulness. It made Jud's heart clench, and for a moment he wondered if he had done the right thing.

Doubt fled when Ty slipped the dildo from his ass and positioned his cock at his entrance. Nothing happened for the span of a few seconds, and Jud waited, no longer patient, as Ty slicked his cock with more lube.

"No need." Jud grunted, pressing back against the warm shaft in the valley between his cheeks. "You've prepped me enough."

Ty's darkly seductive chuckle turned Jud's blood molten. Desire sizzled, blasting into overdrive.

"If I'm not careful, you might beg me to do this again...and again."

The thought made Jud's head spin. He wasn't ready to go there yet, so he grunted something noncommittal and rocked his hips in further invitation.

Not that Ty seemed to need it. He splayed one palm at the base of Jud's spine and used his other hand to guide his cock inside with a forcefulness that made Jud gasp.

"Hard and fast, you said?" Ty's voice was breathy now, the tight control clearly slipping.

"Yes."

Ty slid in deeper yet, pinning Jud's body to the couch. Then he started to thrust, and raw pleasure chased every last shred of guilt and regret from Jud's mind.

A slow burn rolled through Jud's veins, fiery and intense. Heat caused his inner walls to clench around Ty's cock. His lover cried out and pushed in deeper, setting a quick, easy rhythm for both of them. Jud met every thrust with hip pistons of his own, his ass ramming upward each time Ty bore down on him.

Ty's balls slapped against his flesh, the sound acting like a euphoric aphrodisiac for Jud's already inflamed senses. His shaft ground against the pillow, chafing in the intensity of the rough glides. Pleasure built like a hurricane inside him. He couldn't get enough oxygen into his lungs. Every one of Ty's thrusts brought him closer and closer to climax.

He knew the other man couldn't take much more of this, either. Ty's breathing had grown shallow and ragged, and his cock swelled as it pummeled Jud's channel. Nothing had ever felt better in Jud's entire life.

And then, just as Jud had come to terms with giving Ty his body, the man asked for his heart.

## Chapter Five

Jud had always assumed that it would take a momentous event to yank the rug out from beneath his life a second time. Something like an explosion, or fireworks at the very least. The last time there'd been blood—oh, so much blood. He pushed away the image of Derek's broken body. Now was not the time to dwell on it; he'd spent years doing that.

If someone had told him that a tender kiss on the nape of his neck was all it would take to rock his sad little world, he'd never have believed it.

It started out innocently enough, with a press of Ty's lips against his skin. And it wasn't even as though the man hadn't kissed him before. He'd felt Ty's lips on his ass, his back, his legs—even on his mouth—yet none of those kisses had felt like this one.

Tender. Sweet. It felt almost...loving.

Ty's cock stilled inside Jud's passage. The man's mouth molded to Jud's throat, hot and sensual, branding him with what would undoubtedly be a noticeable hickey in the morning.

Jud trembled. His muscles tightened, and he hovered in a dream world, suspended between the delirious bliss streaming through his veins and the need to turn his head and capture Ty's mouth in a soul-shattering kiss of his own.

He would have done it too, if Ty hadn't shocked him for a second time in just as many minutes.

Just like that, lips pressed to Jud's throat, Ty came. He shuddered and emptied himself inside Jud's burning ass, his utter silence at odds with the rough, authoritative tendencies he'd exhibited all evening.

As though connected to his lover by more than Ty's cock sheathed to the hilt in his body, Jud followed suit. His stomach and thighs rippled as the orgasm burst through him, and his shaft jerked against the pillow. The crown had been rubbed raw by the fabric, and as cum shot from the sensitive tip, Jud cried out.

Only he didn't simply scream "Oh God!" or any litany of words he could have come up with at the height of his bliss.

He shouted Ty's name, and sealed his fate.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was only minutes later, when the overwhelming ecstasy had cleared from his brain enough to let him form a coherent thought that Jud realized the atmosphere in the room had changed. The air had thickened, like the sultry mugginess just before a thunderstorm. He lifted his head and realized he was alone.

Confused, he sat up, cringing at the soreness of his ass, the stickiness of his cum-drenched stomach. Ty's cock had been so deeply embedded in his body; surely he would have felt the man withdraw? And when did Ty leave anyway?

Jud shook his head and blinked, trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind. Why couldn't he remember?

He squinted into the living room. A hazy white cloud enveloped the coffee table. Startled, he stared beyond it, only to find the same eerie fog blurring the edges of every other object in the room. Brightness flared from the mist itself, forcing him to squint against the unexpected light.

"What the hell?" Even his voice sounded strange, thin and whispery. The sound might as well have been filtered through a wall of cotton. On impulse, he checked his ears, but found both passages free of plugs.

"Not hell. Try again."

Jud's heart did a summersault and knocked against his ribcage so hard, the air fled from his lungs. The voice was unmistakable. And...impossible.

*This isn't happening.*

Derek couldn't come to him. Not now. Not here.

Not like this.

A million questions rapidly flittered through his mind, followed by a thousand excuses. How would he explain his nakedness? The musky scent of sex in the air? The love bites and bruises all over his body? The cum seeping from his channel and coating his skin?

Derek's hand on his shoulder stopped the barrage of thoughts. It felt ethereal, surprisingly light against his flesh.

"I saw everything."

Jud's eyelids drifted closed. A lump formed in his throat. All the excuses vying with one another in his muddled mind dissipated like the echoes of a nightmare at dawn. A vise closed around his heart and tightened around his soul. He didn't dare open his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. God, but the words sounded so lame, so inadequate. He'd shattered a promise that meant more to him than any belief he'd ever held in his life. He'd betrayed his lover, destroyed the sacredness of what they'd once shared.

Yet even the powerful significance of what he'd done wasn't enough to summon back the endless waves of guilt. He knew he could try to explain that he'd made a mistake. He could ask for Derek's forgiveness.

Only...he didn't want to.

Because no matter how terrible his deed, how abhorrent his disloyalty, he couldn't bring himself to regret it.

He'd wanted this. Wanted Ty. And though he'd tried to blame his frantic desire on the otherworldly compulsions of a sex ghost, or on a new lover who may or may not take no for an answer, the truth was, he'd missed having a flesh-and-blood man.

Someone he could touch, and kiss, and curl up with at night. Someone who was more than dreams and memory.

Someone who loved him back.

Jud stumbled to his feet and slitted his eyes. The sight of Derek standing before him made his head reel.

He'd never seen Derek look more beautiful. When he'd had come to Jud in the sacristy of the Holy Outpost, year after year, he'd been as close to human as a ghost could manage. He'd made himself look nearly opaque, though his once black eyes had blazed with a blue fire that was unmistakably paranormal. His touch had some weight to it, but even Derek's iron will hadn't been able to banish the unearthly chill that had crept through his veins.

For weeks after their encounters, Jud could feel the cold creep into his skin every time he thought of Derek. At first, it had been a small price to pay to be with his lover, but lately, it had become just one more of an endless number of burdens he had to bear.

Tonight, Derek had taken no precautions to ensure Jud wouldn't be startled by the sight of him. He looked huge, towering over Jud, nearly twice as wide across the shoulders as he'd once been. His form was an ethereal blue, semitransparent. Black hair hung unbound down to his shoulders, and the blue flames in his eyes danced unfettered around his black irises.

Jud shivered. It was like staring through a window into nothingness. Into endlessness.

*Into death.*

The fact that Derek was gloriously naked registered last, and Jud flinched at the absurdity of that realization. Derek's cock should have been the first thing Jud noticed. His dick had always been thick and long, more than ample for Jud's tastes, but now the powerful shaft was easily twice the length and thickness it had been when Derek was mortal. The black curls that had once covered Derek's groin were gone, leaving his sex completely bare.

Jud dragged his gaze from Derek's erect cock up to his face. "If you're here to punish me, you'd better get on with it."

"Why?" Derek seemed amused. It wasn't the reaction Jud had expected. "You have somewhere to be?"

"Not anymore." He hated sounding sullen, but couldn't help it. "I have..." He cleared his throat and tried for the same light tone he'd heard in Derek's voice. "I *had* a date."

"Well, Merry Christmas to you, then. Looks to me like your date turned out quite well."

Jud shook his head. He had to tilt his head back to look Derek in the eye. "That wasn't what I meant."

The smile disappeared from Derek's face, was replaced by a flicker of regret. "I know what you meant."

"You didn't come," Jud whispered. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the anxiety he'd felt earlier that evening took another savage swipe at his chest. "I thought—"

"You thought I'd left you for good."

Jud nodded, not trusting his voice to speak.

“You were right.” Derek spread his hands in a gesture of supplication. “I did.”

Dizziness swept over Jud in a rush. He tried to remind himself that he'd expected this, he'd *known* it in his heart, but that didn't make Derek's words hurt any less.

“Why?”

Instead of answering, Derek tilted his head. He observed Jud for a long moment, then shrugged. Or rather, Jud thought the odd lift of Derek's shoulders was a shrug, until an eruption of pure white unfurled behind him. Somewhere in the distance, a bell rang, silvery and sweet.

A feather came loose from Derek's wings. Jud watched it float down to vanish in the pale mist gathered around their feet.

“You're an angel.” Amazement washed over him, and a rush of potent emotion gathered behind his eyes, making them sting. “I didn't know.”

Derek's broad grin was even brighter than the odd illumination blazing off the fog. “I am. Thanks to your forgiveness.”

Jud shook his head. “I don't understand.”

“I had to atone for a mistake I made. Long ago, I had you promise something I had no right to ask.” The blue fire in his eyes dimmed a little, and he frowned, but continued. “And then when I realized you could see ghosts, I continued to hold you to your promise. I was...weak. I couldn't give you up.”

“I didn't want you to,” Jud murmured. He scrubbed a hand over his face, struggling to come to terms with Derek's confession. “At least, not at first. Not so soon after you—”

“Died. You can say it, Jud. After I *died*.”

Jud moistened his lips, but couldn't meet Derek's gaze. “Yes. When you died, a part of me died with you. I didn't know how to go on. I didn't *want* to go on. I just wanted you back. Having you with me, even for a day, was more than I thought I deserved.”

Derek took a step forward, then reached out and caressed Jud's cheek with the back of his knuckles. Jud braced himself for the icy impact, but it never came. Derek's touch was warm, tender in a way he hadn't expected.

“I'm the one who's sorry, Jud. For robbing you of the last ten years. For being so afraid of losing you that I sacrificed everything to keep you with me. Including the one thing that meant



the most to me.” He hung his head and his hair fell forward, hiding his eyes and shadowing his lean cheeks. “Your happiness.”

Jud leaned into the caress, surprised to discover that his pulse no longer jumped at Derek's nearness. Now Derek's spirit touch elicited feelings of tranquility and an odd sense of peace, but no hint of the potent sexual reaction he'd experienced when Derek was alive.

“Neither of us could have known how things would turn out,” Jud said. “Life just...happens.”

“Death too.”

Even after all these years, Jud still had trouble hearing the word, especially rolling so nonchalantly off Derek's tongue. “I'm as much to blame as you. What we had couldn't last.”

Derek's head shot up, and the blue blaze turned a furious shade of indigo. “That's not true. Don't you see? What we had was magic. The kind that's meant to last a lifetime...and it did. It lasted the length of my lifetime.”

A lump formed in Jud's throat. “And mine? Am I meant to suffer for an eternity without you?”

A muscle pulsed in Derek's flawless jaw, but his lips twitched upward in a semblance of a smile. Those eerie eyes skimmed over Jud, settling on his semihard cock. The cum had long ago dried on Jud's skin, but he knew the smears would still be visible against the dark trail of hair leading from just beneath his navel into the nest of curls at his groin.

He felt Derek's gaze like a physical caress, slipping into his veins, sparking remembered pleasure.

“You weren't suffering tonight.” Derek remarked.

A blush heated his cheeks. It was his turn to duck his head, but then a thought struck and he lifted his gaze. “So you're not here because you missed me. Not really, I mean. You just want to chastise me for what happened with Ty.”

“Chastise you?” Derek looked genuinely perplexed. “Why would I want to do that?”

Jud kneaded the muscles at the back of his neck. “If you're not angry, why summon me, then?”

“Summon you—” Derek let out a great gulp of air that wafted, odorless, over Jud's face. “Oh, baby...I'm so sorry. I thought you understood.”

Derek's hand dropped from his face. Gently, he nudged Jud's shoulder, turning him sideways.

Almost at once, the brilliant light faded. The couch came into view and Jud froze in stunned silence. He had a vague notion that he tried to say something, but what, he couldn't tell.

All he could do was stare at the two figures before him. Ty, crouching naked by the side of the couch, a phone clasped to his ear in one hand, the other fumbling along the column of his companion's throat. The other man didn't move. His body lay splayed along the faded leather, one arm hanging down off the edge, fingers curved at an awkward angle as they bent against the hardwood floor.

Ty was yelling something Jud couldn't hear. The clear terror written on his features mirrored the shock and fear glinting in his eyes.

“Do you get it now?” Derek asked. “I didn't summon you. *You came to me.*”

## Chapter Six

Jud whirled on Derek, fists bunched and held up, ready for a fight. Right then, he didn't care if he had to take on the entire heavenly contingent with his bare hands and tear them limb from limb. He'd do it. He'd do anything to erase the anguish from Ty's eyes.

It wasn't as though he could die trying.

"Fix it," he demanded. "Send me back."

Derek had the presence of mind to look shamefaced, though the chagrin seemed out of place, at odds with the luminescence of his features and the blazing brilliance of his wings. "It doesn't work that way."

"Sure it does. I'm"—Jud swallowed past the bile that rose in his throat and forced the word out—"dead. And you're an angel. So fucking get me back into my body before I file a complaint with your boss."

"You're not serious."

When Jud didn't smile, Derek cringed. "Look, even if you could complain, I wouldn't recommend that particular route."

"Why not? It's not like I've got anything to lose. I lost the only man who mattered to me years ago. And now..." He glanced back at the couch, where Ty had gathered Jud's body in his arms. Tears cascaded down the man's cheeks, drenching Jud's bare chest. He shivered, certain he could feel every drop land on his cooling flesh. "Now I'm about to lose my second chance at happiness."

Derek tilted his head. "You talk as though there's still a way out of this. I'm sorry, Jud, but there isn't. Your fate was preordained. This end...as sudden as it is...it's a good end for you."

"Dying in the arms of a man whose life will never be the same after this night? You call that a *good* legacy to leave behind? Shattering someone's world?" He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Well, you'd know all about leaving anguish in your wake, wouldn't you?"

The angel lifted his hands, palms up, in a defensive gesture. “It wasn't as though I had a choice.”

Jud opened his mouth to reply, but the anger drained out of him as an image of Derek's body, beaten to a barely recognizable pulp and stabbed in two dozen places, flashed through his mind.

“I know,” he said at last. “I just wish...I wish you hadn't gone out that day.”

Derek crossed his massive arms over his chest. “Don't.”

“I'm just making an observation, that's all. You could have stayed home.”

“I said...*don't*.”

“Too bad. Since I'm dead and all, we've got all the time in the world to have this conversation.”

Derek fixed him with that laser-beam stare. “It was my time.”

“Bullshit.” Fury pulled at Jud's self-control. “It was *our* time. To celebrate the new apartment. To be together.”

“We were supposed to have the rest of our lives for that. I was working a major case. The Simmons trial was just a few days away. I had to—”

“And the church? You went there right after you left the office. Why?” It occurred to Jud that in all the years Derek had been coming to him after his passing, he'd never once asked that all important question. He'd been afraid of what he might learn.

Until the night Derek died, Jud had never even considered the possibility that the man he loved could be cheating on him. But then Derek left him on Christmas, and wound up dead in a crumbling old church, and suddenly Jud wasn't so sure anymore.

“It was Christmas Day. I went to church. It's not as though I expected to get jumped by a maniac who wanted to cut me into little pieces.”

“I've known you since we were in second grade. You'd *never* gone to church.”

A muscle twitched in Derek's jaw, and Jud felt an unreasonable flutter of satisfaction at the sight. So even angels got flustered. You just had to know which buttons to push.

Derek's voice dropped a few octaves to a silky whisper. “I never had a reason to go before.”

“So why that night? What was so different then?”

“I went there...” He licked his lips, then glanced up at the ceiling as though asking for help. Whatever answer he'd expected obviously wasn't forthcoming, because he turned back to Jud and continued. “I went to confession, all right? I needed to talk to someone because—”

“Because?” Jud prompted.

Derek's aura darkened, and the brilliance of his wings dimmed a little. He puffed out a breath and crouched so that his shocking blue eyes were level with Jud's. “Because I wanted to ask permission to marry you. We couldn't make it legal, of course, but I wanted us to be a real couple before God. It was...important...to me.”

Jud struggled to make sense of Derek's words. Understanding struck like a lightning bolt, right between his eyes. “God said no.”

Derek frowned. “Why would you think that?”

“You were killed in a horrific way. That doesn't exactly sound like a heavenly blessing, now, does it?”

“I thought I explained this. It was simply my time. My death had nothing to do with—”

“Prove it.”

“What?” Derek straightened to his full height, looming over Jud. The room darkened, once-white mist gathering like gray thunderclouds above his head. “That God isn't homophobic?”

“That's a start.”

“You're being ridiculous.” Derek paced from one end of Ty's living room to the other.

Jud followed the angel's movements, avoiding looking toward the couch. He couldn't stand seeing Ty's pain any more than he could take looking at his own body, lying still in Ty's arms.

“I didn't deserve you, okay? Is that what you want to hear?” Derek spun on his heel to pin Jud with his supernatural stare. “I was jealous and possessive. I wasn't worthy of your love.”

A stitch of remembered grief jabbed him in the gut. He'd loved Derek so much that at first he'd barely been able to eke out a meager existence without him. But he found a new talent while engulfed by anguish and sorrow: an ability to see ghosts. And with the help of those spirits, he'd found meaning again.

Given time, he could find love again too. Maybe he already had.

Except he was out of time. And his life would always revolve around Derek. Maybe his afterlife would too.

The thought angered him. "So make things right. Release me."

Derek's gaze slid to where Ty sat, bent over Jud's prone body. "I already did."

"You were Ty's apartment ghost." Suddenly, all the pieces clicked into place. "You brought us together."

Derek looked pained. "I earned my wings tonight. When you said Ty's name instead of mine..." His voice cracked, and his eyelids drooped closed. "That's when I knew you'd let go of me."

Jud took a tentative step forward, then another. He placed a palm on Derek's arm. The angel's skin felt warm, impossibly soft.

Derek started at the contact. His muscles corded and went rigid, as though he held himself back from doing something he might later regret. Only the throbbing of his oversize cock, the tip of which now pressed against Jud's stomach, betrayed the depth of his desire.

"But you haven't let go of me," Jud whispered. "Have you?"

A silver tear rolled out from beneath Derek's right eyelid. It trickled down his cheek and glinted in the shadowy light as it rolled down his smooth chest. "No."

The angel's lips barely moved as the word slipped from his mouth, but it was enough for Jud to understand every unspoken implication that came with that confession. Derek wanted Jud for himself, just as he always had.

"I didn't come to you, did I? You brought me here. And then you lied to me."

The clouds gathered close, deepening from gray to a bold purple color, like a livid bruise. A bolt of ashen lightning slammed into one of them. The ominous rumble of thunder followed in its wake, abnormally loud in the small apartment.

Derek's wings quivered. The white sheen began to dim, turning the feathers a mottled charcoal color. Derek glanced over his shoulder, eyes widening as a tiny plume of smoke appeared where his wings fused to his back.

Pain flared in his face, tightening his brows in a grimace. "I'm so sorry."

But it was too late. Even Jud knew that.

Judging by the way Derek fell to his knees and dropped his head in his hands, he knew it too.

The air shimmered, and the scent of rain gathered, filling Jud's nostrils with the rich aroma of an impending storm. Derek's wings shriveled and separated from his body. The angel's strong physique began to compress, his muscles contracting, the long limbs shrinking. His skin turned a savage red, as though the sun had spent days blasting his flesh.

Through it all, Derek knelt stoically. He didn't make a sound, though the changes to his body had to be harrowing.

A fist clenched around Jud's heart. This was a man he'd loved. No matter his faults, Derek had made Jud happy, once. He'd given him joy, and more pleasure than Jud had thought possible at the time.

And as Derek said, it wasn't his fault he'd died. Had he lived, he could have been a wonderful partner. A great husband, even. He could have eased off on his possessive tendencies and allowed trust to build along with sweet, eternal love.

Jud clung to those possibilities as he closed the small distance between them and placed his splayed palm on top of Derek's bent head. Beneath his hand, Derek's hair disintegrated into ash.

"I forgive you," Jud said, his voice loud and sure. He aimed the words toward the ceiling, and beyond. "For everything."

## Chapter Seven

Jud still wasn't breathing. He hadn't breathed in minutes.

For that matter, Ty couldn't remember breathing, either. He vaguely recalled screaming, and talking to the police dispatcher, and bargaining with God and every other deity he could think of. But breathing? No.

"Come on, damn you!" He pressed both palms down on Jud's chest in what he thought was a rough approximation of the proper technique for a CPR chest compression. Jud's body jerked upward with the force of the ram, then fell back to the hardwood floor where Ty had dragged him minutes earlier. The man's ribs contracted, recoiling under the pressure.

Fuck, but it had been too long since Ty had been trained to do this. He'd taken a course almost a decade earlier, when he'd landed his first foreman job with a construction crew. He figured it might come in handy should one of the guys fall off a ladder or something.

Never in a million years could Ty have fathomed he'd be using it on a man he'd fucked to death.

"Where the hell are the damn paramedics?" He glanced toward the door he'd flung open after hanging up the phone, but he hadn't heard as much as a strangled siren's wail in the past five minutes. A rare occurrence in Vegas, where the sounds of emergency vehicles woke him at all hours of the night.

Ty bent his head and slid his hand beneath Jud's neck, trying not to think about how icy the man's skin had gotten. He tilted Jud's head, lifting his chin in the process, then lowered his ear to the man's mouth.

Nothing. Not even a light puff or a wheeze.

*Hopeless. He's dead, and I've killed him, and this whole goddamned thing is fucking hope—*



Beyond the apartment window, an ambulance siren flared to life. Relief swept through Ty's body, shaking him to the core. If he hadn't already been kneeling, he'd have staggered under the sudden weight of the gratitude pressing down on his chest.

He gathered Jud tightly to him. The man's body hung lifelessly in his arms, like an oversize puppeteer's doll that had its strings cut unexpectedly. "My fault...all my fault."

It would have been so easy to give in to the overwhelming grief and tumble into self-pity and endless despair. But if even the slightest chance that Jud could wake still existed, he had to give everything he had to try and make that happen.

So he placed Jud gently on the floor, and started CPR again. This time, he bypassed the chest compressions and went straight to rescue breathing. He pinched Jud's nose and lowered his mouth, creating a seal against the man's cold lips.

Ty breathed out slow and deep, pushing oxygen into Jud's lungs as he exhaled. Blood roared in his ears, drowning out the sounds of the emergency vehicle that had to be by the front door of the building by now. His heart pummeled his ribcage with hard, rapid thumps. Adrenaline laced with raw terror sped through his veins.

He couldn't remember ever being so scared in his entire life. Not when he'd waited in the doctor's office for the diagnosis of a biopsy on what turned out to be a benign freckle. Not even the night a van had sideswiped his truck, sending it hurling off the side of a ravine.

Having his life flash before his eyes had been a thousand times easier to handle than watching Jud lose his. *My fault. If I hadn't pushed, if I hadn't insisted, forcing him to do things he wasn't ready to do, this never would have happened.*

The thought shattered his insides, breaking his heart into a million pieces. He was caught in a downward spiral of anguish and misery, fighting a rapidly losing battle with the barrage of emotions welling up inside him.

And then Jud's tongue swept against his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

The darkness felt thick enough to drown in.

Confusion shrouded Jud's mind, making it difficult to focus for longer than a fragmented second before his thoughts skittered sideways, already somewhere else. He couldn't recall much,

but he remembered...light. There'd been brilliant white light. Blue flames in dark eyes. And...feathers. Wings. Then...ashes.

*Derek.*

His throat closed and panic rose inside him. He couldn't move. The darkness pressed down on his chest, smothering him. It walloped him with a sharp, sudden blow, making his muscles clench in agony.

The unexpected light touch against his mouth was a lifeline in a sea of terror. Lips smooth and firm, but not a kiss. Something more meaningful, more important. He reached for the sensation with his tongue and found the salvation he'd been desperately seeking.

*Ty.*

Life returned in a staggering rush. It poured through him like molten plasma, heating his icy veins. His muscles spasmed and he clenched his fingers, triumphant at even that small motion. The pressure against his mouth eased. He parted his lips, inviting the return of that kindling caress.

Before he could find refuge in another tender touch, nothingness swept in again. It felt different this time; less threatening, more like a comfortable blanket thrown around his shoulders than a wad of cotton stuffed down his throat.

With Ty's face floating in his mind's eye, he gave himself over to the fatigue numbing his limbs, and slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ty barely had time to react to the shock raging through him before large hands gripped his shoulders, pulling him back.

"What happened here?" a man shouted as a woman wearing a dark blue uniform dropped to her knees beside Jud.

"I-I don't know! He was fine one minute, and then...then he wasn't."

"What were you doing?"

"We...I..."

The paramedic shot him a sharp look. His eyes narrowed as his gaze raked over Ty's naked body. "Right."

Ty was past caring what the man thought of him. He didn't even make an effort to cover himself. Embarrassment ranked low on a very long list of physical and emotional responses battering his soul.

The woman gripped a bag valve mask in her hands. She tilted Jud's head back the same way Ty had done, grabbed the plastic tube, then pulled back abruptly. "He's breathing! Doug, this man is breathing!"

"Got it!" Her partner ran into the hallway, only to return a few moments later pushing a gurney.

Ty's chest constricted. His heart felt like it would break out of his chest. He kept himself upright by leaning against the wall, and watched as the paramedics loaded Jud on the gurney and covered him with a blanket.

While they wheeled him out, Ty darted into the bedroom and grabbed the first pieces of clothing he could reach. He didn't bother with underwear as he yanked on an ancient pair of jeans riddled with holes everywhere but in the crotch. He slid a black T-shirt over his head on his way out the door, and tripped over the shoes he tried to slip his feet into while still in motion.

In the hallway, Ty halted. The male paramedic, Doug, smacked the side of his fist into the elevator button, clearly impatient. From where he stood, Ty could see the rhythmic rise and fall of Jud's chest. The sight filled him with bone-numbing relief. He forced himself to remain still, when all he wanted to do was run and gather Jud in his arms. He needed to feel the man's warm puff of breath on his cheek, to hear his heart beat in that reassuring cadence that proved he was alive. Yet he knew that if he grabbed Jud just then, he'd cling to him and never let go. This time, no burly paramedic would pull him off. No one would.

So he ran back into the apartment instead. Once there, he didn't hesitate, but headed straight for the sad-looking Christmas tree in the corner. He yanked the silver bells from the plastic branch just as the elevator dinged its arrival.

With the bells clenched tightly in his hand, Ty ran.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jud woke to the scent of antiseptic. The acrid smell, combined with a steady electronic beeping, jolted him out of a bone-numbing sleep.

He cracked one eye open and took in the green walls, the blinking machines and dark monitors, the tray holding a bowl of orange Jell-O. All those things belonged in a typical hospital room. The man sitting in a chair by the side of his bed, legs splayed open, folded hands draped between jean-clad thighs, didn't.

Neither did the spirits that gathered behind him. Jud recognized Neil and Jersey Girl. They huddled together with the Civil War soldier and another half dozen ghosts Jud had never seen.

His world came back into sharp focus. Derek was gone, but he hadn't taken the other spirits with him. Nor had Jud's ability to see them vanished along with him.

Jud ignored the ghosts for now. There'd be plenty of time to deal with them later. As far as he knew, it was still Christmas. And that meant he was off duty.

He focused on Ty. The man's brows were drawn together in thought. Long lashes hid his eyes, but Jud didn't need to see them to know that anxious worry would be mirrored in those dark depths.

"Hey," Jud said, surprised to hear the grit in his voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm all right."

Ty glanced up, and the relief that washed over his face was so sudden and profound, Jud's heart skipped a beat. An unexpected urge to fist both hands in Ty's shirt and hold on for dear life hit with frightening intensity.

"Thank God. When you—" Ty gritted his teeth. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

Damn, but Jud knew that look, that struggle to say the word that caught like a fishbone in his throat and made it impossible to utter. "Died," he whispered, just like Derek had done. He was surprised to realize that the memory of his former lover no longer pressed heavily on his heart. "When I died."

Ty flattened his lips, unwilling or unable to say anything else, and he clutched Jud's hand in both of his. Warmth seeped into Jud's fingers. He squeezed back, grateful for the tactile connection.

After they'd been sitting like that for a few minutes, Ty's lips abruptly parted in surprise. He glanced down at their linked fingers, ran the tip of his thumb over the back of Jud's hand, and shook his head. "It's gone."

Jud followed his gaze, but didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. "What?"

“The lust. When I touch you, I don't feel the overwhelming urge to fuck you senseless anymore.” The color drained from Ty's face and he clamped his mouth shut, as though he'd realized how insulting that sounded.

“What? Guys in hospital gowns don't do it for you?” Jud lifted the blanket and glanced at the hem of the blue, standard-issue garment riding up his thigh. “Looks like it's one of those that ties in the back, and I don't think I'm wearing any underwear.” He quirked an eyebrow. “Still nothing?”

Ty ran his tongue over his bottom lip, but didn't return Jud's easy grin. “I didn't mean it like that. I mean, the desire's still there, it's just...softer now. Quieter. It feels like it's my own reaction, not something someone else put there.”

“Your ghost is gone too.”

Ty's gaze veered sharply toward the small table beside the bed, and Jud followed his shift in focus. Derek's silver bells, which Jud had last seen hanging in Ty's Christmas tree, had been propped against a water pitcher.

“I should have known you'd solved my problem when I didn't feel anything unusual after grabbing those bells. Last time I touched them, I nearly came trying to take them out of the box.” Ty ducked his head and sank his teeth into his lower lip, clearly embarrassed.

Jud heaved his weight on his elbows and nudged himself into a sitting position. “Why did you bring them?”

“I wasn't sure how you'd feel about me when you woke up. I thought it was important that I had these ready for you. You know, in case—”

“In case I didn't want to see you again.”

“What did I do to you? God, I thought...” A grimace settled in the lines around Ty's mouth. “I thought I'd killed you. I'd never been so frightened in my life.”

An icy rage washed through Jud, followed by a sudden rush of heat. “You didn't do anything wrong. In fact, what you did was pretty damn wonderful.”

Ty didn't smile at the compliment. His face remained stricken by grief, by regret and sorrow.

Jud slipped his fingers from the man's hand and lifted them to Ty's mouth. He lingered there, sliding the pad of his thumb over Ty's lower lip. "I have to tell you something. You might not believe me."

Ty only stared, his face unreadable. "Try me."

Jud swallowed past the lump of anxiety clogging his throat, closed his eyes, and told him everything. About Derek, about the Christmas encounters he'd shared with his lover for a decade, about Derek's plan to use Ty to force Jud to break the promise he'd made all those years ago. And finally, he told him about Derek's inability to let go.

Through it all, Ty didn't interrupt. Didn't even move. When Jud had finished speaking, Ty sucked in a lungful of air as though he'd been holding his breath.

"How did he die?"

Jud blinked at the question. He'd given only sparse details about Derek's abrupt and unforgiving fall from grace. "Ashes. His wings turned to charcoal and—"

"That's not what I meant. How did *your* Derek die? All those years ago?"

"He was beaten, then stabbed." Jud spoke slowly, keeping the old pain at bay. "Father Chuck found Derek's body in the sacristy of the Holy Outpost church."

A flare of awareness arced between them, laden with emotion. "Did they fry the bastard who did it?"

"He's rotting in jail. The cops found the guy two blocks away, trying to hide behind a dumpster. He still had the knife in his hand, and there was blood all over his clothes. The case was closed before an investigation even really got started."

"Who was he?"

"A petty thief Derek had defended for grand theft auto. The son of a media mogul who thought he was entitled to a life without consequences because his daddy had enough money to buy his brand of justice. Only that had been his sixth offense in less than three months, and even his father's influence could no longer bail him out."

"And he held Derek responsible."

It wasn't a question, but Jud felt the need to answer it anyway. "Yeah. He thought Derek had done a lousy job defending him. He'd gotten out of jail a few days earlier, and the cops

discovered he'd been following Derek ever since. It didn't help that he'd spent Christmas Day getting drunk and stoned while waiting for Derek to leave his office.”

“Still...” Ty shuddered visibly. “To act out that kind of violence in a church is just...foul.”

Jud recoiled against the hospital pillow as he remembered the rage that had welled up in his chest, the pain that had flared behind his eyes, the white-hot agony that had filled his field of vision. He'd passed out on the steps of the Holy Outpost after emptying the contents of his stomach in the bushes beside the rusted metal railing. Father Chuck had found him and brought him back inside. When Jud came to, Father Chuck was there. And so were the ghosts.

“Seeing Derek like that triggered something inside me,” he whispered.

“The ghosts?”

Jud nodded. “I'd never seen one before that night. And as far as I was concerned, if I couldn't see something, it didn't exist.”

Ty smiled. The sight of that playful, unexpected grin made Jud's body clench with pleasure.

“And now? You see ghosts, so there's your proof of their existence. But what about other things? Do you still find it difficult to believe in what you can't see?”

Jud's gaze flickered down. He took in the strong line of Ty's thighs, the stiff proof of the man's desire bulging against the seams at his crotch. “I thought you said the lust was gone.”

“The magical lust, yes.” Ty stood and moved to the edge of the bed. He leaned down and nuzzled Jud's throat, engulfing him in the irresistible scent of masculine spice with a hint of musk. “The *want*, though... I'm warning you, I might never stop wanting you.”

“Might? What kind of a promise is that?”

Ty chuckled and brought his mouth up to Jud's. The kiss was much too brief, much too chaste. “The only kind I can make to a man wearing a hospital gown.”

“I can strip out of this thing in two seconds flat,” Jud said. He'd started proving it when the nurse walked in.

“Now, now, Mr. Hess. None of that until the doctor's pronounced you fit for hanky-panky.”

Ty's eyes glinted with amusement as he pulled back. He hooked his thumbs in the back pockets of his jeans. "Is that a medical term?"

"It should be." The woman gave them both a wink. She had curly red hair and enough pens stuck in the pockets of her uniform to start her own office supply store.

"We're going to finish what we started just as soon as they let you out of here," Ty promised. He dragged a hand through Jud's hair. "And we're going to celebrate Christmas the right way."

"You'll sing carols?" Jud teased.

"Better. I'm going to cook you dinner."

A lash of excitement whipped through Jud. He glanced behind Ty at the ghosts who had started drifting away. Neil held up two thumbs and beamed an ethereal smile his way.

"Hope you don't mind a few extra guests around the table," Jud said, struggling to keep his excitement and growing libido under control.

Ty looked puzzled for a long moment, then snorted as understanding dawned. "Just as long as none of them are crazy ex-lovers reaching out from beyond the grave." He wiggled his brows for a moment, then frowned. "You don't have any more of those, do you?"

"Nope."

"Good. Because you know...I find it hard to compete with angels." As the nurse studied the chart at the foot of Jud's bed and gnawed on the cap of a ballpoint, Ty leaned over him again. "And I warn you...I'm the farthest thing from an angel as you're ever going to get."

A memory of the way Ty had worked his body with the dildo before sinking into his channel made Jud groan aloud. A dark swirl of remembered pleasure arced through his cock.

"Thank God," he whispered.



## Epilogue

*December 25, 2010*

Late afternoon sun reflected off the glass panes of the living room window and scattered golden beams over the hardwood floor. With Ty's dark curtains packed away days ago, there was nothing to keep the brilliant light at bay. It danced across the bare white walls and tangled in the dark waves of Ty's hair.

Jud ran a hand through his lover's thick mane and smiled. Gone was the short, military cut. Months earlier, Jud had made an offhand comment about digging guys with long hair. Since then, Ty hadn't trimmed an inch. Unruly waves now flopped over one eyebrow in a sexy style that made Jud want to fist all that glorious hair and give it a few hard pulls.

Ty wrapped an arm behind Jud's waist and tugged him forward so their bodies pressed against each other. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing." He'd tried for innocent nonchalance, but judging by Ty's skeptical eyebrow raise, hadn't succeeded.

"You're looking at me like you want to devour me whole. So spill."

Jud staved off a laugh by leaning in and nipping the tender skin at the base of Ty's throat. "That's the way I always look at you."

"And don't think I don't appreciate it." He reached down and pinched the curve of Jud's ass, then followed that with a sudden slap.

The sound of flesh against denim resonated through the empty apartment, nudging Jud's cock from semihard awareness to full-fledged eagerness.

"Seriously, though." Ty insisted. "Tell me."

A grin pulled at the corners of Jud's mouth. Ty knew him too well. They'd only been dating for a year, but they'd been practically inseparable that entire time. Jud couldn't hide anything from his lover, and frankly, he didn't mind.

"I was thinking that this is the first Christmas in as long as I can remember that feels...*right*."

Ty's easy smile vanished. His eyes took on an intense, serious sheen. "First of many."

The vehement promise in those simple words made Jud shiver. With anyone else, he would have been concerned about a repeat of what happened with Derek, but Ty wasn't possessive. He was passionate, earnest and loyal, committed to their relationship in the same way that Derek had been fiercely dedicated to his work.

He never took Jud for granted. He was...*romantic*, which Jud hadn't expected. Oddly, their new relationship hadn't taken any getting used to. They simply clicked, fitting together in a comfortable way.

Derek had kept him somewhat off-balance, unsure of where he stood, uncertain of their future. He'd hoped for the best, but hadn't been able to cling to the certainty that their love would last.

With Ty, there was no doubt, no ambivalence. There was only trust, and the kind of deep, satisfying love that wrapped around Jud like a shield, protecting him from whatever the world tossed in his direction.

In twelve months, his life had changed in more ways than he could have imagined. He was *happy*, and that joy seeped into everything he did. He now solved more cases, brought peace to more spirits than ever before. His continued successes in puzzling out some of the toughest investigations had led the LVPD to offer him a full-time position on staff, making Jud the first legitimate medium endorsed and recognized by the department as an essential member of the team.

And the personal changes went beyond any triumphs he'd experienced in his professional life. Coming home to Ty every night had imbued what had once been a pathetic existence with vibrancy and passion. He only wished he'd met Ty sooner. Perhaps then he wouldn't have wasted a decade pining away after a spirit who had never been right for him.

*Can't think that way.* He shoved aside the ball of regret that threatened to settle in his stomach and slipped his knee up between Ty's legs to nudge the man's cock. As he expected, he found Ty's dick hard and ready for him.

"Let me take you home," Ty murmured in his ear. "I've got a bed with your name on it."

Laughter shook Jud from the inside, and he let it out to echo off the walls. Damn, but it felt good to laugh like that, wild and unrestrained. "You mean a *bedpost*, don't you? And instead of a name, I'm probably just a notch among a hundred others."

"Yeah." Ty conceded with a shrug of his shoulders. "But you've got the biggest...*notch*...of them all."

Jud skimmed his palms down Ty's back and cupped his ass, pulling him closer yet. "Liar. We both know that's *my* bed we're talking about."

"Only because you broke mine."

Jud nearly choked on his fake indignation. "I remember a certain someone tying me to the headboard. How is it my fault that the wood frame snapped while you sucked the life right out of me?"

They stared at each other for a full three seconds before they both released a sudden bark of laughter.

"All right, all right." Jud tilted his head, still chuckling. "Wrong choice of words."

"So what do you say?" The playfulness in Ty's voice vanished beneath the husky timbre of his desire. "Are you ready to get out of here for good?"

Jud glanced past Ty into the barren living room. He'd moved in last spring, but there were too many memories here to feel truly at ease. Too many ghosts that, unlike those he dealt with every day, couldn't be laid to rest.

They'd packed everything and moved into a new place three weeks earlier, but the lease wasn't up until the end of the month, so they'd been in no hurry to clean the empty apartment and hand over the keys. Today, Jud had insisted they get this task out of the way before beginning their Christmas celebration in earnest. He wanted to start over, to leave every ounce of baggage behind.

He shook his head. "Not yet."

Ty nodded briskly, but Jud didn't miss the spark of disappointment that flared in his beautiful eyes. "All right. Take your time."

Jud dropped to his knees, hooking his fingers in the waistband of Ty's jeans as he did so. The zipper slid down smoothly, the sound of metal teeth unusually loud in the empty space. "Oh, I intend to."

A groan slid from Ty's mouth, sending a wave of anticipation down Jud's spine. He couldn't get enough of the sounds Ty made: the loud moans, the hungry gasps, the eager cries.

He wanted to hear them all today. Every one, over and over again.

Jud peeled off Ty's jeans, as slowly as his eager fingers would let him, which was a whole lot faster than the time Ty took to pull his shirt off over his head. God, how he loved that Ty remembered everything he liked; such as his preference for having Ty naked at all times, for instance.

There was no substitute for a naked man. None. No tantalizing strips of cloth, no matter how skimpy or sheer, could even come close to the stunning eroticism of well-defined muscles on a tall frame. From Ty's broad shoulders to his flat abs, narrow hips, and long legs, he was the epitome of male perfection.

And then there was his cock. Or, well, there it *wasn't*, because Jud had already sucked it deep into his mouth. As much as he liked to look, he liked to taste even more.

The tip of Ty's shaft nudged Jud's cheek as he licked the length of the man's erection. Wasting no time at all, Jud allowed his mouth to glide up and down the solid shaft, then nuzzled the curly hairs at the base and inhaled lungfuls of horny male scent.

Ty's fingers threaded into his hair. Jud reached up and grabbed a sure hold of his lover's firm ass. Ty widened his stance. His thigh muscles shook, and Jud knew it was with the effort of not fucking his mouth with long, hard strokes.

He drew back, running his tongue across the thick veins bulging against the sensitive underside of Ty's cock, then dove for the entire length again. In and out he pumped, his hands holding Ty steady, his mouth working the shaft in fast glides. He sucked and licked and nibbled, every tactic earning him another of those cock-stiffening noises.

Precum flooded his taste buds. Jud's cheeks hollowed with the effort of keeping up the frantic pace he'd set. His jaw ached. But the discomfort was well worth it when he felt Ty's dick twitch against his tongue.

Jud drew back, panting. Finely attuned to even the smallest change in Ty's behavior, he knew when his lover was close.

"Nuh-uh," he said, waving a finger at the much larger man like a teacher at a naughty schoolboy. Never mind the fact that *he* was the one on his knees. "You don't get to come until I say you can."

It had taken Jud a long time to take control of his partner in this way, but Ty had often encouraged him to "unleash his inner dominant," as he put it. Jud was still a long way from being anything close to a true dominant, and Ty was much better at giving orders and enforcing rules than he was, but Jud enjoyed turning the tables on his lover every once in a while.

Jud rose and shucked his clothes while Ty watched, desire plainly written on his handsome face. Warm rays of sunlight danced over Jud's skin, setting his already inflamed nerve endings on fire.

He glanced around the room, suddenly wishing they'd left a few boxes lying around for such an emergency. He wanted something to drape Ty's body over so the man's gorgeous ass arched up high for the taking. But there was nothing—nothing but the smooth floor, the pale walls, and the windowpane.

As Jud scanned the area, a flash of silver from the window ledge caught his eye. He squinted against the beam it flung into his face like a mirror refracting sunlight.

"You packed everything, right?"

Ty grunted, a hand around his cock. His lashes drifted down, and his breath came in rough, ragged pants. He was still close. Damn close, judging by the way the muscles in his taut abdomen pulsed and shifted with the strain of holding back his release.

The sight of Ty's straining cock wiped all other thoughts from Jud's mind. With a growl, Jud circled behind his lover and nudged him forward so that he stood, palms splayed, against the wall. Ty's thighs parted and he shifted his stance, thrusting his ass toward Jud.

"No lube," Ty gritted out between clenched teeth.

“That's what you think.” Jud grabbed for his jeans and fumbled in the back pocket until he found a small packet of foil. It was just a sample size—they'd been giving them out at the drug store—but it would do.

He tore the foil and squeezed the clear liquid into his palm, then ran his hand over his cock. The cool silkiness of the lube made him tremble in anticipation. He smoothed the rest of it between the valley of Ty's cheeks, then pressed a finger inside Ty's tight passage.

Ty's whimper echoed through the room, and Jud grinned, triumphant. Ty rarely whimpered. He growled, grunted and cried out, as damn macho as they came. But when he made those little sounds of pleasure in the back of his throat, Jud knew he'd done everything right.

“Just for that, you're going to get a reward,” Jud whispered as he positioned the tip of his cock at his lover's back entrance.

“What'd I do?”

“You begged,” Jud said simply, then slid home.

He clutched Ty's hips with both hands and pulled out before sinking back in to the hilt again. He had to stand on the tips of his toes and angle his cock to get deeper penetration into the taller man, but *fuck* if he cared.

He could have taken it slow, could have driven Ty mad with languid strokes and endless teasing thrusts, but he didn't. Today wasn't about gentle lovemaking. It was about banishing demons, about making a new start. About laying claim to his new life.

And about laying claim to Ty.

His nails curled into Ty's flesh. He knew the harsh grip would leave marks, and that's just what he wanted. He took his lover hard, delighted with the way Ty's inner walls squeezed him, welcomed him, milked him for all he was worth.

“Jud!” Ty snarled.

The sound of his name spurred Jud on further. He pushed in deep, then deeper, then withdrew and started all over again. Over and over. Faster and faster.

Ty's tight ass cheeks quivered with the pounding, but damn if he wasn't meeting him thrust for thrust. He kept pace, angled himself so he could receive every inch of Jud's length. Each fierce shove drove Jud closer to climax, bringing him to the edge, then hurling him overboard.

He barely had time to realize he was past the point of no return when he spilled himself. Ty followed suit despite neither of them having touched his cock. Cum spurted onto the floor, painting thick strokes of cream on the dark hardwood.

Ecstasy skittered through Jud's nerve endings. His body tingled, every muscle quivering with the onslaught of pleasure.

He laid his cheek against Ty's back, thrilled to be able to hear the rocketing rhythm of his lover's heartbeat in his ear. After a long minute, Jud withdrew slowly and straightened.

"Looks like we'll have to clean up again," Ty said, staring pointedly at the mess he'd made of the floor.

Jud laughed. "You don't think our security deposit covers that?"

Ty gave an answering snort as he pulled up his jeans. Jud watched his lover's perfect ass disappear beneath faded blue denim, and sighed as he tugged on his own clothes. He couldn't wait to get Ty back to their new place and get him naked. Again.

As Ty left to grab the lone roll of paper towels they'd ditched in a kitchen cabinet, Jud turned toward the window. It was just past noon, and despite the holiday, Vegas bustled below him. An ambulance screeched by in front of the building, its sirens blaring. Jud grabbed the window ledge and leaned his forehead against the cool pane, knowing the chaos of the city couldn't disturb the inner peace he'd found.

A glint of something shiny flickered at the edge of his field of vision. He turned his head, and his gaze landed on the silver bells perched on the edge of the window ledge.

He stared at them in silence, expecting the unwelcome rush of grief and memories. But neither came. He felt nothing as he looked at the Christmas decoration; nothing but the joy he'd been feeling all day.

"Derek's gone."

Jud spun around, expecting to see Ty. Instead, Neil stood there in all his cowboy cop glory, transparent hat tilted at an odd angle on his broad forehead. Jud smiled. Ever since he'd moved in with Ty, the ghosts had kept a respectful distance when he wasn't on duty. Once he walked out the front door, all bets were off, but when he was with Ty, the spirits respected their privacy.

"Do you know where?" Jud asked, unable to keep the curiosity at bay. "Is he all right?"

Neil cocked his head. "He's been given a second chance. Just like you."

"I hope he's better-off now," Jud said, meaning every word. Despite everything that Derek had done, he deserved a shot at redemption. Perhaps, with luck, he'd find it.

Neil winked. His smile was lopsided and enigmatic, like he knew more than he was telling. Something Jersey Girl had said last Christmas came back to Jud.

*"It's not our place to divulge the secrets of others."*

Wherever Derek was, whatever he was doing, would have to remain a mystery. "Thanks for letting me know."

"I thought you'd want to." Neil glanced over his shoulder at the sound of footsteps approaching. With a tip of his hat, he gave Jud one last wink and vanished. It didn't seem to matter that Ty wouldn't have seen him anyway.

"I heard you talking," Ty said as he knelt to wipe the floor. "Your ghost buddies?"

"One of them, anyway."

Ty glanced up, fixing him with a concerned stare. "Everything okay?"

Warmth fluttered in Jud's heart and seeped in to his soul. He grinned. "Never better."

"Good." Ty rose and strolled into the bathroom. After flushing the wadded up paper towels, he headed for the door. "Let's get out of here."

Jud followed, only to hesitate in the doorway. After a moment's indecision, he glanced at the silver bells, still on the windowsill where he'd left them.

Ty placed both hands on Jud's shoulders and kneaded the muscles in his neck. "You coming?"

Jud took a deep breath, only to release it on a sigh a moment later. He'd been right. There was nothing left of Derek in his heart. Every beat belonged to Ty, now and forever.

"Hell yeah," Jud said, and slammed the door shut.

 THE END 



## Loose Id(R) Titles by Hunter Raines

*Silver Bells*

## Hunter Raines

Hunter Raines believes the only thing hotter than a stunning man are *two* gorgeous men together, and she loves to explore that premise through stories that delve into the ecstasy of male-on-male love. She's the author of short stories, novellas and full-length novels featuring alpha males who can't keep their hands off each other.