



Cameron Dane

Saying
I Do

Loose Id

*Quinn Security:
Saying I Do*

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Dedication

For Anne Cain. One short sentence in an e-mail got me thinking about the next chapter in Adam and Rhone's life together. Once the guys started talking to me, I had to write this story. Saying I Do happened because of you. As always, you rock.—CD

Prologue

Rhone slammed Adam into the wall of their apartment and shoved his cock up his partner's ass. Adam cried out, and Rhone moaned as his lover's passage closed in tightly and suffocated his dick. Goddamnit, it felt good to finally fuck his man. Being rock hard during the long el ride home had nearly killed him. Once they made it inside the apartment, and Rhone tore Adam's clothes off and his own jeans down, he just couldn't hold off another second to get them to the bedroom.

I have to celebrate. And I don't want to do it with anyone except Adam.

Shoving a hand into Adam's dark, silky hair, Rhone yanked his head back and fused their mouths together in a searing kiss. He held Adam to him and pumped his prick through the snug embrace of Adam's hole. It felt like, with every deep in-stroke he made, Adam massaged each nerve ending in his cock. And on every shallow withdrawal, he licked Rhone's length with a million tiny tongues.

Christ. He's steaming and tight...and perfect.

Rhone breathed against Adam's cheek and worked hard to control the depth and pace of his fucking. He brushed his lips across Adam's jaw, met his gaze, and trembled. "What you do to me." He pressed his forehead to his lover's and didn't look away from the intensity in his gaze as they made love. "I love you."

"Love you too." Adam's eyes burned dark as onyx, and he clamped his arms and legs even tighter around Rhone's shoulders and waist. He flicked his tongue into Rhone's mouth and branded him all over again with that split-second touch. "Now fuck me like you mean it, and make me come."

Rhone held Adam to him, and his balls swelled just thinking about pounding Adam into oblivion. "Whatever you want." He took a big stride in the direction of their bedroom, forgot he still had his jeans around his knees, and sent them both crashing to the floor.

Shifting just in time, Rhone took the brunt of the fall. With a grunt, Adam landed on top of him, straddling Rhone's hips and still riding his cock.

Shit.

“Are you okay?”

A chuckle escaped Adam. Then a smile hit his pretty lips, a twinkle made it look like the moon danced in his eyes, and his chuckle turned into a full-on belly laugh. He wiggled his ass on Rhone's dick and waggled his brow. “I think we stuck the landing. We're gonna get all tens from the judges for sure.”

Looking up at his partner's handsome face, Rhone shook his head with ease, but his chest constricted hard on the sight. “Stuff like that is why I fall for you more every day we're together.”

Fingers grazed lightly on Rhone's stubbly cheek and into his hair. “You are my world, Rhone.” Adam folded himself down on Rhone and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. “Always will be.”

Damn it. “Ohhh fuck.” Rhone's balls squeezed hard, and he lost his shit. He dug his fingers into Adam's hips and drove up into his tight passage one last time. The pleasure of taking Adam overwhelmed him, and with a hoarse noise, Rhone unloaded his seed into Adam's ass, marking him deep inside.

Adam reared up with a gasp as Rhone filled him, and he quickly took his own cock in hand. With eyes closed, he tilted his head back and rode Rhone's dick with long, sure strokes. His sleek, muscular frame undulated in a wave of solid, olive-toned flesh, and the sight of it stole what little breath Rhone had left in his body.

“Christ, you are something special to see. Here.” Rhone spit in his palm, brushed Adam's hand aside, and circled his own around Adam's straining prick. Adam opened his eyes, and Rhone finished, “Look at me, baby, and let me help you come.”

Rhone started to pull on Adam's rigid length, and Adam bunched Rhone's jersey in his hands, immediately picking up the pace of his ride. “Oh yeah...” He bit his lip as Rhone alternated between jerking him off and tugging his nuts, and his chute rippled so damn much that Rhone's cock remained almost completely hard in Adam's ass. Adam groaned and whipped his seat back and forth on Rhone's penetration. “Harder, Rhone, harder.”

With a surge into a sitting position, Rhone bit Adam on the shoulder—and delivered his lover straight to heaven. Adam locked in place and then convulsed and spewed hot lines of cum onto Rhone's stomach. His channel milked Rhone with every tremor that went through his frame, and Rhone hissed as his prick mightily enjoyed the handshake.

The tension and trembling eventually left Adam's body. He gently pulled himself off Rhone's cock, leaned back on his elbows, and smiled in that sweetly wicked way he only did for Rhone. “Damn,” he said with a grin, “the Cubbies need to get into the postseason more often.”

“Amen to that.” Rhone laughed too, and he wondered how many people had gone home from that baseball game earlier tonight and fucked in celebration of the huge win. Rhone bared his teeth like a wolf and looked Adam up and down as if he were cornered prey. “Imagine what I'll do to you if they ever win the World Series.”

Adam groaned and covered his eyes with his hand. “Don't torment me with something you're never gonna be able to make happen.”

“Right.” Rhone grumbled right back as he thought about the World Series drought of their favorite team. Letting his disappointment go, he grabbed the edge of the couch and pulled himself to his feet. “Come on. It's late.” He slid his jeans back up to his waist, took Adam's hand, and pulled him upright too. “I'll take care of that bite for you in the shower, and then we'll hit the bed.”

Adam's gaze strayed to his jeans wadded up on the floor, and his heart fluttered with renewed nerves. “Wait.” He didn't move with Rhone. With a tug against his partner's hold, their twined fingers separated. “Give me a minute.” Looking into Rhone's pale eyes, Adam worried the inside of his lower lip. “I'll...” While pointing at the door, he took a step back. “I'll make sure everything is locked up tight, and then I'll join you.”

Rhone's stare narrowed, but when he opened his mouth, he just said, “Okay. Don't be long. I'll get the shower going.”

After Rhone disappeared into their bedroom, Adam gathered up the used convenience packet of lube, tossed it in the trash can under the desk, and then emptied the contents of the front pocket of his jeans into his hand. Among the loose change and a folded slice of wrapped

gum, the band of black enamel with a thin line of matte silver running down the center winked up at him like the brightest of stars.

Should I?

God, Adam had something so great going with Rhone right now. More than he ever could have imagined or hoped for when their relationship had changed from best friends to lovers two years ago. More than he would have dared dream twelve years ago when Rhone caught Adam trying to steal his cell phone and offered him a job in his business—Quinn Security and Investigations—part of which Adam now owned, along with Rhone, his brother, Canin, and Canin's wife, Kasey.

Adam loved Rhone so goddamned much. He shook just thinking about pushing for a change in their relationship and possibly scaring Rhone away.

You want it, Reyes. You've wanted Rhone for your own in every way from practically the day you met.

In his mind, Adam could hear Rhone on the night their relationship took this new, intimate turn. *“Be the man I know you are and tell me what you want.”*

Now, Rhone's voice drifted to him through the walls of their apartment. “Adam? Where are you? Get your fucking sweet ass in the shower right now!”

Adam let his jeans fall to a heap on the floor, then dropped the change and gum too, and slipped the band on his thumb. “I can do this.” He psyched himself up under his breath, strode through the bedroom, and then into the bathroom before the shaking got so bad Rhone would think he was ill rather than nervous and excited.

Rhone shoved the shower curtain open right then and stopped Adam dead in his tracks. “There you are,” he said. A quick smile turned his face from harsh lines to breathtaking. “Damn, I was about to go see if you were installing new locks. What was the holdup?”

Adam took his fill of the big, tan body before him, slick with water. God, the man was so stunning, he tongue-tied Adam, as he often did when they were naked together. Wires and plans tripped in Adam's brain, and instead of exhibiting suave and cool, he thrust his thumb in Rhone's direction and blurted, “Will you marry me?”

Rhone stumbled into the shower wall at his back.

"I got this ring for you." Adam rushed forward. He slipped the band off his thumb and held it up. "It's not an engagement ring... Well, I guess technically it is. I didn't know what I was supposed to get you as a symbol of my proposal; obviously not a diamond, although I suppose I could have gotten you something with a diamond, but I don't think that's your style, so I didn't. You don't even have to wear this if you don't want to. I guess it's more a wedding band than an engagement ring. Oh God"—heat flamed up Adam's nudity, and mortification chilled it in reverse—"that assumes you're going to say yes, and you don't have to."

Clamping his runaway mouth shut, Adam forced himself to take a deep breath and get control of his words. "There's no pressure, Rhone. I love you and want to be with you, no matter the circumstances. I want to marry you, though, if you'll have me. I'd like our commitment to be official." The guy still hadn't moved a muscle since Adam had sprung the question, and Adam's stomach started to knot up in tight bundles. "Rhone?"

Rhone jerked to life, and his gray eyes swam with wetness that didn't have anything to do with the shower. "Christ, baby, are you kidding me?" He leaped over the edge of the bathtub and stumbled right into Adam's arms. "Yes." Rhone captured Adam with a clinging, slow kiss, and Adam's heart seized painfully with that one small word. "Fucking goddamnit, of course I'll marry you. Jesus, you shocked the hell out of me, though. Maybe more than the first time I realized I wanted you as more than a friend. Give me that." He took the ring out of Adam's hand and slipped it on his finger.

A perfect fit.

Adam brushed the pad of his thumb back and forth across the metal, letting the heat from Rhone's body absorb into the ring and into him. "It looks nice on you."

Clearing his throat, Rhone said, "Yeah, it does." He lifted Adam's bare hands and looked each finger over. "What about you?"

Stricken, Adam's mouth gaped. "I don't... I didn't..."

"Right. I'm an idiot." Rhone closed Adam's mouth for him. "Of course you didn't buy one for yourself. That's my job. I like what you chose." He dropped his focus back to the new piece of hardware on his tan hand, and his voice thickened with emotion. "The colors are like your eyes and my eyes. I'll get you the reverse. The silver around the black. It'll be like showing the world that I'm protecting you, and you're protecting me."

Slashes of heat burned across Adam's cheekbones. "I was kind of thinking that too when I saw this one in the store." He lifted Rhone's hand and nuzzled into it. "Thank you for saying yes."

Dipping down, Rhone planted kisses on each line of red marring Adam's cheeks. "Honey, you don't have to thank me. I'd have married you the night we hooked up and any night since. It's not legal here, though, and I want it to be legal. I guess that's why I didn't ask you before." His pale eyes darkened to slate, and he nodded, as if to himself. "Yeah. We'll go to one of the states where it is legal..."

Adam linked his hands at the small of Rhone's back. As he looked up at his fiancé, he knew every bit of adoration coursing through him shone in his eyes.

He listened to Rhone slip into his take-charge, organizing mode, and took mental notes regarding the to-do lists he created out loud. When Adam got a chance, he slipped in, "Whatever you want."

Adam didn't need to say anything else right now.

Rhone had said yes.

The details didn't matter.

Chapter One

December 26

Awe filled Adam as he stared up at the Vermont hotel designed to create the illusion of an English estate fit for royalty. “Oh wow. It's amazing in person.” The trilevel, Palladian-style facade had a hue to it that looked like muted sunlight had absorbed into the structure. Columns fronted the entrance, and a pair of men in sharp uniforms stood on either side, waiting to allow guests entry.

“It is cool, isn't it?” Rhone joined Adam and pulled him to his chest with an arm around his waist. He dipped his mouth down to Adam's shoulder, and puffs of white from the frigid air mingling with his inner warmth escaped his lips as he talked. “Let's get checked in and do a little exploring around the grounds before we meet with the event planner. Come on.” Excitement infused Rhone's voice. “Let's go inside.” He linked his hand in Adam's and pulled him in the direction of the front doors.

An unexpected ripple of fear rolled through Adam's belly as he let Rhone lead him to the place where they would marry. Up to this point, all the wedding planning had taken place through e-mails and over the phone, and in a strange way that kept the whole process at a distance and made it almost unreal.

Now, here they were.

Adam didn't have any family to speak of who would celebrate this union with him. His parents had disowned him and kicked him out when he was sixteen, and had only reinforced their intolerance of his homosexuality when he'd tried seeing them one more time a number of years ago. His mother and father cutting him out of their lives hadn't bothered him in a long time, but his *tía*... Adam's heart constricted where he stood. His aunt Loretta was another story. His *tía* had lived with them, and for all intents and purposes, had raised him and loved him for the first

sixteen years of his life. Her inability to get past Adam's being gay still made him hurt all over when he thought about it too much.

Not that Rhone would have family members coming out of his ears for this wedding either. Canin was Rhone's only blood relative who would attend. Rhone's mother had passed away when he was just a little boy, and his father had checked out of the responsibility of raising two small sons not long after her death. Their grandmother had taken care of them, made them into the men they now were, but she had died a while ago too.

We make our own way now.

Adam exhaled slowly. They had their own created family these days. And on Monday, their guests would join them in Vermont. Then, on New Year's Eve, just before midnight, he and Rhone would exchange their vows in a little chapel on the hotel grounds.

In less than a week, I'll be legally bound to Rhone.

Whoa.

Adam swayed.

"Adam?" Rhone whipped his arm around Adam's waist and kept him from falling. "What's the matter? Talk to me, baby."

"Sir?" One of the door attendants rushed to Adam, slipped an arm around him too, and helped situate him upright. "Are you all right? Can I get you some help?" The man looked back at his coworker. "Go get a bottle of water for him." Concern filled deep blue eyes as the guy looked from Adam to Rhone. "Maybe we should get your friend inside and sit him down."

Adam quickly regained his footing and equilibrium and looked up into two sets of worried eyes. "I'm sorry; I'm fine. I promise. I just feel like an idiot." Adam glanced at the dark-haired door attendant and burned with discomfort. He turned his gaze back to Rhone and felt himself blush even darker. "I absorbed the fact that we're finally here, and it hit me that this is really happening."

"Hell yeah it is." Rhone winked and caressed his palm down Adam's waist to his hip. "Better not faint on me at the altar." Leaning down, he whispered oh-so-very-softly in Adam's ear, "Or else I'll make you ten times redder with the method I use to bring you out of your swoon." He licked his tongue into Adam's ear and shot a reaction straight down to his cock.

Before Adam could stammer a reply, Rhone pulled away and put his full attention on the hotel employee. “I think he’ll be okay.” He stuck out his hand. “Thank you for jumping in so fast.”

“I’m glad I was close by.” The man clasped Rhone’s hand and pumped it in a large one of his own. “My name is Wes. I do a little bit of everything in the hotel, so if you need anything, just let me know.”

“I’m Rhone”—Rhone’s arm moved up to around Adam’s shoulders—“and this is Adam.”

Adam shook the young man’s hand too. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Wes swept open one of the tall glass doors of the hotel and gestured to the understated opulence on the other side. “Welcome to the Astor-Grand. Enjoy your stay.”

Rhone hooked his arm around Adam’s neck, yanked him in, and pecked a kiss to his temple. “Come on, stud.” He chuckled. “Let’s go check in.”

* * * * *

“Here is the chapel.” Eliza, the hotel event planner the Astor-Grand had put in charge of Rhone and Adam’s wedding, threw open the doors to the small stone building. “As you can see, it is almost completely decorated for a wedding that will take place tomorrow, but rest assured I have your flowers scheduled to arrive the morning of the thirty-first, and all will be in place for your ceremony.”

Uh, yeah. Rhone cringed at the explosion of pink and purple ribbons and frippery that overwhelmed the simple, charming structure. The chapel had ten rows of pews on both sides of the center aisle, and when Rhone pulled Adam inside and looked up, he noticed a tiny balcony above with a thick, dark-wood railing.

Rhone dropped his line of sight back down, and a giant fuchsia bow attached to the humble stone wall assaulted his vision. Seeing their planner busy taking a call, Rhone dipped down to Adam and kept his voice low. “What do you think?” he asked. “Is Barbie getting married here tomorrow?”

Adam covered his mouth, but not before a snicker slipped free. His face sobered, and then he straightened and said, “Be nice, Rhone.” Adam turned in a circle, taking in the decor. “The bride might be very young. If this is her dream, then she should be allowed to have it.”

The event planner stepped back in. “I apologize for cutting our tour short, but I have a situation brewing that I have to address.” The woman spread her arms in welcome as she walked backward to the doors. “Feel free to stay in the chapel for as long as you want. Just let the employee waiting outside know when you leave so that he can lock up.”

After the woman left, Rhone and Adam wandered around the small chapel hand in hand, and Rhone just enjoyed the hell out of Adam's wide, dark eyes taking everything in. Adam was smart, capable, and part owner of their very successful security firm, but Rhone could still look at Adam and instinctively know when he was mentally pinching himself inside to assure himself that something special was really happening. Adam was twenty-nine years old and sexy-as-all-get-out, but in this moment, Rhone could see the teenager Adam used to be: a young man whose parents had kicked him out of his home for being gay, forever changing Adam into someone who wasn't sure he deserved a good life.

That was just one of the reasons Rhone had been so goddamned stunned when Adam proposed. Not that Rhone didn't believe Adam loved him and wanted a legal commitment, but rather that Adam still, all these years later, had moments of fear that he would wake up one morning to find everything important in his life gone.

Including Rhone.

Not in a million years.

Till death do us part. Rhone didn't need to speak the words. He'd felt the truth of them for far longer than the two years since he found out Adam was in love with him, and immediately realized himself that he was crazy mad in love with Adam too.

Vows won't change it; they'll just seal the deal.

Rhone spotted a narrow flight of stairs tucked in the back corner of the chapel. “Come on.” He crowded Adam from behind and guided him to the steps. “Let's go take a look from upstairs.”

Dogging Adam's backside all the way up the steps, Rhone entered the tiny loft that only had enough room for one small pew. He followed Adam to the railing and settled in behind him, caging him with his arms braced on the thick wood rail. Adam's warmth—Christ, he was always warm—sank into Rhone's chest and belly and worked its way deep into him in a comforting embrace.

“Damn, honey,” Rhone murmured as he looked down into the body of the chapel. “We’ll be meeting at that altar in less than a week.” Tucking Adam against him, Rhone rested his chin on his partner’s head. “Can you believe it?”

Adam leaned into Rhone and twined their arms against his stomach. “It’s hard to picture what our ceremony will look like within the ocean of pink and purple taking over the place right now.”

Rhone bit back a snort. “Do you think I’ve forgotten just how great I know your imagination is?” He baited Adam with a tickle to his side. Since becoming a couple, Rhone had coaxed stories out of Adam about Adam’s past penchant for eavesdropping on Rhone having sex with women. One thin wall had separated their bedrooms in the apartment they’d shared for a lot of years, and during some of that time, Adam admitted that he had listened in and pleased himself, all the while envisioning Rhone in bed with him. “Because your descriptions of what you did to yourself in your bedroom were vivid enough that I can still close my eyes and see you pushing that dildo in and out of your sweet ass while moaning my name.”

“Rhone!” Adam hissed under his breath. He tried to turn around, but Rhone held him in place. “We’re in a church,” he added in an equally low voice.

“Not technically,” Rhone argued. “It’s a chapel. And it was built by a hotel for the purpose of creating cozy weddings, not for Sunday services. It’s not as if we’re standing in the Vatican.”

Adam’s fingers dug into Rhone’s forearms. “Still...” Tension ran through the body in front of Rhone, but a breathiness laced that one word and stirred Rhone’s cock to attention.

Rhone pressed his nose into Adam’s hair and grew even harder from inhaling his partner’s natural, spicy scent. “I have a two-track mind, Adam.” He slipped his hand inside Adam’s jacket, undid the buttons on his shirt, and rubbed his palm across the plane of hard muscles beneath his hand. “Work and you.” He grazed his fingers over the pointed tips of Adam’s nipples, and his own balls swelled in response. “And work isn’t anywhere in my thoughts right now.”

Adam covered Rhone’s hand, nudged his ass into Rhone’s cock, and moaned low. “Rhone...”

Putting his mouth to Adam’s ear, Rhone nipped the sensitive skin behind. “Look down and picture it. Let the pink and purple disappear and see the leafy green sprays attached to the end of each pew.” His hand drifted down to Adam’s belt and undid the buckle. The zipper on his jeans

sighed in the quiet space as it came down, and Rhone slipped his hand inside Adam's underwear. "Imagine the altar with white and green arrangements, with bands of sheer gray ribbon running through them." Adam's cock burned with heat and hardness beneath Rhone's hand. Moved by his own need, Rhone closed his fingers around Adam's thickness and stroked up and down the velvety-smooth length.

Fuck, he feels good.

Rhone gripped his man tighter and pulled on his dick again.

A little moan escaped Adam, even as he covered Rhone's hand on his crotch and stilled the caress. "You shouldn't."

"Shh, it's okay." Rhone moved Adam's hand to the side and pushed his jeans and underwear down in the front, freeing Adam's erection from his clothes. "Keep looking down into the chapel and picture the black carpet runners going down the main aisle and across the first row of pews." Letting go for just a moment, Rhone licked both his palms, slicking them up for a better drag. He put both hands into the mix and tugged fist over fist, constantly keeping Adam's cock covered. He teased the leaking tip with pressure, making Adam whimper. "Can you see our group of friends and family all dressed up and whispering to each other with excitement while they wait for the ceremony to start?"

"Yeah." Letting his head fall back on Rhone's shoulder, Adam began to pump his hips into the handjob, and his voice grew heavy with his arousal. "They look happy for us."

"They are." Rhone gritted his teeth as his prick hardened to past painful, but he ignored his need and kept every bit of focus on the man in his arms. "Now put your attention on the side entrances and see us both emerge in our suits and ties, and watch as we walk from opposite sides and meet in the middle."

"You look so amazing." Adam sucked his lower lip between his teeth and groaned low. His hips jerked all over the place as Rhone reached between his legs and massaged his balls.

Adam exhaled slowly, and he fused his fingers more deeply into Rhone's forearms with every long, full drag on his erection and manipulation of his nuts. "From the moment I met you"—Adam turned his head and buried his face in Rhone's neck—"I always thought you were the most handsome man I'd ever seen."

Adam's blind devotion to Rhone's harsh features that didn't come anywhere close to traditionally attractive made Rhone's blood race and his heart skip a beat. "With your Cuban and Spanish blood, I don't think I've ever looked upon anyone as striking as you. Wedding suit or completely naked."

Adam bit Rhone's jaw, leaving a sting, and scraped his teeth across his flesh. "Please, I'm so close." He slid a hand down and covered Rhone's on his cock, forcing a tighter, harder pumping motion up and down his length. "Finish it."

"Listen to us, baby." No longer just for Adam, Rhone's blood sped through his body at a breakneck pace as he found himself caught up in the fantasy that would become reality in just days. "Listen to us repeating the vows of loving, honoring, and cherishing that the justice of the peace recites." His voice thickened, sharp with emotion, and he finished softly, "Listen to us saying I do."

Adam cried out in response, the sound muted against Rhone's jaw. His entire body jerked and shuddered, and his cock and testicles swelled under Rhone's touch. Rhone moved his hand to Adam's slit just in time and captured the spurts of seed he released as he came.

Warm, sticky cum coated Rhone's hand. As if he'd been doing it his whole life, he licked another man's essence off his palm and fingers, growling low in his throat as he savored the smoky, bitter taste that was Adam.

Adam's dark, beguiling gaze slid between Rhone's mouth and his shiny digits. Then he put some space between them and grasped the balcony railing, as if he needed help to hold himself up. "God"—he stared as Rhone tongue cleaned his hand—"you kill me when you do that."

Needing another taste, Rhone leaned in and captured Adam's mouth in a deep, searching kiss. He tugged Adam's head back, slanted his lips, and let Adam taste himself. Adam slid his tongue along Rhone's and captured it between his teeth, tugging, and Rhone trembled at the intimacy, unlike any he'd shared with another soul in his life.

"Christ, honey." Rhone shook his head and swallowed, fighting off every whisper-soft contact from his underwear against his sac and cock, which felt like dozens of fingers dancing along his sensitized flesh. "You do me in every time you respond to me so completely." He glanced down, saw Adam's dick still half-hard, sitting outside his underwear and jeans, and had to turn away. "Give me a minute, and we can take that walk through the formal gardens."

Adam circled Rhone slowly. His hand drifted down Rhone's back to around his hip, and the gossamer-light touch ended on Rhone's straining erection pushing against his jeans. Adam looked up, and a naughty, lusty light glinted in his black gaze. "You don't really think I'm going to leave you hard and unsatisfied, do you?" Without breaking eye contact, Adam undid Rhone's belt, button, and zipper and quickly had his clothes bunched around his hips. "Hold on tight"—he dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around Rhone's thighs—"and enjoy the thank-you." After one last sultry look up, Adam opened his mouth and swallowed half of Rhone's cock in his heavenly wet mouth.

Rhone bit down a roar of pleasure. He bowed back as Adam pulled up with incredible suction and sent every nerve ending in his prick into overdrive. Rhone's bare ass bunched into tight knots of muscle, and the cool air permeating the chapel could not penetrate even a millimeter of his flesh. Adam relaxed his jaw and took Rhone deeper inside, sucking gently. Rhone reached backward blindly, latching his hands around the balcony railing. His slit kissed the back of Adam's throat, and Rhone forced his fingertips painfully into the wood in an effort to stave off coming.

Dropping his head back, Rhone swallowed convulsively, struggling against the swelling in his sac and tingling in his nuts. Adam bobbed that pretty mouth of his up and down Rhone's rock-hard erection, and Rhone could feel every goddamn lick, kiss, and suck as he stared into the chapel, the image upside down, and tried to focus on something that would cool his ardor.

The problem was, Rhone had done such an effective job painting a picture of them tying the knot that he could see nothing else himself. He moaned loud and deep with need and pleasure, the sound coming from all the way in his gut. His core twisted with physical and emotional desire, and he couldn't be sure if he responded to Adam licking down and sucking on his balls with the most incredible, insane pressure, or the image in his mind of him and Adam kissing with aching tenderness after the justice of the peace announced them wed.

His nuts contracted painfully and fast. The zip of acute, perfect pleasure ripped up his spine and into his belly, and Rhone jerked up straight just in the nick of time. He grabbed Adam's hair and drove his cock past his partner's lips, apologized for the rough handling, and scraped his own esophagus raw as he stuffed his shout of release back down into his body. Rhone shook and shook and shook instead, and held a fistful of Adam's hair tight in his grip as

he dumped a load of ejaculate into the man's mouth and down his throat. He pumped his hips a half dozen times, letting every drop out, until he finally went still.

Adam surged to his feet. He shoved his hand between Rhone's legs and burrowed his fingers between his buttocks until he reached Rhone's hole. "I need to make love to you." His eyes burned with midnight, and his voice held complete command. "Right now." He pressed his digit against Rhone's shivering pucker with force.

Oh yes. Rhone craved nothing more than Adam buried deep inside him. "Please fuck me." One of them always carried a convenience packet of lube, and the other took care of individually wrapped wipes. "I want your cock in my ass too." He turned and rubbed his crease into Adam's prick, moaning as the thick, rigid length split his cheeks.

Just as Rhone grabbed for the railing and bent over, two voices whispering furiously drifted up to them in the balcony, and Adam tackled Rhone to the floor.

Chapter Two

Company.

Oh crap.

His excitement doused with the frigid water of reality, Adam landed on top of Rhone as they hit the thinly carpeted floor. With his heart racing like mad, he quickly dragged Rhone behind the wall and out of sight of whoever had just entered the chapel.

Mouthing the word *oow*, Rhone rubbed his bare butt cheeks and shifted to lean against the stone wall. He put his mouth right on Adam's ear and spoke under his breath. "Thanks a lot. You put rug burn on my ass."

This man. Biting his lip to keep from laughing, Adam put his finger to his lips in a shushing motion. He turned Rhone's head and whispered urgently in his ear, "Pull yourself together and do up your pants." He righted his own jeans and did up the buttons on his shirt in record time. "We have to get out of here without anyone noticing us."

Voices, distinctly identifiable as one male and one female, rose up to the balcony again, louder this time, in an argument.

Rhone turned to Adam, his mouth pulling in a frown. "I don't think someone noticing us is going to be a problem."

Eavesdropping was part of their business, and Adam found it incredibly difficult to turn off the switch in his brain that told him this wasn't work and not to listen in.

"You can't do this to me now," the woman hissed furiously. "That wasn't our deal."

"It's a good place that can be great with the right help." The man's voice remained as calm as the woman's was frantic. "I am the right person to make it happen. I've seen more of the inside workings now. I like it, and I'm not backing down."

“Fine.” The woman snapped off the word like a shard of ice. “Be a jackass and insist on this, but I swear if you do, I’ll put an end to this whole mess right now.”

“No, you won’t. You want it too badly to walk away.” The guy’s voice reeked of cool and confidence.

“You don’t think I’ll play chicken with you?” the woman said.

Adam peered around the edge of the wall and spotted a petite, freckled redhead leaning right up into a suited man’s face.

“Go ahead, Ford,” she went on. “Give it your best shot. I’ll crash into you head-on and take us both out before I let you take over this hotel.”

“You’re welcome to try.” Ford didn’t back down from the woman invading his space. Rather, he took off his wire-framed glasses, wiped them on his lapel, and slipped them back on before adding, “You’ll find I don’t frighten easily.”

A shout of feminine laughter echoed within the chapel walls. “I seem to remember a certain someone running to my room and begging to sleep on my floor because he swore he saw a ghost in his bedroom.”

“I was five, Annie.”

“And I was eleven. So what? That will always be my first impression of you.”

The man opened his mouth, but light streaming into the chapel from someone else opening the doors again flooded the room below, and he snapped it shut. As an entourage worthy of an army swarmed the area, the man and woman split apart, avoiding each other and the group.

Wow.

Sex no longer even remotely on his mind, Adam’s belly twisted with sick. He lifted his gaze to Rhone’s and breathed through the discomfort. “I don’t like that we overheard that.” Honesty kept him talking. “Or that I got so caught up in it.”

“*We.*” Guilt that Adam imagined must be visible in his own eyes mirrored back at him in Rhone’s pale gaze. “I was here and listening just as intently too.” He leaned across Adam, pressing their chests together as he peered around the wall. “I think there are enough people down there talking over each other that we should be able to slip out unnoticed. Let’s get out before we hear anything more.”

Adam liked that plan a whole lot. At this point, it wasn't so much about not getting caught in the balcony for their own sakes; now, Adam didn't want that couple to know there had been someone inside the chapel witnessing their fight.

Rhone crawled on all fours around the back of the short pew until he reached protective wall covering. Adam followed. With a hand outstretched waiting when he got there, Rhone pulled Adam to his feet and guided them down the narrow flight of stairs.

They flew down the final steps, casually hugged the back wall without incident, turned for the exit, and looked up into the butterscotch-colored eyes of the woman from the fight. She leaned against the wall with her hands shoved into the front pockets of her loose-fitting pants, and stains of pink did battle with her freckles for the most prominent feature on her face.

Her focus drifted from Adam and Rhone, to the upper balcony, and then narrowed as it traveled across the span of the chapel to the chestnut-haired man with his head down and his shoulders hunched. Even with his face averted, Adam recognized him as the other half of this woman's previous fight. Ford.

Returning her attention to them, she pushed back her shoulders and said, "Heard all that, did you?"

Steady as a rock, Rhone stepped up in that solid, commanding way of his Adam so loved. "We'll never speak a word of it." He produced a business card and handed it over. "It's our business to know how to keep our mouths shut. Rhone Quinn. Adam Reyes." He put his hand on Adam's back and brought him into the intimate circle. "We own a security firm in Chicago. Private investigation is occasionally part of our gig too. What we heard is already forgotten."

"Thank you for your discretion." The woman shook Rhone's and Adam's hands. "I'd rather not have the particulars of that conversation floating around the hotel. Annabelle Astor." She introduced herself. "But everyone except my grandmother calls me Annie."

Oh, well then. Adam was an expert at keeping an even expression, but fuck, no wonder she didn't want stories about herself flying around the hotel. She owned the damn thing. Or someone in her family likely did anyway.

One of the women in the chattering group called Annie's name and clapped her hands together as if signaling an animal to heel.

Annie shook her head, and she couldn't hide a trembling in her fingers as she buttoned her coat. Her light brown gaze settled back on Adam and Rhone, and none of the fire that had been there when she'd thought herself alone with Ford remained. "I apologize for my rudeness, but I cannot be a happy bride-to-be right now. I have to get out of here." She took a glance across the room again, held on Ford for a moment, and then slipped out of the chapel.

"Let's get out of here too." Rhone put his hand in Adam's and tugged.

Adam let Rhone pull him but looked over his shoulder and found the man who had to be Annie's fiancé still at the front end of the chapel, his stare locked on the door Annie had just vacated.

Once they were outside, Adam zipped his coat and fell in beside Rhone. As he did, he couldn't help glancing back at the stone chapel one more time. "You don't think the pink and purple could be for her, do you?"

"Hell if I know anything about other people's tastes, but she didn't strike me as the frou-frou type. And the guy she was doing battle with, who I would guess is the groom-to-be"—Rhone shot Adam a look full of speculation and questions—"didn't strike me as the type to lie back and accept a prissy-ass wedding."

Clearly, neither Annie nor Ford was the type to sit back quietly, period—with each other anyway. "Do you think they're entering a merger marriage?" Adam asked aloud, to himself as much as Rhone. "Do they have those anymore?"

"Don't know." Rhone shrugged. "I assume if your wealth goes back generations, you might keep nudging marriages into more generational wealth so that you don't risk it going away."

"Or maybe they're both new wealth, and their families want them to grow the coffers together." Curiosity spiked Adam's adrenaline and gave him a surge of energy. He couldn't get the final looks of either Annie or her fiancé out of his mind either.

Adam moved in front of Rhone, faced him, and skipped backward to stay ahead of his big strides. "Did you do any research on this hotel before you showed it to me? Do we know anything about the people who own it?"

"Ohhhh no." Understanding and mischief swirled light and dark shades in Rhone's eyes. "You are not doing this." Rhone lunged and made a swipe for Adam, but Adam sidestepped him with a shout of laughter and started to run.

“What if I want to?” Adam threw out over his shoulder, his voice challenging.

“Then I'll keep you too busy to come up for air!” Rhone gave chase, hot on Adam's heels in the direction of the hotel. Adam ran across the open land, the grass somehow still thick and green in the dead of winter. His chest heaved with the rush of his sprint, and he almost made it to the back corner before Rhone grabbed him and spun him into the wall of the hotel.

Rhone had his arms around Adam's back and waist, cushioning the impact. Dipping down, he got eye to eye with Adam. “We are here to have fun, get married, and screw our brains out as a couple of horny-as-hell, happy grooms, not to get into other people's business and open an investigation.” His face suddenly sobered, and his gaze and mouth softened at the same time. “I love how you so automatically connect and empathize with people, but we are not getting into anyone's marriage this week but our own. It's not our business.” He cupped his hand around Adam's neck and lifted his face with a nudge of his thumb under his chin. “Okay?”

Melting, not truly emotionally invested in a fight, Adam slipped his arms around Rhone in a loose hold. “Okay.”

Rhone's mouth hovered over Adam's, and his breath made Adam's lips tingle. “Okay,” Rhone repeated. He scraped a kiss on Adam's lips, glanced up, and made eye contact, then brushed their lips together again. “Okay.”

He sank into a deeper kiss, and Adam moaned and let his jaw go lax, loving when his man took over his mouth. Adam had quickly discovered that Rhone loved to kiss, and Adam never grew tired of Rhone's holding his jaw open with a big, strong hand, or of his taste consuming Adam's mouth, or of his ardor, which sometimes simmered and other times exploded to epic proportions in record time. Fast or slow, soft or hard, deeply invasive or the shallowest of sips, Adam craved Rhone's mouth every second of every day.

Fingers burrowed into Adam's hips and pulled him closer, digging so deep, Adam hoped he'd see marks on his flesh tomorrow. Adam ground his growing erection against Rhone's already-hard bulge, and he slanted his mouth over Rhone's with force, aggressively kissing Rhone back in a way he'd only been passive up to this point.

Rhone reached back and pushed Adam's hand down to his ass, pressed their fingers into his crease through his jeans, and bit off a curse when Adam nudged his hole. He looked up, his eyes lit with pale fire. “I want you inside me.”

God, yes. Adam's testicles swelled and grew heavy with agreement. "Let's go back to the room."

"Let's." Rhone took a half step back but immediately stopped. Wincing, he reached down, groaning as he adjusted himself. With his breathing labored, he rested his forehead against Adam's and brushed his thumb across his lips. "Give me a minute to get my cock under control, and we can go inside."

"Good idea." Adam raised a brow and smiled. "I don't want to give the other guests any extra incentive to check out your dick." Looking down, he added, "It's all mine now," and caressed his partner's impressive length through his jeans.

Rhone glared. "That's not gonna help." He closed his hand around Adam's wrist and removed the contact from his crotch.

"Sorry." Adam took a step back and gave Rhone some space. "Zipping my lips and locking my hands down." He curled his lips in over his teeth and set his arms straight at his sides.

As soon as Adam and Rhone went silent, the strains of a male voice reached them with, "...nice people. Please don't make me."

Adam suddenly realized the chase he'd taken Rhone on had ended with them near the "employees only" area of the hotel. Now that he looked, he saw the STAFF ENTRANCE sign on the wall a few feet away, with an arrow pointing in the direction from which the voices came.

Another male voice, the tone cutting, said, "Are you saying no to me?"

"Please." The first man begged, his voice rising in pitch. "It can be someone else. *Anything* else. Wherever. However. Any other time, and I won't complain."

"You're complaining and defying me right now, and I am in charge." The second voice dropped to a hiss. "I don't have time to explain this shit to you again."

"But..."

The resounding *crack* of skin making contact with skin rent the air, and Rhone growled and started running. Adam wasn't far behind. They rounded the building and found two men standing outside the employee entrance. One of them was the door attendant who had helped grab Adam when he'd nearly fainted. Wes. A bright red handprint marked his cheek. With his face now pale, wetness filming his eyes, and his shoulders hunched, he almost looked like a

different man to Adam. His stance held a subservient quality that belied his superior height and more muscular frame to the guy standing next to him.

The only other person there, so clearly the person who had slapped Wes.

Adam sized up the second man, noting his white blond hair and tall, wiry frame. He wore a suit that signaled him as a hotel employee too, but something more subtle than Wes's doorman garb, so Adam guessed this other man to be management.

Bullying his employee.

Asshole.

Rhone stepped in close enough to the men to intimidate, but he barely spared a glance for the second man. "Everything okay here, Wes?" Rhone gentled his tone and treated Wes—a man who was Rhone's same height and build—with kid gloves. "You all right?"

Those eyes of Wes's, such an odd blue they might actually be purple, widened and darted from Rhone to the second man and back to Rhone. He immediately stiffened his spine and pushed back his shoulders. "Yes, I'm fine. I apologize for disrupting your walk." Wes looked at Adam and dipped his head with apology too. "Both of you."

"I am the one who needs to apologize." The blond man stepped in and stretched his hand out to Rhone. "My name is Jared Stafford, and I am the hotel's concierge. We are a bit short staffed at the moment, but I'm afraid I ignored that and was attempting to satisfy the needs of a guest by pulling Wes from a place where he is needed tomorrow. He was very rightly arguing his position, and I became too passionate on behalf of my guest."

Rhone left Jared's hand hanging unshaken. "I'm not the one you hit."

"Of course." Jared swiftly turned, cuffed Wes on the shoulder like one buddy does another, and pumped his hand in a forced shake. "Wes, I'm very sorry for becoming physical with you. If I need you to help me with a special guest, I should absolutely go through the proper channels to get your schedule changed. This won't happen again."

"Thank you." Wes shook Jared's offered hand, but his gaze didn't calm or steady, and his coloring remained a little green. "I should get back to work." He disappeared into the hotel without looking at anyone again.

Jared watched Wes go, then clasped his hands together. "Can I get you folks anything?" He turned on the helpful-employee charm, behaving as if what Adam and Rhone had just

witnessed had never happened. “Would you like an escort to guide you back to the formal garden path?”

Rhone didn't smile back. “We'll manage.”

“Very well,” Jared answered in an irritatingly pleasant tone. “And once again, I do apologize for my behavior. I can only hope you'll believe me when I say it's not indicative of how I operate or, more importantly, how the Astor-Grand treats its staff.” He offered an abbreviated bow. “Enjoy the rest of your stroll.” The concierge left them with that and went back inside the hotel.

The door started to open once again, and Rhone and Adam quickly retreated in the direction from which they'd come.

Rhone glanced at Adam with a grimace. “Jesus, twice in one hour. I can't even begin to imagine what we're going to overhear during dinner tonight.”

Adam no longer had an appetite. Not to mention a desire for a crowd. “Maybe we should just order room service.”

Rhone's sensual mouth became a thin, hard line. “That might not be a bad idea.”

“I wouldn't mind being alone with you anyway,” Adam murmured.

“Me either.”

An overwhelming love and appreciation for what he had with this amazing man washed over Adam in a wave. Unable to help himself, he slipped his arm around Rhone's waist and tugged him in close for the quiet walk to their room.

He loved it when Rhone automatically held him tight too.

* * * * *

December 27

Stopping at the stove, Rhone caressed Adam's ass and nipped his neck before moving past him to grab the juice from the fridge. After he poured both of them glasses, he settled down at the bar and just stared at his man. Christ, he loved watching Adam cook. Adam knew it and didn't mind doing it. Once Rhone and Adam had agreed to get married in Vermont, Rhone had made sure the hotel they were going to book for their stay offered rooms with fully functioning

kitchens. The Astor-Grand only had them in their highest-end, multiroom suites, which looked more like apartments than hotel rooms, but Adam had set his mind on this hotel as soon as he'd seen it, and Rhone would give Adam whatever the man wanted.

Goddamn it, he's sexy. Grinning to himself, Rhone shook his head as he sipped some orange juice. After first realizing his love and subsequent physical attraction to Adam, for a time afterward, Rhone used to constantly stop himself midthought, shocked and bemused that he could so automatically think another man sexy after having never experienced attraction to his own sex before. Now, the thought slipped into Rhone's consciousness like breathing. Adam was sexy. Rhone could now see some men, generally speaking, as sexy. It no longer registered as something of an oddity at all.

He let his gaze slide up and down Adam's backside, loving the sinewy muscles that worked efficiently under the taut, deep olive skin covering his back. Black flannel bottoms covered his lower half, but Rhone had worshipped every inch of that flesh so completely over the last two years that he didn't need to see it bare to picture Adam nude. Rhone let his attention drift to Adam's arms and hands, which deftly handled two pans, one with frying bacon and the other shaping the perfect omelet, and his chest ached at his good fortune. He hadn't ever thought it possible to love someone the way he did Adam, and now he couldn't imagine going through life without him.

A deep-seated rumble of denial sounded from Rhone's gut just in *thinking* about losing this person.

Adam looked over his shoulder with a quick, pointed glance. "Stop grumbling. The food will be ready fast enough." He turned back around and smoothly transferred the large omelet to a plate. "Why don't you check and see if they delivered a paper to us? There's supposed to be one outside our door every morning. Maybe after we eat, we can sift through it and find something to explore in town today."

"Sounds like a plan." Rhone put his juice down and moved across the suite. "I'll be right back."

Rhone swung open the door and nearly tripped over Wes.

"Oh hi," Wes said. He wore a different uniform today, a blue vest, tie, and crisp white shirt that Rhone recognized as the garb worn by the people handling the reception desk. "I was just

about to knock.” Wes offered Rhone an envelope. “These are a gift of free services from the hotel, but particularly from Mr. Stafford and myself for what you witnessed yesterday. We apologize again for what happened.”

“*You* don't have any reason to say you're sorry.” Heat bubbled in Rhone's core all over again. “The man hit you, and last night my partner and I debated taking what we saw to ownership and having him formally reprimanded, if not fired.”

Wes grabbed Rhone's forearms in a crushing hold. “Please don't do that. Thank you for stepping in, but Jared just surprised me; that's all. I was stunned into silence for a moment, and that's what you and your friend saw.” He glanced away, and Rhone watched his throat move in a visible swallow before he finally made eye contact again. “I wouldn't have let him hit me a second time.”

Rhone studied Wes and put him at about twenty years of age. He ignored Wes's size and frame, which nearly equaled his own; he looked past the professional appearance that didn't have a stitch or hem out of place and into unique blue eyes that didn't dart or waver under Rhone's scrutinizing stare. Everything physical about the man matched the strong tone of Wes's voice today, but Rhone couldn't shake the difference between this person and the frightened man of yesterday afternoon.

I don't know if I believe him.

“Sir?” Wes prompted, pulling Rhone's attention back to the conversation.

“I hope that's true,” Rhone finally said. “I hope you will push back if Jared bothers you again.”

“I will. I promise.” Wes looked right into Rhone's eyes, and he sounded a little out of breath. “Thank you.” His palms slowly slid down Rhone's forearms to his hands and curled around the backs. “If you ever need anything while you're here, come find me, and I'll make sure you get it.” The man's thumbs started brushing back and forth over the pulse points in Rhone's wrists, shocking Rhone into stillness for a moment.

Fingers started to thread into the backs of Rhone's, and Rhone yanked his hands away.

“Adam and I will keep that in mind,” Rhone answered, his tone curt. “Thank you for these.” He maneuvered the envelope out of Wes's hand. “If you'll excuse me, I have breakfast waiting for me.”

“Right.” Wes clasped his hands behind his back, and his face bloomed with color. “I have to get to work myself.” He pointed in the direction of the employee elevator and took fast strides away. “Bye.” His voice echoed with softness back to Rhone.

Disturbed, Rhone scooped the paper off the floor, shut the door, and rejoined Adam in the kitchen.

“Who was that?” Adam asked. He had plates of food ready and waiting on the bar. “I heard voices.”

“Wes was outside our door just now.” Rhone tossed the newspaper onto the kitchen counter. “He was giving us these”—he held out the envelope—“courtesy of the hotel, as an apology for what we witnessed yesterday.”

Adam accepted the envelope with the vouchers. “Okay.” He pulled one piece of paper out of the envelope and looked down at it quickly. “This one is for the fancier restaurant in the hotel. I suppose that's nice.”

“Babe...” Rhone hesitated, uncertain, but he never lied or kept secrets from Adam. He lifted his gaze to the question in his partner's eyes. “I think Wes just put a move on me.”

Chapter Three

Adam's jaw dropped.

He pushed it closed himself and cocked his head at a befuddled-looking Rhone. “What do you mean, Wes put a move on you?” Rhone remained standing in place, so Adam eased him into one of the chairs at the bar, took the other one himself, and swiveled Rhone to face him. “Are you saying he hit on you?”

Pursing his lips, Rhone looked to be in an absolute state of shock. Almost sweetly so. He picked up on women flirting with him—and many did, to Adam's great frustration—but men hitting on him still tended to go right over his head.

“I'm not sure, but I think so,” Rhone finally answered. “Here's what he did.”

Rhone went through the entire conversation that had taken place between himself and Wes, and he used his hands, explaining that he was acting as Wes, and Adam was Rhone.

The webbing of Adam's fingers tingled with life under Rhone's intimate caress. “Okay, well, that's definitely sending out a signal.” He rubbed his skin and tried to dissipate the unpleasant thought of someone else's doing that to Rhone. “Wes was deliberately touching you, and not in an innocuous way.”

“Why would he do that?” Rhone asked. He picked up his fork and took a huge bite of his omelet but kept his chair shifted to face Adam. “He's seen us together twice now. It's blatantly obvious to anyone who looks at us that I belong to you.”

Holy fuck. Adam's legs went a little shaky, so it was a damn good thing he was already sitting down. Rhone said stuff like that so offhandedly that it filled Adam's heart to the brim and made him feel like the single most important person in the world.

Bingo. Adam snapped his fingers as the light clicked on in his brain. “That's why exactly.”

Rhone paused with a slice of bacon poised at his mouth. “Why, what?”

“You don't see this in yourself, Rhone, but you make people feel special and necessary. And safe. God, how you make them feel safe.” For all his years of security training, Adam still never felt more secure than when he was with Rhone. The sensations Rhone evoked just...enveloped a person in big, strong arms. “You did that with Wes yesterday when you stepped in with that asshole, and now he has a crush on you. It's complete hero worship. Believe me; I know the feeling. I've been there.”

“You stepped in yesterday too,” Rhone pointed out. “You were there.”

“But you did all the talking. I never got a word in. You took charge in that way you do, and Wes is all *melty* inside now.”

“I don't like it.” Rhone pulled a face that made him look like he'd swallowed lemon juice instead of orange. “It's uncomfortable.”

“I would guess it's harmless, and we're here for less than a week,” Adam answered. Rhone probably didn't understand how painful a one-sided crush could be. Adam remembered, and he couldn't help his chest twisting for Wes and something that would never happen. “You go ahead and maintain a safe distance. I'll keep an eye open, and if it looks like he's going in for another move, I'll take care of it myself.” No matter how much Adam empathized, the guy wasn't getting his hands anywhere near Rhone again. *Not my man; get your own.* “Count on it.”

Rhone tapped Adam on the chest. “You better protect me.”

Adam chuckled. “Oh, I will. Nobody is hitting on you except me.” He claimed a fast, hard kiss, biting off the other half of Rhone's slice of bacon for himself as he did it.

“Hey!” Rhone made a grab for empty air, where the bacon used to be. “That was mine. You have your own.”

Adam just leaned in and kissed Rhone again. With a moan, Rhone didn't complain about sharing his breakfast again.

* * * * *

“Oh no.” Adam ground to a halt next to Rhone just inside the entrance to the coffeehouse. “I didn't plan this. You know I didn't.”

Voices already familiar to Adam wafted across the warm air in heated tones.

Annie and Ford. Apparently disagreeing again.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

Adam and Rhone had purchased one-day passes and spent the day learning how to snowboard on a nearby mountain. They hadn't thought about anyone or anything except having fun and being alone for one last day before their guests arrived tomorrow morning. They'd had a nice, relaxing dinner in town, wandered the brick-paved streets, and looked into store windows, happily doing nothing but being quiet together. Spotting the coffeehouse, Rhone had suggested a hot chocolate before heading back to the hotel for the night. Adam had lazily agreed and let himself be pulled inside the establishment.

So much for avoiding outside distractions by steering clear of the hotel all day.

"You can have anything else." Annie's voice rose, reaching Adam and Rhone clearly. Adam guessed she didn't realize there was anyone in the place other than the half-asleep barista behind the counter. "All you have to do is ask. You know that's true."

"I don't want anything else," Ford answered. "I want half of the Astor-Grand. Talking me blue in the face isn't going to get me to change my mind."

"Why are you being such a stubborn, spoiled bastard about this?"

That got Ford out of his chair and leaning over Annie with a hand planted on the table in front of her. "There's not a spoiled bone in my body, but maybe I'm just acting like the little boy you keep accusing me of being." His voice rang with passion in a way it hadn't in the chapel yesterday. "Talk to me like an adult, Annie, not *at* me like I'm a child, and maybe the answer will become clear." He pushed off the table and straightened. "Excuse me. I'll take a cab back to the hotel."

Ford rounded a planter and came face-to-face with Adam and Rhone. Recognition registered in his green eyes. "Evening," he murmured, his tone formal. He then pushed past them without another word and left the casual establishment.

Annie popped up and spotted them from over the leafy divider wall. "Oh hell." She flopped back in her seat. "You guys again. Wonderful."

Adam and Rhone approached, and Annie chuckled, the sound miserable.

"I thought we'd have some anonymity away from the hotel," Annie shared. "So much for that." She fiddled with the mug sitting in front of her. "I hope I can count on your discretion again."

“Ahh, sure,” Adam answered but became distracted by Rhone's leaving them to go place their order.

“Take a seat.” Annie eased out the chair next to her. “Not that I'll be good company.” Her gaze drifted to the picture window and narrowed on Ford as the man crossed the street. “Jerk.”

Adam opened his mouth but immediately closed it with a snap as he watched Rhone approach with two mugs in his hands.

This week is for us. Rhone's desire for some alone time echoed in Adam's mind.

Turning back from the window, Annie must have caught the curiosity in Adam's demeanor. “You're wondering why I'm calling the man I intend to marry in a week a jerk.”

“Weellll...”

After taking a seat and putting down their drinks, Rhone curled his hand around Adam's thigh under the table. He gave a little squeeze, and Adam interpreted the touch. *It's all right, babe.* Rhone's caress spoke with a gentle indulgence. *Go ahead and ask your questions.*

“We can't help but be a little curious,” Adam said as he blew steam from the top of his drink.

“I'm not surprised, considering what you've overheard.” Annie grimaced, but the frown looked more sad than angry. “Ford and I have known each other since we were kids. I thought that meant I could go to him and strike a deal between us that would be mutually beneficial.”

“What kind of deal?” Adam asked, although he figured he could take a pretty good educated guess.

“I'm thirty years old, and my mom and grandmother want me to get married. Obviously to someone they deem suitable.” Annie rolled her eyes at that. “They go on and on about why aren't I dating someone or why won't I go out with men they want to set me up with, and it not only bothers me, but listening to it incessantly gets on my father's last nerve. I decided to use that to my advantage.”

Adam took a sip of cocoa and savored the warm, rich flavor. “How?”

“I want to run the Astor-Grand.” Annie's voice softened, and her eyes lit with the light of a kid gaining the freedom of riding her first bike. “I've loved that hotel since I was six years old, and my grandmother took me for my first formal tea.” The faraway gentleness left her gaze, and

her voice slipped to that hard place Adam had witnessed her use with Ford twice now. “But even though I have business and hotel-management degrees, and I have the practical experience of running another hotel under my belt, my father doesn't think I have the chops to oversee the Astor-Grand. I figured I could kill two birds with one stone. I approached Ford, got him to agree to the particulars of a marriage deal, then went to my father and told him I would go through with it, get my mother and grandmother off his ass about me once and for all, *if* he would allow me to take over the Astor-Grand on the day I got married.”

“And your father agreed?” Rhone asked.

“Yes.” She nodded. “And my mother and grandmother were ecstatic. All sounds good so far, right?”

“I don't know.” The mercenary nature of it left Adam a little cold.

“What's in it for Ford?” Rhone wondered.

“Ford's father and my father were great friends,” Anne explained. “But Ford's father died when he was still just a kid. Even though Ford's mother is still alive and well, my dad took it upon himself and became almost a surrogate parent to Ford. Ford came with us every summer when we went away on trips, and he always kept my father apprised of how he was doing in school.” A sweet smile turned Annie's face downright pretty, but she quickly flattened her lips and straightened, pulling herself back in line. “Sorry, that's not what you asked. Anyway, Ford's mother didn't want to have the responsibilities of Ford's father's businesses, and so she sold them one by one, over time. My father took over one of them. It's a ski resort near here called Ryan's Lodge.”

“Oh”—Adam perked up—“we drove up there today. It's nice.”

“Yeah, it is. It's named after Ford's grandfather. It was his first business. It started out modest and became his most successful. I got my father to agree to turn over control of Ryan's Lodge to Ford upon our marriage. As long as we stay married, and Ford proves he knows what he's doing, in five years, complete ownership of the lodge will convert to Ford's name. Only now”—a hard glint sparked in Annie's eyes again—“Ford doesn't only want Ryan's Lodge. He wants to help run the Astor-Grand too.”

Rhone finished his hot chocolate and got up to put his mug on a bussing tray. “Didn't you get the deal in writing?” he asked as he sat back down.

"Papers are drawn up, but nothing gets signed until we say 'I do,'" Annie answered. "Ford wants to amend it to say that we will co-run both places, rather than him one and me the other."

Adam sat up. "And your dad doesn't find Ford reneging on his end of the deal offensive?"

"No." An actual, genuine smile took over Annie's face, and she even laughed. "He thinks it's shrewd and that Ford is trying to get the best deal possible, since the Astor-Grand is the more lucrative of the two hotels. He respects Ford's killer instincts. It's what he would expect his own sons to do, and he already thinks of Ford as another son. If it didn't screw me over so badly in the process, I'd respect it myself."

"You have brothers?" Adam didn't know why, but he'd judged Annie an only child.

"Two." Annie crossed one leg over the other, adjusted the hem of her skirt, and went on. "Both older, both very smart and capable businessmen. I half wish I could say they're dolts and my father is being a sexist idiot by not giving his sharp only daughter control of one of his biggest assets, but my oldest brother, Robert, runs the Astor-Grand right now and does a very good job." Her gaze drifted in the direction of the hotel, which was miles away, and Adam watched as longing took her over and made her tone quiet. "I love it in a way he doesn't, though, so I could do better."

Adam exchanged a *Should I?* look with Rhone, and Rhone nodded.

"What does your brother have to say about being booted out by his sister and her husband on the day they marry?" Adam asked, treading carefully.

"Oh, he's fine." Annie waved her hand negligently. "There are other businesses for him to sink his teeth into, and he'll look forward to the challenge."

Rhone rubbed Adam's knee and picked up the thread that had clearly occurred to them both. "So there's no chance he's manipulating Ford into this sudden change of heart in an attempt to get you to call off the wedding, thereby allowing him to keep his gig at the Astor-Grand?" His voice held none of Adam's finesse; blunt tended to be Rhone's style.

"No. Absolutely not." Nothing in Annie showed any hint of suspicion or pause. "Robert is the kind of guy who is emotionally cold in terms of business. None of it is personal to him. He can be ruthless, but he's successful with that icy negotiating style because he really can walk away without caring if things don't go his way. He sees moving on from the Astor-Grand as another stepping-stone. No big deal."

“Then there must be another reason,” Rhone argued, making Adam bite back a smile. *Doesn't want to get involved, my ass.* “People don't do things, just because, without motivation. There is always a reason for a person's choices. What does Ford say are his?”

“That he has ideas that can make the Astor-Grand great, and he wants to make sure he has a legal means to assure his voice is heard.”

“And you don't buy that,” Rhone pressed.

“Oh no”—Annie's pitch rose comically—“I *completely* believe him. What's pissing me off is that he's messing with me and changing the deal we came to, just the two of us, in good faith.” Annie went quiet for a moment. When she picked back up, her voice wavered, her tone strident no more. “We've known each other forever, and I thought we were grudging friends, but more friend than grudging. We shook on the deal. He seemed happy to be getting something he wanted, and I guess I stupidly thought that meant something to him.”

“I'm sorry.” Adam covered her hand.

Just as fast as vulnerability had taken the woman over, a dastardly glint twinkled in her eyes. “Oh, don't feel bad for me. He won't win. I've spent twelve years of college and hard, physical labor at a smaller hotel preparing for the day I would get the Astor-Grand as my own. I came up with the plan to get it, and Ford will not take it away from me. I have a week to figure something out.”

Leaning out of swinging distance, Adam grinned and raised his hands in surrender. “I don't know if I should wish you good luck or warn Ford to duck for cover.”

Annie laughed, and it put a smile back on her face. “I'm not sure either. Anyway, thank you for letting me vent. I actually feel a little bit better.” She picked up her half-full mug, put it on the bussing tray, and then donned her coat. “I think I'm going to head back to the hotel and try to sweat off the rest of my frustration in the gym. You guys have a good night.”

“Bye.” Adam waved.

Rhone added, “See you.”

From where he sat, Adam followed Annie with his gaze as she left the coffeehouse and jogged across the street in her high-heeled boots. She veered to the left, in the direction of a parking garage, and a moment later, a man in a long gray coat appeared from the shadows and followed her.

“Oh, did you see that?” Adam pointed, animated, as everything clicked into place. “That was Ford. He didn’t leave after all.”

“We should follow him.” Rhone pushed up from his chair.

Adam put his hand on Rhone’s arm and brought him back to his seat. “Nah. Not necessary.”

“Why?” Rhone braced his arm on the back of Adam’s chair and studied him up close in a way that sent wonderful shivers down Adam’s spine. “What do you know, honey?”

“He’s not stalking her,” Adam stated with confidence. “And I don’t even think he’s trying to steal her hotel out from under her.” In Adam’s mind, he could still see Ford’s eyes on Annie as she left the chapel yesterday, and he could hear the passion in his voice and words from just a few minutes ago. “He’s totally in love with her.”

“You think?”

“Yep. See?” Adam caught movement from through the window out of the corner of his eye. “There he comes again. It’s dark, and there aren’t a lot of people out. I bet he was hanging around to make sure she got safely to her car.”

Rhone leaned his elbow on the table and rested his head in his hand, his gaze shifting in the direction of Ford’s retreating form. “That’s a big boulder to push up a steep hill.”

“To get her to admit that she’s equally in love with him?” Adam propped an elbow on the table too and studied Rhone. “Maybe. But she already feels it. It’s so obvious. Otherwise she wouldn’t be so hurt by what she sees as his betrayal of their friendship.”

“If you say so,” Rhone mumbled into his palm. “You’re usually right about stuff like that.” He canted his head and reached out to finger Adam’s cheek. “You want to help them, don’t you?”

As with Wes, Adam couldn’t help the tugging in his core. He’d quietly loved Rhone for such a long time; he knew that muted desire in Ford’s eyes, and he remembered exactly how much it hurt to want something he didn’t think he could ever get. “Just because I want to help”—he played with Rhone’s fingers—“doesn’t mean I can.”

“We’ll see what we can figure out.” Rhone captured Adam’s hand and pressed a kiss to the center. “In the meantime, I’m suddenly really tired.” He fished the keys out of his pocket and held them up. “Can you drive?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Adam accepted the keys.

This time, he took Rhone’s hand, pulled him out of his seat, and led the way.

Chapter Four

December 28

Twinkles of morning light sneaked in through the cracks in the curtains covering the hotel bedroom window and danced across Rhone's skin like fairies at play. Adam knew his thought was fanciful, but he kissed his way across the span of Rhone's washboard stomach anyway and basked in the quiet of the early-morning hour and in being so close to this man.

His chin scraped against the elastic waistband of Rhone's boxer-briefs and rubbed against the tip of a hard ridge of flesh. Rhone's cock jumped under the fabric, as if reaching for further contact, and Adam smiled against his partner's abdomen.

I'm getting there. Adam peeled Rhone's underwear down to his hips. *Don't you worry.*

Unable to hold back, Adam dipped down, closed his mouth around Rhone's penis, and softly sucked his fiancé's cock.

Everything about Rhone appealed to Adam's senses on a primitive, base level, and his own body hummed with awareness of it. The span of Rhone's shoulders and back, the power in his legs, and the unforgiving lines of his face all tripped up Adam's heartbeat. The smell of his perspiration before he showered, the faintly salty taste that clung to his flesh, no matter his state of cleanliness, and the biting, almost-burnt flavor of his seed sliding down Adam's throat all evoked possession in Adam and made him want to lick Rhone everywhere. The furnace of body heat Rhone emanated, the solid line of his frame, which didn't waver when Adam leaned into him, and the casual way he threw his arm around Adam in public spoke to the person inside Adam who wanted someone to claim him and take care of him.

And the textured growl of his voice, which rumbled through Rhone and into Adam right this second, felt like big, strong hands caressing him and pulling him close.

“Mmnn...” Rhone stretched toward the headboard with one hand and tunneled his fingers through Adam's hair with the other. He tilted Adam's head back, and Adam looked up to a drowsy half smile and sleepy eyes.

Shifting his hips, Rhone purred as more of his length pushed past Adam's lips. “I like waking up with my cock in your mouth.”

Adam pulled up, pecked a kiss on the tip of Rhone's dick, and grinned at the man slowly coming awake. “Happy Monday.”

Rhone flexed his hips again and then spread his thighs. “Gonna be a great one with a start like this.” His chuckle turned rough as Adam poked out his tongue and swiped it across his slit. Early ejaculate spread in a muted flavor over Adam's taste buds, spurring him on. He murmured his appreciation and bent down again, taking more thick cock inside, not stopping until Rhone's erection owned every space in his mouth. He took the root in hand and jerked it off in tandem with each suck up and down over Rhone's prick. Searing heat burned through Rhone's rock-solid dick and took over Adam's mouth, making him moan with excitement and the need for more. Adam craved knowing every inch and took his time worshipping Rhone's length, covering every thickly ridged vein from start to end with long, winding licks from his tongue.

“Fuck, baby.” With a jerk of his hips, Rhone punched the headboard and pulled Adam's hair, clearly fighting coming. “It's too early for me to hold it back.”

Oh yeah. Adam licked two fingers and slipped his hand between Rhone's legs. “Give it to me.” He rubbed those moisture-slick tips right behind Rhone's sac and pressed into the soft patch of skin, almost hard enough to cause pain. *He loves it so fucking much.* Adam flicked his gaze up, connected to Rhone's agonized, pale one, and pushed again. “Let it go.”

With a roar, Rhone bowed up in the middle and came so fast, Adam didn't get a chance to go down on him again. Hot spurts of cum shot up and splashed over Adam's lips, cheeks, and chin, shocking him frozen for a moment. It wasn't that Rhone had never come on his face before, but he tended to tell Adam in advance in case Adam wanted to say no.

Adam never said no.

He closed his eyes, savored the final hits of seed landing on his lips, and felt branded all over again.

A heartbeat after everything went still, a hand snaked around Adam's nape and tugged. Rhone pulled Adam across his chest and angled his head for a leisurely good-morning kiss. Their tongues tangled with a lazy brush here and there, and upon separating their mouths, Rhone kissed Adam's nose and forehead.

"Sorry about that," he said, his voice still thick. He used a combination of animal tongue cleaning and the edge of the bedsheet to wipe away the stickiness from Adam's face. Adam did the same to Rhone in return.

"My brain wasn't awake enough to give you a warning," Rhone added, his voice still sounding half-asleep.

Adam preened under the loving attention. "It's okay." He turned his face and rubbed against Rhone as the man moved his mouth down Adam's nape with soft suction. "In a way, I asked for it."

Rhone pushed back on his pillow and made eye contact with Adam. "By waking me up with a blowjob? Yeah, you kind of did." He quirked a brow and pinched Adam's bare ass.

Affecting his best glare, Adam rubbed his left butt cheek. "Ouch. Roll over." He drew up to his knees and let Rhone shift to his stomach. "I'm not done with you yet."

After moving onto to his belly, Rhone cradled a pillow under his chest and head and settled into the bedding with a sigh. Adam smiled at the picture of Rhone's stark white underwear still twisted around his bronzy tan thighs, and was almost reluctant to pull them off and toss them aside. He did, though, and as soon as they cleared Rhone's feet, the man drew one leg up into a modified butterfly position.

Oh my goodness.

He did make a stunning picture.

Adam's cock started to stiffen in anticipation of that dark little hole winking from between Rhone's cheeks, but he ignored the stirring in his prick for the glory that was the rest of Rhone's body. Muscles bunched in his shoulders, arms, and down either side of his spine, and his buttocks were tight orbs of firm flesh too. His long legs had a light dusting of dark hair, and even his big feet excited Adam.

I want it all.

And Adam could have every inch at his leisure forever. Because Rhone was his.

I still can't believe it.

The truth of his and Rhone's commitment cracked Adam in the gut with force, and his blood sped so fast through his veins that he withdrew, needing to breathe for a moment and regroup. Instead of covering Rhone and fucking him furiously as he'd planned to do, Adam knelt near the end of the bed, took Rhone's foot in hand, and gently started to knead the arch.

"Ohhh..." Rhone's deep moan vibrated through his whole body. "That's incredible, baby. Don't stop."

Adam pressed his thumbs up and down into the sole of Rhone's foot, delivering a touch he knew Rhone loved. He manipulated the foot, rotated his ankle to loosen the joint, and even pulled and cracked his toes before resting Rhone's foot back on the mattress and spreading his open palms up to his shin and calf to dig into the solid muscle there.

Secretly, Adam loved giving Rhone massages and never felt like it was a chore that demanded equal payback. This act, which Rhone considered a luxury, allowed Adam to touch his man in ways he had only fantasized about for too many years. He could happily spend hours running his hands all over Rhone's flesh and exploring nooks and crannies that might bring him a jolt of joy to have touched. Adam sank his digits into the dense tissue of Rhone's thigh, slipped his fingers under to the front of his leg, and worked out any lingering tightness from his quad.

Rhone released more low growls of pleasure with each inch of flesh Adam rubbed into a state of complete relaxation. "Damn it, Adam, if it weren't for the fact that I would hunt you down for leaving us, I'd say you have a natural calling and to find a career in massage therapy." He looked back at Adam with a fast, menacing glare and then laid his head down on the pillow again. "But I would track you down and drag you back to my side, so don't even think about it." The drowsy force in his voice made Adam smile.

"You know better than to think I'm going anywhere without you." Planting his hands on the bed, Adam leaned forward and, as a light, stinging punishment, bit into the thickness of Rhone's upper back. "But that's for even hinting at it."

Chuckling, his eyes still closed, Rhone reached back and swatted Adam's flank. "Not effective, honey. Every time we make love now, I like standing in front of the mirror later to search for the marks you leave on my body."

Damn it, man. Adam almost swooned for the second time in nearly as many days.

Needing a little bit of an upper hand back, Adam dipped down and put his mouth right behind Rhone's ear. "How about I just drive you crazy until you beg me to fuck you?" He pushed his fingers deep into the flesh covering Rhone's hips and dragged his short-trimmed nails up his sides, leaving angry red lines in his wake. "How about I do that?"

The raw moan of need that escaped Rhone matched the fast shudder that worked its way through his frame. He opened his eyes, and silver dominated the gray. "How about you quit teasing me and give us what we both want?"

That's better. "Soon." Adam maneuvered Rhone's arms out from under the pillow and started with cracking the fingers on his right hand one at a time. "I haven't finished your massage."

Once again, Rhone rumbled contented noises. "I'll be a puddle by the time you do."

Adam moved his way up Rhone's forearm to his biceps and triceps and worked his fingers into the thick muscles. "Then you'll be nice and relaxed for my cock"—his voice dropped to a seductive tone as he got caught up in the intimate touching and their exchange—"and I'll slip right inside."

Rhone sucked in air and reached under his body to between his legs, hissing a second time. "You're making me hard again." His back rolled in a needful wave under the massage that went from one shoulder to the other and down his left arm to his hand. "I'm gonna come the second you push into me."

The picture of his cock claiming Rhone's ass filled Adam's mind and swelled a heavy response in his balls and prick, pushing his length to leaking and rearing. "Now you're making me hard."

Picking up the pace a bit, Adam pressed the heels of his hands into the firm flesh on either side of Rhone's spine and worked his way down to the tight globes of his ass. He took the taut flesh in hand, one cheek in each, and kneaded in, up, and out in a circular pattern, repeatedly exposing the dark starburst of Rhone's hole. He let his thumbs dip into Rhone's crack and graze the man's pucker and crease with every pass, and even dipped his fingers down to brush his taint and roll the weight of his sac. Rhone trembled, and his asshole pulsed again and again and again, begging Adam without words for more.

Adam shivered in kind and searched in the tangled bedsheet for the lube.

I can't deny either one of us any longer.

His fingers hit on the soft plastic of the travel-size tube. With his gaze fully on Rhone's bud, Adam thumbed the cap open, slicked up his erection from root to tip, and then squirted out a dime-size amount onto his middle and pointer fingers.

Holding one buttock aside, Adam said, "Get ready for the shot of cold," and nudged his lubricated fingers against Rhone's entrance.

"Ohh...mmm." Rhone bucked into the contact, and Adam gave him the pressure he so clearly wanted. He tapped, rubbed, and pushed with two digits and relaxed the hell out of Rhone's asshole. Adam pressed against the muscle until, with a deep groan from Rhone, his body gave up, and Adam pushed his lubricated fingers inside.

"Ah shit, honey, shit." Rhone pressed backward and, on his own, worked Adam deeper into his channel. His passage pulsed with damp heat all around Adam's fingers, and his thighs, buttocks, and back tensed with strain.

With fingers poised in his lover's ass, Adam used his other hand to caress up and down the line of Rhone's spine. "You all right?" He crooked his embedded digits down over Rhone's sweet spot and gave him a little lick of heaven.

Rhone buried his face in the pillow, and it muffled a rough noise Adam recognized as need. "Can't wait anymore." He turned his head, and the already-severe lines of his face pulled even tauter. "Fuck me."

Adam withdrew his fingers and immediately covered Rhone from top to bottom. He folded his leg into the curve of Rhone's bent one and settled his chin over his shoulder. "Sorry, baby." Adam pecked a kiss full of apology to Rhone's nape and then tucked his hand between their bodies to fit his prick to Rhone's bud. "I didn't mean to make you hurt."

"It's all r—"

Adam pushed his cock in right then, turning Rhone's comment into a gasp as Adam slowly took his ass. Rhone moaned long and low, and his chute sucked tight all around Adam's length, killing Adam with unparalleled pleasure.

Rhone covered Adam's hand and threaded their fingers together in a bruising hold. "I never get used to feeling you sink inside me." His voice, full of the thickness of morning and lust, slipped into Adam as deeply as Adam pushed his prick into Rhone. "It's so... Oh yeah, that's so

good.” Rhone growled with each small, measured slide Adam delivered in his passage. “Loving.”

“I hope so.” Adam bit his lip at Rhone's words and just kept from letting his control lapse. “I do love you.” He tucked his face into the crook of Rhone's neck and trembled all over. “So goddamn much.”

In answer, Rhone squeezed Adam's hand even tighter. He reached back with the other and twined it in Adam's locks, holding his face close. Adam breathed through the fierce pleasure being inside Rhone evoked, and he kept the rock of his hips steady and slow, hardly moving within Rhone enough to call what they were doing fucking. It didn't matter right now. Adam didn't need the frantic friction to stay hard; he just savored the heat hugging his cock with a rhythmic pulse, and the steady rise and fall of the man breathing beneath him.

Each tiny withdrawal and penetration Adam delivered to Rhone pulled a shiver or sigh out of him and in turn had Adam pressing a smile into Rhone's neck. God, he loved every response this man gave him, no matter how big or small. Adam couldn't help it; he pulled all the way out, sucking in air at the delicious stroke along his hard prick. Then he sank back in, pushing his length through the slick heat of Rhone's tight-as-hell channel to the sounds of his sexy moans, and smothered himself again in the deepest kind of pleasure. He did it a second time, pushing to the root. Not enough, giving in to his craving to crawl inside this man, Adam rotated his hips, somehow tucked his cock in a little deeper, and gasped as Rhone groaned and fluttered all around his buried length.

Rhone's fingers dug into Adam's hand and head. “Baby...” His voice sounded strangled, and then he silently shuddered.

“Rhone...” Adam tensed for the onslaught of pleasure he knew was coming, but couldn't get more than that one word out before Rhone strangled his cock in the throes of his quiet orgasm. His body shook and his ass contracted repeatedly in sharp waves, creating the most suffocating, wonderful milking in his chute, and just like always, it pulled Adam into the undertow.

Unable to stroke even once more, Adam spilled inside Rhone with a soft cry and filled his lover with pulsing jets of seed. Everything felt like it had a wash of watercolor over it, and Adam remained on top of Rhone, still lodged inside him, in peaceful silence. Rhone continued to hold

Adam's hand and hair, but with each passing moment, his fingers lost some of their grip, until only a loose connection remained.

Long minutes passed. The clock ticked closer and closer to when they would get a wake-up call; one they could not ignore. Adam knew it was coming, but he still grumbled a protest when Rhone finally moved beneath him and gently dislodged their bodies.

"I'm sorry, honey." Rhone caressed Adam's ass as he rolled out of bed with a groan. "You know I'd lie in bed like that all day with you, but we have to get into the shower unless you want to greet our guests naked and smelling like sex."

The phone rang, right on time, and Rhone grabbed it up. After listening for a moment, he said, "Thank you," and put it back in the cradle. He then turned back to Adam and extended his hand.

Adam rolled onto his side, clutched Rhone's pillow to his chest, and inhaled the soft scent of shampoo and musk. "This bed is too nice. It smells like you. I don't want to get up."

Rhone's pale eyes lit with sympathy, but he still wiggled his fingers. "Come on."

Adam reluctantly took them, and Rhone hauled him to his feet and slung him over his shoulder, to Adam's shout of shock.

"All you have to do is lean your shoulder against the tiles," Rhone added. "I'll handle the soap and washcloth and take care of the rest." He ran his hand up the inside of Adam's thigh and fondled his balls with a firm touch. "All right?"

Adam closed his eyes on a soft moan of delight.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to get in the shower after all.

* * * * *

Adam reared back and pushed the door almost all the way closed the second after he opened it. He reached back and put a hand on Rhone's leg, stopping him too.

Rhone stayed silent, as Adam knew he would. The man rode Adam's back, though, and through the small crack Adam had left open in the doorway, he felt certain Rhone's focus had zeroed in on what had caught Adam's interest too.

Wes had just dipped his head and said, "Very good, sir" to whoever had the room two doors down. As soon as the door closed, the younger man turned away and pressed his forehead

into the hallway wall. With shoulders hunched and shuddering, he lifted his hands and covered his face. He remained there for a long, agonizing minute, wherein Adam felt certain he and Rhone stood watching without breathing. Abruptly, Wes stiffened his spine and pushed back his shoulders, scrubbed his face with both hands, and walked in the opposite direction, where Adam knew the employee elevator was located.

As soon as Wes turned the corner, Rhone pulled the door all the way open and held it for Adam. "What do you suppose that was about?" he asked.

"Don't know." Adam glanced at Rhone as he pulled on the door handle to check that it had automatically locked. "He clearly thought he was alone, though, and I doubt he would have wanted anyone to witness the moment of weakness. That's why I pushed you back."

Rhone started walking backward, facing Adam with a wolfish smile as they moved. "And here I thought you were only worried he would hit on me again." He poked Adam in the ribs and waist, making Adam laugh and wiggle out of the touch. "So much for protecting my honor and virtue," Rhone added. Adam lunged, and Rhone took off down the hall.

Adam gave chase, and they veered right into the elevator just as the doors opened. Rhone turned and pushed his back up against the wall, and Adam paused only long enough to hit the Lobby button before stalking Rhone until there wasn't even room for air to fit between their bodies.

With his fingers curled around the handrail, Adam leaned in more and absorbed every change of breath in Rhone, feeling the rapid beat in his chest. He held his mouth mere centimeters away from Rhone's and watched the pale mercury take over his gaze.

"If Wes hits on you again," Adam whispered, "just show him that mark on your neck." He rubbed his hand over the material covering Rhone's nape, where he knew a darkened patch of skin existed. "And let him know what we were doing as I gave it to you."

"Only a few more days until I can just show him my wedding band."

The band Adam had bought Rhone, and the one Rhone designed in return, sat in the hotel safe, waiting for their ceremony.

"That won't keep half the men and women in this world off a guy like you," Adam murmured. As New Year's Eve approached, old insecurities that he usually kept at bay crept up

on Adam more and more often, stealing his sleep. “Or have you forgotten how many people we've caught happily hooking up with married men and women over the years?”

His gaze softening, Rhone cupped Adam's cheek. “That's never going to be us, Adam.”

Adam covered Rhone's fingers and let them fall tangled to their sides, suddenly unable to tease anymore. “Please be sure you've given this marriage every bit of thought needed and that you're certain it's what you want. That you know you can be happy in it, *with me*, for the long haul.” His throat choking him with old panic, Adam let go of their hold and stepped back.

“Adam.” Rhone caught Adam's hand, not letting him pull out of touching distance. Awareness of Adam's fears lived in his eyes. “Please don't start worrying about that again.”

Women. Rhone's lifelong heterosexuality...at least until he started up with me two years ago.

Adam couldn't completely let go of the “what-if” game. What if Rhone, no matter how much he loved Adam in his heart, rediscovered one day that he needed a woman in his life?

“Rhone, I can't help—” The elevator *dinged* just then, and the doors slid open to reveal the lobby. “Never mind.” Adam moved, but once again, Rhone held him in place.

After putting his hand out to hold the door open, Rhone tipped Adam's face up to his and scrutinized it. His thumb played along Adam's jaw, inciting a shiver. “Are you okay?” Rhone asked. “I don't like seeing you upset.”

“I'm fine.” Adam swallowed down his stupid worries and managed a smile. “Let's go say hello to our guests.”

Rhone leaned down and brushed his lips high on Adam's cheek. “All right.” People started pushing past them to get inside the elevator, so Rhone moved them out but kept Adam's hand firmly in his. “They should be checking in as we speak.”

It only took a second to see Canin towering over everyone else in the crowd. Many of Quinn's employees were here, not only for the wedding, but as a bonus vacation of sorts. Among them Kasey, of course, and her brother, Nate. Logan Jeffries, a former Chicago detective and good friend of Rhone's and Canin's, was also a guest. The crowd parted then, and Adam's heart stopped at the sight of a short, plump Hispanic woman, her black hair sprinkled with silver.

Adam's aunt Loretta stood a dozen feet away from him, and Adam couldn't hold the soft, keening noise of need inside.

He never thought he would see her again.

She looked up right then, and tears quickly filled her eyes. “*Mijo?*”

“Tía?” Adam took a tentative step forward, but he abruptly stopped and automatically sought the safety of Rhone.

Rhone looked only at him, and he had never looked so beautiful in Adam's eyes. “My wedding gift to you,” Rhone said, his voice rough. His jaw clenched, and he looked like he fought tears too. “Surprise.”

Chapter Five

Rhone's heart constricted as he watched Adam process his aunt's standing in this hotel, as a guest for his wedding. The man took another step toward Loretta but turned and flew into Rhone's arms instead. Rhone took the impact without wavering and crushed Adam to him as tightly as Adam held him. After imagining this moment a hundred times during his conversations with Loretta over the last few months, Rhone found *he* had as much trouble choking down his emotions as he knew Adam did.

He rubbed his hand into the small of Adam's back and pressed his lips to his temple. "It's okay, honey." Rhone kept his voice low. "She's really here. You can go talk to her; she's not going to disappear."

Adam stepped back a sliver, and his dark gaze, still full of shock, found Rhone's. "How did you do it?"

"We'll talk about that later." Rhone brushed his knuckles down the warmth of Adam's cheek and felt like a goddamned hero—as he always did—when Adam leaned into the contact. Rhone reluctantly let go and nodded his head in Loretta's direction. "Go on."

A visible, unsteady breath moved Adam's chest under his snug black sweater. "You come too." He wrapped his hand around Rhone's forearm and didn't give him a chance to object.

Not that Rhone would have done anything of the sort.

Adam's hand shook as he reached it out to greet his aunt, once again tugging at Rhone's heart. "Tía?" Rhone could almost taste the fear in that one word from Adam.

Loretta clasped both of her fleshy hands around Adam's. "Oh, mijo." She touched his face, drew him to her shorter frame, and engulfed him in her arms. "I have missed you."

"Me too, Tía," Adam murmured. "So much."

Adam towered over his aunt, but he stooped to accommodate her and hugged her with a fiercely tight hold. Adam held on to Loretta in such a way that made Rhone feel like he looked at

a sixteen-year-old boy desperate for love. Only this time, his aunt embraced him, rather than turning away from a frightened nephew whose own parents rejected him for his sexual preference. His father violently so.

Someone nudged him on the shoulder, and Rhone looked up to find Canin's ice blue gaze on him.

"Hey, Brother," Rhone said. He took a moment and waved at the rest of the group milling or waiting in line. "Glad to see everybody made it safely."

"Check-in is covered," Canin shared. "Reception is assigning room numbers and handing out keys as we speak."

"You didn't have to do that." Guilt edged Rhone's words. His and Adam's shower—or rather, Rhone's soaping Adam up in some choice areas—had taken on a life of its own and pushed them to the limit of their morning schedule.

"Not a problem. We got here a little early." Canin looked to Adam and Loretta and bumped Rhone with his shoulder again. "You did good there." He slung an arm around Rhone and kissed the side of his head. "I'm proud of you."

Rhone chewed the inside of his cheek as he watched his partner. No longer embracing, Adam held his aunt's hands and conversed in such soft tones, Rhone couldn't decipher the words. "I didn't do much," he said.

Canin's gaze once again strayed to the pair a few feet away. "I bet Adam would disagree. His aunt too."

"Speaking of"—Kasey sneaked up to them and reached across her husband's front to Rhone—"here's her key card for her room."

"Hi, Kase." Rhone squeezed Kasey's hand. "Let me take care of this, and then I'll come back and start making proper hellos to everyone."

Rhone moved to Adam's side and got his attention by putting a hand on the small of his back. He wasn't sure how Loretta would respond to actually seeing her nephew with another man, but Rhone liked touching Adam and wasn't about to confine it to behind closed doors.

The woman's cheeks immediately turned ruddy, but she didn't look away.

“*Señora* Reyes.” Taking a chance, Rhone leaned in and kissed her cheek. “It’s good to see you again. Thank you for coming.”

“Mr. Quinn.” She clasped his hands, a welcoming, strong grasp, and Rhone soared inside for Adam. “Thank you once again for taking care of the details and the cost.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Rhone replied. Loretta released his hands, and Rhone stepped back to Adam’s side. “Here is your room information and key.” He handed her the small folder and then turned to Adam, who still looked like he’d stepped off the elevator into an alternate universe. “Why don’t you help her get settled and catch up over lunch?”

It was as if Adam finally noticed other people in the lobby. “But everyone else—”

Rhone put a finger to Adam’s lips. “Everyone else understands.” Their employees and friends might not know the exact details of Adam’s family situation, but they’d all been together for long enough to glean the basic facts that his family never called the offices, nor attended birthday or holiday parties or any number of a thousand other little things that gave their separation away. “Go. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Um...okay.” The poor man still looked dazed. He lifted up, pecked a fast kiss to Rhone’s cheek, and said a distracted “bye.” Then he turned back to his aunt and linked his arm in hers. “Tía, let’s see if we can find your luggage and your room.”

Rhone gave himself a handful of seconds to bask in Adam’s happiness and then started shaking hands and slapping shoulders, welcoming and thanking those who’d made the trip.

He finally got to Logan Jeffries and looked around the lobby as he shook the man’s hand. “Where’s your girlfriend?” he asked as he searched for a striking redhead. “Did she have to—” Behind Logan, Canin sliced his hand across his throat, killing the rest of Rhone’s second question.

Logan’s gaze narrowed on Rhone. He then turned and, judging by the tic in his jaw, surely saw Canin shove his hand behind his back and offer a ridiculously fake smile.

“Things ended between us this weekend,” Logan shared as he turned back to Rhone. “I’m fine, though. No need to walk around it as if it didn’t happen.”

“All right.” Rhone shrugged, unsure what else to do. If Canin had details, Rhone would learn about them later. “Either way, we’re glad to have you here.”

“Thanks.” Logan picked up his bag and shook hands with Rhone at the same time. “Excuse me. I still need to get a room key.” The dark-haired man moved away, his limp barely noticeable today, and stepped in line behind Nate. Logan's low tones didn't travel well, so Rhone couldn't hear what he said, but younger Nate spun and almost jumped out of his skin.

Canin winced, watching as he rejoined Rhone. “Sorry about that. I should have warned you. He was going to back out, but I made him come.” He traded a glance with Rhone. “Maybe that was a mistake.”

“No, we want him here.” Rhone's heart went out to the guy. He had been with his girlfriend for five years. “We all have tough hides; we can take it if he starts biting.”

A wave of strawberry red hair caught Rhone's attention out of the corner of his eye. He spotted Annie, with Ford right behind her, walking out of the hotel's coffee bar...and heading in separate directions.

She looked up and caught Rhone watching her. After silently mouthing, *You again?* she laughed, offered him a wave, and went on her way out of the hotel. Remembering Adam's read on the situation, Rhone searched for Ford and found him waiting for the elevator. His eyes were like chips of peridot behind his trendy wire frames; he had them right on Rhone, and they didn't hold a trace of Annie's humor.

“What's that all about?” Canin asked, drawing Rhone back to him. Kasey stood with them once again too.

“Oh, there's all kinds of interesting stuff happening in this place.” Rhone got in between them and slung his arms around their shoulders. “Let me catch you both up.”

* * * * *

“I can't believe you're really here.” Adam clutched his aunt's hand, as he had been doing nonstop for three hours. He had barely let her go long enough to eat lunch. “I gave up wishing you would accept me, but I always had this piece tucked away inside me that stayed alive, hoping you would find your way to me again.”

They sat at the table in Loretta's hotel room, plates from room service now empty. The window to Adam's right had the curtains thrown wide, and light from the sun reflected off the miles of green below, casting a beautiful backdrop to this perfect day.

“Mijo, I cannot promise you I understand why you must marry your friend.” She had yet to call Rhone Adam's partner or fiancé. “This is not what I grew up knowing or seeing, and I do not—*cómo se dice?*—feel passion for a woman this way to understand.”

“I know.”

“My church tells me this is wrong.”

The hairs on Adam's neck stood on end, and his heart began to ache in a different way. The old, painful way.

Not again.

“Tía.”

Loretta put her hand up, silencing him in that way she always had when he was a child. “Please listen to me,” she said. Her familiar accent called to Adam, even as he feared judgment all over again. “I have missed you so very much these many years, and I have gone to Father Abel many times to speak with him about this, asking many questions, and always he tells me for man to lie with man is wrong, and I must not let my love for you weaken me.” The hold on Adam's hand grew stronger as his aunt shared. “I did not like that he would not differ his reply, no matter my question, and so I spoke to other priests, seeking guidance from many.”

“And what did they say?” Adam held his breath.

“The same. That I should not do anything that would allow you to believe what you are is okay. This comes from wise men of God, and for many years I accepted, but as I did, I continued to miss my boy, more and more every day.” His aunt cupped his cheek, and Adam's skin remembered her warmth as if she had hugged him good-bye for school only yesterday. “You are my son, as much as any I might have had from my own body.”

“I cried over losing you a thousand times more than”—Adam did not know what to call his mother and father anymore. He'd stopped believing them family long ago—“them.”

“I'm sorry I brought such sadness to your kind heart.” Her face, creased with lines Adam didn't remember, filled with sadness of its own. “My heart knows that you are a good boy; you have always been a good boy. And recently, I have seen that your friend is a good man. These things I know. In here.” She touched her bosom. “I know. A priest—not any man—can tell me you are not full of God's spirit. I cannot believe that. Your friend—Mr. Quinn—”

“Rhone, Tía.” He squeezed her hand, imploring. “Please, call him by his name.”

“Yes, Rhone.” She offered a smile that wobbled just a little bit. “He came to me with respect and patience. He only asked me to listen and said he would do the same. Your friend did not tell me how I should feel, *mijo*. He did not judge me. He only told me about himself, and more, how he sees you. As we spoke over *café con leche*, many times, I begin to see these things I am told to believe about the gays are not true with him any more than they are with you. If they are not true about you or him, then perhaps they are not true about anybody, and that the church is not right in this.”

“They aren't, Tía. I promise.” Adam hadn't lived this close to hope in a dozen years. “I just love Rhone instead of a woman. Everything else about me is the same as any other man.”

“I do not know.” A struggle still lived in her brown gaze. “Perhaps when I meet God, I will have to face judgment for loving you and wishing to celebrate your wedding. Perhaps I will be told that I was wrong to defy my church in this one thing. I have given thought to this many times and have decided that if I am wrong, I will accept whatever comes to me as punishment when the time arrives. While I wait for that to happen, I will accept my nephew for whoever he believes himself to be, and I will embrace his desire to marry a very good man.” She clutched him with hands that trembled, and her eyes shimmered with tears. “I hope you will give me the chance to know you again, Adam. I wish to know your new family and friends and to be in your life.”

A sob wrenched out of Adam, and he pulled his aunt to him and hugged her close. He wrapped his arms around her and sank into the soft, comforting bosom of his childhood. She held him too, and the faint scent of rosewater carried Adam the rest of the way home.

“Please forgive me.” Loretta clung to him as if she expected he would float away if she let go. “I wasted precious time.”

“It's done, Tía,” Adam mumbled into her fleshy upper arm. He couldn't hate her, not after the soul-searching she'd done to get to this place of acceptance. “It's already done.”

As they embraced each other, Loretta promised to find a grocery store and kitchen tomorrow so that she could make him and Rhone a good meal.

Adam chuckled. Without even trying, she had found the way right into Rhone's heart.

* * * * *

Opening his hotel-room door and letting himself inside, Adam felt as if he moved on a goddamned cloud. He shut the door and leaned back against it, letting the truth of this day sink into him like the warmth of a summer breeze against his bare skin.

I have my aunt back.

Adam laughed out loud just to hear the happy noise.

Rhone appeared from the bedroom, smiling as he buttoned the cuff of his dark gray shirt. His eyes lit with silver when he looked up and saw Adam. “Hey, babe. How'd it go?” As he spoke, Adam started stalking him.

“You need to hustle your ass and change, or we're going to be late for dinner,” Rhone reminded him. They had a room reserved and would officially welcome everyone with a private meal this evening.

Reaching his man, Adam backed Rhone into the wall and let his gaze wander, memorizing every bit of Rhone's perfect, hard face. “You.” His voice was husky with too much love, and he had to stop.

“You're shaking, honey.” Rhone slipped his hand to Adam's nape and tilted his chin up with his thumb. “Just breathe.”

Adam turned his head and pressed a kiss to Rhone's wrist. “Most days I can't believe you're real and you're mine.” With a small lean in, he closed the distance between them and captured Rhone's mouth with a desperate clinging of their lips.

“Me too,” Rhone uttered roughly. He slashed his mouth across Adam's and licked inside. “About you.” He rocked against Adam, igniting Adam with the feel of a thickening erection.

Fueled by need and love, Adam tore at Rhone's belt, button, and zipper, and shoved down the dress pants he had surely just put on. “You're getting a blowjob every night for the rest of your life.” He made that promise as he captured Rhone's prick in his hand and pushed down the length with a snug hold, drawing a gasp and pump of Rhone's hips. “Starting right now.”

“I take it things went well. Oh mnn...ahhh...” Rhone's voice trailed off with a hiss as Adam dropped to his knees, wrapped his mouth around the velvety heat of his lover's growing cock, and sucked with firm pressure. Rhone dug his hand into Adam's hair with stinging strength. “You're very welcome.”

After that, Rhone was moaning and writhing too hard to say anything else.

Chapter Six

December 29

Adam waved at Kasey and his aunt. “Have fun!” he called one more time. “And, Tía, make sure she doesn't back out of the massage.”

Kasey glared at him from over her shoulder. Aunt Loretta tsk-tsked Kasey and guided her in the direction of the spa with an arm around her waist. Adam chuckled as he took a seat in the lobby to wait for Rhone to return from his hike around the grounds with Canin, Nate, and Logan.

Canin wanted Kasey to relax this week and had stooped to laying a guilt trip on her in order to do it. Adam wanted his aunt to enjoy some of the perks of staying at such a fine hotel but knew she wouldn't take a spa treatment on her own. Adam, after putting his head together with Canin over dinner last night, had gone to Kasey and asked her to find a way to get his aunt to agree to an afternoon at the spa, with the actual express purpose of getting *Kasey* there, although she didn't know it. Kasey, a big softie, even though she didn't like anyone to know it, had gone to Loretta and said she wanted to try a massage but wouldn't step inside the place on her own and got Loretta to agree to accompany her. Kasey would figure out that Canin really wanted *her* to have the spa treatment for herself, not as a favor to Adam for his aunt, but when she did, that was Canin's problem, not Adam's.

The crash of shattering glass rent across the lobby and had Adam out of his chair and spinning in search of an accident. Two women behind the reception desk and one guest all looked down at the space behind it, so Adam walked over to check it out, just in case someone was hurt. He knew a little bit of first aid.

Wes knelt behind the counter, apologizing as he used two folders to scoop up glass from a broken vase.

Jared, standing at the other end of the desk, hung up the phone and assured the guest everything was fine and that someone would be right over to clean up the mess. He snapped his fingers, and one of the two female employees stepped in and dealt with the waiting guest. Within a minute, someone in a custodial uniform arrived to take over for Wes. Jared grabbed Wes by the arm and pulled him to his feet. Wes didn't utter a word, but he winced, and Adam could see Jared's fingers digging deeply into the younger man's biceps. Jared unlocked a door, probably an office, and pulled Wes inside.

Adam approached the second female employee. "Everything okay?" he asked, his voice soft.

The woman kept her gaze on the closed door. "It would be if Jared weren't such an asshole and treated his boyfriend with a little respect." She suddenly snapped her attention to Adam, and horror mapped her face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that to you. Please forget that I did."

"It's okay. I won't say anything." Adam leaned an elbow on the counter and let his attention drift to the office door. "I take it Wes knocked over the vase, and Jared didn't like it."

As if he had guided her, the woman's focus followed Adam's to the door once again. "It wouldn't have happened if Jared hadn't been hovering over Wes while he works. Wes is perfectly capable and does a great job." Her lips twisted, and her stare narrowed. "He's a total sweetheart, and the guests love him. Doesn't stop Jared from riding Wes harder than anybody else, though."

"Why?"

"Don't know for sure."

Adam could practically see vibrations humming in the woman. "But you have a theory..."

"Wes is dyslexic," she shared. "At least I think he is. My mom wasn't diagnosed until she was in her fifties, so I know how to recognize the writing patterns and some other little signs. Anyhow, I think Jared thinks Wes will make the hotel look bad if he writes something wrong or makes a mistake entering something in the computer." She drummed the pen in her hand against the counter with a heavy, hard pattern. "Or maybe he just thinks Wes is stupid and is embarrassed by him." She stared at the door for another heartbeat but then straightened and turned to face Adam with eyes wide as saucers. "How did you do that?"

"What?"

"Make me tell you all that stuff like I was sitting with a friend talking over pizza."

“My guess is you care about Wes and wanted to tell someone what you've seen.” Adam slipped his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “I listened.” The silence radiating from that office where Jared had dragged Wes hit Adam like an amplifier turned all the way up to ten. “Excuse me, will you?”

He moved around the long length of the reception desk, stepped behind, where he knew he had no business being, and knocked on the office door.

Jared swung it open, looking ready to rage in someone else's face, but yanked everything to professional when he recognized Adam. “Can I help you, Mr. Reyes?” His voice was as irritatingly pleasant as the afternoon he and Rhone had caught him slapping Wes.

A boyfriend. An abusive one at that. Shit.

Adam glanced behind Jared to Wes and took in the lack of color in his face and his hand holding his arm. He also noticed a swatch of white wrapped around Wes's wrist, and just bit back ripping this concierge a new asshole. “I do need help with something.” He matched Jared's tone with an equally bland one of his own. “I'd like to borrow Wes, if I could.”

Jared slid a foot to the left and blocked Adam's view of the other man. “Sir, Wes is working reception today. If you could explain to me the particulars of what you need, I'll make sure I get the right person to assist you.”

Little prick doesn't have a clue that I could fuck him up and have him begging for mercy in less than five minutes.

Adam wrapped his hand around the door frame and leaned in just a scant few inches. “Wes will do just fine.” With his full focus on Jared, Adam blinked and let steel slip into his voice. “Thank you.”

The man's caramel eyes crystallized to the color of brown sugar, but his best employee smile remained glued in place. “Very good, sir.” Jared stepped aside. “Wes, please assist Mr. Reyes with whatever he needs.”

“Yes, sir.” Wes moved past Jared to Adam's side.

Adam gestured toward the front of the hotel, and Wes fell into step beside him. After taking a dozen steps, Adam broached Wes in a soft voice. “I saw what happened. Are you all right?”

“Yes, sir.” Wes clasped his hands behind his back as he walked. “I didn't cut myself. I'm fine.”

Adam stopped walking, which forced Wes to do the same. “I didn't mean the vase and the glass.” Adam looked past the height and muscles roping Wes's frame into violet-blue eyes and *knew* they held secrets of abuse. It settled into Adam's gut with a sick certainty. The stiff, lifted chin and the rigid stance holding Wes upright could have been Adam looking at himself in the mirror as a teenager. His chest constricted with the fear he used to feel, and prompted him put his hand on Wes's forearm. “Are *you* okay?”

They stood at the front doors, but Wes's gaze flicked to the reception desk some twenty-five feet away. And there Jared was, his head down, watching them. Adam knew how to discreetly observe someone with the best of them and could detect it in an amateur a mile away.

Son of a bitch.

He led Wes outside, away from Jared's watchful eye. “Wes?”

“Everything is perfect, sir,” Wes insisted.

“Please call me Adam.”

Wes only stiffened into a more-complete military stance. “May I ask what you needed my help with, sir?”

Right. Adam sighed. “I'd like you to get a package out of my car, please.” He handed over the keys as he described the vehicle and where it was parked. “It's in the trunk; it's the only thing there. You can't miss it. Can you please take it up to my room and put it in the closet of the smaller bedroom? You can leave the car keys in the desk in that room when you're finished.” Adam easily could have done this himself, but he needed Jared to see Wes do *something*. “Okay?”

“My pleasure, sir.”

“And, Wes”—Adam put a hand on the young man's forearm—“take this too.” He pulled out his wallet and forced a business card into Wes's hand. “If I can help you, with anything, please don't hesitate to use the number on that card.”

“Thank you, sir.” Wes dipped his head; his frame remained so fucking stoic, though, that it hurt Adam's heart. “I'll go take care of that package right now.”

Adam watched Wes stride toward the parking area, frustrated that he hadn't gotten anywhere with the younger man. He'd taken plenty of hits from his father as a kid, and maybe that made him overly sensitive to abuse of any kind, but he couldn't help wishing Wes had taken his help. He knew it wasn't realistic. Fuck, Wes didn't know anything about Adam and had no reason to trust him. It had been a long shot at best.

Still, Adam had Rhone as a result of one of the biggest gambles of his life, so he knew the rewards for taking chances.

How do I convince Wes to take a risk?

Right then, Rhone's deep bark of laughter carried through the frigid air right to Adam's ears and put an automatic smile on his face. The twinkle of a feminine one as well as others followed, and as Adam turned, his smile froze. Annie strolled in the middle of Rhone, Canin, Logan, and Nate, and she clearly had everyone enthralled with her story.

"No, I swear it's true." She put her gloved hand on Rhone's arm. "Ask my brother if you don't believe me." Her fingers lingered, and she looked lighter than Adam had ever seen her. "Right into the fresh paint. My entire front was increasingly lighter shades of blue for weeks until the stain finally went away. Try having that, plus freckles, red hair, and being thirteen, all at the same time."

Everyone in the group responded with a laugh, but Rhone poked her in the shoulder and said, "I think I'm going to require photos to believe you."

"I'm sure they exist. Mom certainly didn't let me step out of any family pictures because of it." She looked up at Rhone, sharing a million-dollar smile. "Not the best summer for me."

"No, I guess—" Rhone glanced up and spotted Adam, where he still stood a dozen feet away. "Hey, babe." He jogged over and pecked a kiss on Adam's cheek. "We were just about to go inside and look for you."

"Here I am." Exhaling, Adam forced the stiffness out of his frame.

"Hi, Adam." Annie waved and smiled at him, and Adam tried not to compare it to the way she'd just looked at Rhone. "How are you?"

"Good. Thank you."

Annie glanced around at the men surrounding her. "You guys are all great," she said, shaking Logan's hand first, then Canin's, and finally Nate's. "Rhone"—she stretched out and

quickly pumped his hand—“thank you for the invite. It was a nice change to have laughs for a couple of hours.” An attendant eased the door open as she backed up to it. “Enjoy the rest of your afternoon.”

“We will,” Rhone replied. “You do the same.” He waved as she went inside.

He has a natural way with women. There were moments, like what Adam had just witnessed, where he could not deny that truth, no matter how much it trickled droplets of icy chill through him. *He responds to them, on a subconscious level, in ways that are as ingrained in him as admiring a beautiful male body is to me.*

Adam rubbed the back of his neck, and his hand came away dewy with perspiration.

“You guys ready to go inside and grab a beer?” Canin jerked his head toward the hotel entrance.

Rhone curled his hand around Adam's nape. “Adam?” He massaged the tightly strung cords. “You all right?”

“Yeah, sure.” Adam shook the tension from his limbs. *I don't have anything to worry about.* When Rhone took his hand and squeezed, Adam returned the affection. “Let's go.”

* * * * *

Adam stared through the glass wall of the hotel bar to the seating area beyond, but his mind held a close-up shot of Jared's hand gripping Wes's arm with such obvious pressure, he had surely left bruises. “I don't know what to do.” He'd just shared what he'd witnessed and been told by the woman at reception. “Poor kid.”

“Honey”—Rhone had a gently prodding tone—“he's not exactly a child. I would guess he's somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty.”

“I know. He just *seems* young to me.” Adam mentally rolled through the handful of times he'd crossed paths with Wes. “His size is deceptive, but goddamnit, his eyes hint at something rough going on in his life.”

“His age doesn't mean anything anyway,” Logan pointed out. “Age, social class, education, size—it's all irrelevant in domestic-abuse cases. All it takes is for one of the two people to feel inferior or to feel as if they need the other person to survive, and the other half can do almost whatever they want and get away with it. I've seen all types beaten and bruised who refused to

say their spouse or partner did it.” Fifteen years of working on the Chicago police force lived in Logan's mossy green gaze.

“Again, I know,” Adam murmured. “It's still frustrating not to be able to break through, though, you know?”

Nate, usually quiet in groups of more than two people, lifted his hand, as if in school. “Do you want me to befriend him?” he asked. “I've seen him. He's closer to my age than any of yours, and—I don't know—maybe that will help him open up.”

Logan leaned back in the booth, laid a half-mast stare on Nate, and crossed his arms against his chest. “As opposed to one of us rickety geezers trying to speak his language? Is that what you're saying?”

Shooting upright, Nate hit his glass of beer with his hand, sloshing liquid over the rim. “No! I didn't... I don't think...” He slumped against his chair, every inch of visible skin beet red. “Shit.”

“Relax, Nate.” Canin cuffed his brother-in-law on the shoulder. “He's just teasing you.”

Logan raised a brow Nate's way at that. Nate jerked his gaze away from the man and turned back to Adam. “I just meant that you're with Rhone,” Nate said. “Plus there's a sense of authority about you, probably because you own a successful business. You come across as a little older than you are, and maybe are intimidating to someone like Wes.”

“While he talks to the kid,” Logan said, “I could use my connection to law enforcement to get friendly with the locals. I can see if they have anything interesting on this Jared guy, see if Wes has ever called the cops on him.”

“No need.” Rhone pulled out his cell. “I can put a call in to Quinn and have them get that information easily enough.”

Logan took the phone out of Rhone's hand and placed it very deliberately on the table. “*You* could find out if charges were filed or arrests were made. *I* can find out if a couple of uniforms ever made a visit to the home or a shared address, whatever, and just had a chat with them because things got loud. Without an arrest, those kinds of things rarely make it to the files you can access through Quinn.” The tic in his square jaw worked overtime as he released Rhone's phone. “I do still have my uses.”

Rhone raised two hands in surrender. “Never meant to imply you didn't.” He slipped his cell back into his pocket. “We wouldn't want you to join us at Quinn otherwise. Go ahead and see what you can find.”

“Will do,” Logan answered.

Canin snapped his fingers, immediately gaining everyone's attention. “You guys are all missing one crucial point. This man did not ask for our help. It doesn't matter if you turn up something on the boyfriend.” He said that to Logan but shifted his gaze to each person at the table. “If Wes isn't ready to leave Jared or ask for help, you might end up pushing him even tighter into the asshole's arms.”

Adam crinkled his forehead and peeked at Rhone out of one eye. “Well, he did sort of ask for one person's help, in an indirect way.”

Rhone reared back. “Me?”

Good God, I cannot believe I'm suggesting this. The guy has a crush on my man. Then Adam felt the blow of his father's fist crack against his jaw, as if it happened right now instead of all those years ago, and he knew he had try to get through to Wes again.

“You're already a hero in his eyes.” Adam curled his hand over Rhone's. “He might be receptive to your help.”

Rhone shook his head, but out of his mouth came, “Oh hell. You know I can't say no to you.” He pushed out of his seat. “I'll go do it right now.”

“Wait.” Adam grabbed Rhone's wrist and dragged him back into the booth. “Wait and see what position he's working tomorrow. If you can get him somewhere without Jared seeing, I think you'll have a better shot.”

“So much for relaxing and easy. I'm telling you right now”—Rhone leaned in and pressed his forehead to Adam's, his eyes full of mercury swirls—“we talk to no one, *not a single person but each other*, on our honeymoon.” He shifted back against the booth, looking like a weary man resigned to his fate. “That's the only way to stay out of trouble.”

Adam kissed Rhone's cheek while everyone else at the table chuckled into their beer...or outright laughed.

Chapter Seven

December 30

Rhone entered his hotel room to the sight of Adam, Canin, Nate, and Logan all whipping their heads in his direction from the living area. Various levels of furrowed brows, compressed lips, and clenching jaws colored their images, but Rhone settled on the one dark gaze he cared about and the individual he knew waited with the highest of expectations.

“I found him carting bags to rooms,” Rhone shared, referring to his search for Wes. With his focus fully on Adam, Rhone took a seat next to him on the couch and curled a hand over his thigh. “He agreed to speak with me during his lunch hour today.”

Visible tension eased out of Adam's shoulders, and he leaned into Rhone. “Thank you for agreeing to do this.”

Softness that Rhone had never known existed inside him until he found Adam had him pulling Adam close. “I know how important this is to you.” Rhone's chest still squeezed every time he remembered Adam's finally confessing that his father used to beat him. “I know where it hits you and why you're so compelled to help.”

“Speaking of helping.” Adam drew back and folded his leg on the couch. He started picking at the hem of his jeans but kept his line of sight trained on Rhone. “I slept on it all night, and the more I've thought about it, the more I know speaking to Wes isn't enough.” He shifted forward again and grabbed Rhone's hand. “We need to extend an offer to help him move to Chicago and give him a job at Quinn. Just something entry-level—a gofer or data entry—like what we offered Nate in the beginning.”

“Honey,” Rhone began, his tone carefully neutral, “we don't even know this kid. Not really.” He brushed his knuckles down the smooth texture of Adam's jaw and fought the urge to

drag him into bed and hold him all day. “I know your heart hurts for Wes, but I am not sure it's a smart idea to bring him home with us.”

Adam pulled Rhone's hand off his face and clutched the fingers in a death grip. “Did you think it was the best idea in the world to offer a job to the kid who tried to steal your cell phone, or did you think 'this is nuts,' but something in your gut told you to do it anyway?”

“This isn't the same, Adam, and you know it.”

“Not exactly, I agree, but it's close.” Adam opened his mouth but quickly sealed his lips shut again. He then settled back against the arm of the couch, and Rhone watched Adam's eyes and body language transform from pleading to pragmatic until Rhone finally looked at the confident man he worked side by side with to win over new clients.

“Here's what I know with a certainty,” Adam said. “You can't just tell someone to make a massive change in his life without giving him a means and some hope to make that change possible.

“All those years ago, you told me stealing wasn't right, that it wasn't a path to success, that I should try something new, and that it could lead to something better. Do you think if you'd just told me that and walked away, feeling like you'd done your good deed for the week, that I would have taken your advice and made a new start for myself?” Adam's tone held no question in it, and he didn't pause for Rhone to respond. “Because I have to tell you, I've thought about the course of my life a lot since that day, and I don't think I would have.”

The businessman image slipped a little, and a rough texture took over Adam's voice. “You gave me a choice, Rhone, and that made the difference. You presented an option for a different life, if I would just take it, and while it was scary, that alternative you put on the table presented the opportunity for a safer, nicer future than what I was living at the time. You not only opened the door, but you put something attractive on the other side that I could see, and it pushed me to walk through. That's what we have to do for Wes.” Adam folded his knees under him, and this time, he took Rhone's head in his hands and brought their faces to within inches of one another. “We have to help him not only see that he needs to get away from Jared—he likely already knows that somewhere inside himself—but we also have to show him something better he can latch onto.”

“Adam is right,” Logan said, reminding Rhone they had an audience. As Adam let Rhone go and sat back at his side, Logan continued. “People don't make changes in their lives until they can see something different that might work better. Wes and Jared are entrenched deeply in each others' lives. They share an apartment, and they work in the same hotel. Any move away from Jared on Wes's part is going to require that he change jobs in order for him to have a halfway-decent shot at not succumbing once again to that twisted safety of the devil he knows. As long as Jared has a job at this hotel, Wes shouldn't, or it's unlikely Wes will succeed in severing that relationship.”

“Nate and I did some checking into Wes's background yesterday evening and this morning,” Canin added, his icy gaze on Rhone. Rhone figured they'd already shared this information with Adam while waiting for Rhone to return. “Wes is twenty-one years old. He dropped out of high school at sixteen and got a job at the Astor-Grand the same year. He started out bussing tables and doing cleanup in the restaurants here, and he steadily trained for more and better positions in the hotel, until he could step in and help out in pretty much every area. Coworkers have nothing but nice things to say about him. He's reliable; they know if they see his name on the schedule he's going to show up and shoulder his responsibilities for that day. Those are huge points in his favor.” That was tantamount to a glowing endorsement from Canin. As owners of a business, they knew quality and reliability in employees was key to their success.

“I dug up what I could about his connection to Jared.” Nate pulled a handful of note-sized papers from his pocket and sorted through them. “Looks like they grew up in the same town a couple counties north of here. Went to the same high school. Wes was a freshman, and Jared was a senior. It appears as though when Jared graduated and moved here to go to college, Wes left high school and came with him. That seems to be when Wes got a job at the hotel and so did Jared. Jared started higher up on the ladder here while working toward his degree. He climbed the hotel chain, where he eventually landed the concierge position eighteen months ago.” Coming to his last little note, Nate glanced at it and then at Rhone as he shoved it back into his jeans. “No disciplinary problems from either one of them that we could find.”

“No criminal records on file or any local domestic issues either,” Logan said. “I talked to guys at both stations in town, and neither have complaints of abuse on file. The uniforms working in Wes and Jared's district don't recall ever being called to the apartment on a noise ordinance or neighbor complaint either.”

“Ever?” Rhone turned back to Adam and studied every line, pore, and tic in his partner's body. “Are you sure your gut is telling you abuse, honey?”

With a gaze glittering with chips of black ice, Adam dug his fingers into Rhone's leg and gave a sharp nod. “I don't know how bad it is, but it's in his eyes, Rhone. It's in the subtler body language he tries to hide beneath the stiff spine and the jutting chin, but I can feel it.”

Damn it. Rhone sighed. “That's all I need to hear.” If Adam believed it, Rhone believed in him. He pressed a kiss to Adam's temple and squeezed his hand. “I'll make a job offer when I talk to Wes and see what I can do.”

Tightness visibly drained out of every corner of Adam's being. “Thank you. Oh”—he perked back up—“I don't want anything to rush you with Wes, but don't forget about our appointment with Eliza later today too.”

“Now that”—Rhone snagged Adam and hauled him in close—“I wouldn't miss for anything.” He captured Adam's lips in a soft kiss but quickly tilted the man's head back and licked deeper, evoking a smile and hum from Adam.

“Oh good God already.” Canin's rumbling tone filled the living area. “Get a room.”

“You're in ours,” Rhone muttered with a chuckle, his mouth still on Adam's. “Get out. All of you.”

He didn't bother to respond to the other off-color comments thrown their way as Canin, Nate, and Logan left the room.

* * * * *

Adam drummed his fingers in a staccato beat against the surface of the table in the hotel's bar and grill. The line of windows at his back beckoned him to the formal garden beyond and then farther out to the hills, trees, and hiking trails.

Where is Rhone? He should have been back already.

Pushing away from the table, Adam murmured, “Excuse me. I'm going to take a walk.”

Canin grabbed his arm before he took one step. “Don't go spying on them.”

Kasey didn't touch him, but her voice held an equally effective cautionary tone. “If Rhone is getting somewhere with Wes, then interrupting could kill any progress he's making.”

Shoot. Shoot. Shoot.

“Adam...” Kasey drawled out his name. “He’s not that late. Show some patience.”

“All right. Fine.” Adam let it go but grabbed his jacket anyway. “That doesn’t mean I can sit still for another minute. There’s a lot of ground surrounding this place; I’ll keep my wandering to the more populated areas.” He’d become too emotionally invested in helping Wes, but as someone who could still feel the whip of a belt welting the back of his legs, Adam knew the scars would only get deeper and worse the longer Wes stayed with Jared. “I need some fresh air.”

Rhone couldn’t take too much longer anyway, or they would run late for their meeting with Eliza.

“Listen.” Adam slipped a twenty under the edge of his plate to pay for his meal. “If Rhone comes back while I’m gone, tell him to sit tight. I’ll be back in a half hour.”

With a glance at his watch, Canin said, “Make sure you are. As soon as we finish eating, a handful of us are heading into town together. We have to meet the others in the lobby soon.”

“I know. Tia told me she’s going with you.” Adam waved one last time as he walked out of the restaurant. “Bye.”

Taking the first exit he found, Adam pushed open the doors and inhaled a deep breath of biting-cold air. His nostrils tingled, and his lungs expanded to accept the invigorating burst of oxygen. As soon as he started walking, the tension eased out of his shoulders and back. He crossed the lawn in the direction of the formal garden and listened to the frost-tipped grass crunch under his shoes. The rhythmic pace of his stride lulled Adam, and with a secret little smile, he couldn’t help letting his mind drift to tomorrow night.

I’m marrying Rhone.

He still couldn’t believe it. He had never dared hope Rhone could love him as anything deeper than a friend. The man had saved his life, and Adam treasured the friendship they’d developed out of their unusual first encounter. Falling in love with Rhone had not been part of Adam’s plan. Rhone eventually discovering that love and wanting him back *never* even blipped on Adam’s radar. Yet here they were, less than thirty-six hours away from legally binding themselves to each other forever.

Adam chuckled as he strolled through the gardens, barely seeing the foliage or other people passing him. Rhone believed that their own state would one day recognize same-sex

marriage, if not allow it itself, and when it did, he wanted their union to already be in place. He was practical and linear in that way. It was one of the reasons Adam loved him so much. He craved the security and embraced a certain amount of predictability.

Maybe Wes would respond to Rhone's solid presence and open up to him about Jared. Adam prayed he could. On a surface level, Adam barely knew the younger man, and he certainly didn't want to encourage Wes's crush on Rhone. At the same time, Adam didn't have it in him to ignore someone suffering abuse. Getting Wes away from Jared and bringing him to Chicago was a bold but good move. Every bit of information they had showed that Wes had a good work ethic. His coworkers liked him, and the guy just seemed so damned earnest whenever Adam crossed his path. He deserved a chance to start a new life. A life that had to be somewhere far away from Jared.

Adam skidded to a halt, and his heart jumped halfway up his throat.

But not if Rhone isn't even talking to him!

Heat seared the back of Adam's neck and ripped down his spine. He didn't know whether to run away, snatch Annie's arms off her body for embracing Rhone, or punch Rhone in the gut for hugging Annie back.

Logic and clearer thinking tried to force themselves into Adam's brain, but his chest burned and squeezed too tightly to feel much beyond gut-wrenching frustration...and fear.

He stood me up. Not for Wes. For her.

The hug broke apart, and Adam heard Annie say, "Thank you."

"No problem." Rhone lifted her face up with a knuckle under her chin and winked. "You promise to think about it some more?"

"Yes." Her eyes flashed with amber, followed by a grumble in her tone. "For all the good it will do."

Rhone nudged his boot against hers. "Come on. You don't really want to believe that."

It's nothing. They're not doing anything.

With a rope twisting on itself repeatedly in Adam's belly, he cleared his throat...loudly.

Rhone looked up, and his entire face softened. "Hey, babe."

“Adam. Hi,” Annie said. She made eye contact, her shoulders remained relaxed and open...and Adam still couldn't suppress the roar of jealousy that rocked through him.

Unable to speak just yet, Adam looked at Rhone and tapped his watch.

Rhone's visage fell. “Oh shit.” He pulled his coat sleeve up and looked at his own watch, as if he might find a different answer. “The meeting with Eliza.”

Adam noticed his own hand beating against his leg and shoved it in his pocket to hide the tic. He cleared his throat again and forced himself to speak. “We need to move, or we're going to be late.”

“I'm sorry.” Annie looked at Adam with apology. “I didn't mean to hold him up.”

“No worries,” Rhone replied. “I'm the one who stopped.” He moved to Adam's side and slipped his arm around his waist. “Talk to you later.”

Annie waved and started down one of the stone paths.

“Keep us updated,” Rhone called as she walked away.

With the tails of her long cream-colored coat floating on the breeze, Annie gave him a thumbs-up without looking back.

Rhone rubbed at Adam's waist and quickly adjusted his step to Adam's fast strides. “I was coming back to find you when I came across Annie—”

Adam held a hand up, and Rhone clamped his mouth shut.

For about two seconds.

“I can tell you're upset,” he started again. “Adam...”

“Stop.” *Fuck. Don't do this right now.* Adam didn't dare lose his shit and start screaming or—worse—crying like a fucking insecure idiot out in public. He exhaled long and slow. “Let's just get to this meeting and deal with it first. Okay?”

Rhone's arm slid away from Adam's back. “Fine.”

“Call your brother and tell him I found you. He and Kasey are waiting in the restaurant for one of us to come back.”

Rhone did as asked. Adam then got the silence he wanted, but the roiling in his stomach only grew.

* * * * *

Back to the room. Finally.

Adam pushed the door open and held it for Rhone, who slipped past him quietly. Letting it slowly ease closed on its own behind him, Adam moved to the living area and draped his jacket across the arm of a chair. His muscles ached from top to bottom with renewed tension he could not release. Two hours of nodding, chatting, and listening to Eliza assure them everything would be perfect tomorrow night had Adam strung tighter than when they'd left Annie in the garden.

Two hours of sitting right beside the man he loved more than anything in the world, and never feeling less free to reach out and touch him, threw Adam right back to being sixteen and on his own.

I'm pretty sure this is not how you're supposed to feel the day before your wedding.

Across the room, Rhone tossed his coat and jacket on the couch and braced his hands against the tall back. From that position, Rhone tracked Adam's every move. Adam could feel it like fingers on his bare flesh. He could *always* feel it.

"How long is the silent treatment going to last, Adam?" Rhone finally cut the thick silence, something that had started up again the second they'd said good-bye to Eliza and headed back to their room. "How long are you going to stew and not let me talk because you already think you know what you saw?"

Adam turned his head just an inch and made eye contact from ten feet away. "I know you're not cheating on me."

Rhone's nostrils flared, and his fingers sank deeper into the couch's upholstery. "You damn well better know that." He bared his teeth, and his eyes shone so bright, he looked downright savage. With a point of his finger, he started to pace. "Better know a shitload more than that about me by now too."

"I do." Guilt had tight enough hold of Adam to force out that concession, but the image of Rhone smiling at Annie and touching her chin remained clear in his mind too. "Then again, I also know I've seen you with Annie twice now in two days." He felt his lips twist in an ugly sneer. "Conveniently without me."

"Oh my God." Rhone spun and smacked his hand against the kitchen bar. "Are you fucking kidding me with this shit? *We*—as in me, Canin, Nate, and Logan—came across her

yesterday while we were hiking. She was by herself, so I asked her if she wanted join us. I wasn't alone with her, and even if I were, that's not a crime, and it doesn't mean I want to have sex with her."

"Interesting that you brought up sex." A sharp pain lanced through Adam's core and into his spine, and he covered the grab to his stomach by putting his head down and striding into the bedroom. "I didn't say anything about sex. With her."

Rhone chased Adam into the bedroom. "I'm just being nice to her. You have been too. Shit, Adam, don't start this with me. You're the one who wanted us to befriend her in the first place."

Adam whipped his head up and found Rhone standing just inside the room. "You certainly did that today, didn't you? When you were *supposed*"—he snarled the word to smother the constriction in his throat—"to be talking to Wes!"

"I did talk to Wes!" Rhone roared loudly enough that the guests three rooms down probably heard him. "Don't you dare imply that I ever ignore your requests. I got nowhere. Wes seemed confused when he realized why I wanted to talk to him. Then he was quickly embarrassed, in denial, and I barely got in that he could come work for us in Chicago before he made some lame excuse and ran off. I cut through the gardens to come find you and came across Annie."

"Of course you did," Adam said with a roll of his eyes. He could hear the snide tone rolling past his lips and hated it, but he could not shut up. "And you just had to stop and chat."

"She was crying! She just broke off her engagement to Ford. What the hell did you expect me to do? Walk right past her without stopping? I'm not an asshole, and I'm not going to become one to satisfy your insecurities."

The wind sucked right out of his lungs, and Adam stumbled into the bed. "What did you say?"

"This is not about Annie, Adam, and you damn well know it. Deep down, you don't for one second think that woman is after me, and I fucking for sure am not after her. This is about you being afraid that I'm going to wake up one day and leave you for a woman."

"Can you really blame me for being scared?"

"I can't believe we're having this conversation again." With his hands clasped behind his neck, Rhone shook his head and glanced up at the ceiling. "I don't know, Reyes. Maybe you'd prefer it if I never talked to, looked at, or associated with a female ever again." He looked down and raised a brow. "Would *that* make you happy?"

A chill went through Adam. "Don't you dare belittle my fear about this," he murmured. "It is legitimate."

"*No. It. Isn't.*" Rhone's hands went from his neck into his hair and pulled, leaving short tufts in their wake. "Christ, we've been through this a hundred times. I'm not going to up and decide one day I need a woman more than I want you."

"Maybe not more than, but you can't categorically deny possibly equal to," Adam argued. "You are a heterosexual man in a homosexual relationship; one that you are about to make permanent by marriage. You are straight. You respond to women. I see it all the time; it's a part of you. Your body picks up on when they flirt with you, and it sometimes even subconsciously moves into the flirtation, because that's what it instinctually reacts to."

"It also instinctually turns to you! It clings to *you*."

"But one does not negate the other!" Adam scratched his throat raw with each layer of fear revealed. "It doesn't change the fact that you are attracted to women."

Rhone growled and squeezed his hands in a wringing motion. "Good Christ, I want to strangle you sometimes. Listen to me, once and for all. I cling to you and crave you because I fucking love you. I want you. No one else." He threw Adam a storm-filled glare. "Now goddamn figure out a way to wrap your brain around that and believe it by tomorrow night, or we're not getting married." He delivered that knife-cutting jab, and then the walls shook as he slammed the door, leaving Adam alone in the bedroom.

Stunned into temporary paralysis, Adam folded under the crushing blow.

He doesn't want to marry me anymore.

No!

His legs came back to him, and he bounded to his feet to chase after Rhone. He ran out into the living area and then yanked open the door to the hall, but Rhone was already gone.

* * * * *

Rhone pounded down the stairwell, floor after floor, down to the ground level, welcoming the breathlessness that seized his lungs with a sharp burn. He fumed inside, and his hands felt welded into tight fists, ready and willing to hit the first person who looked at him sideways or funny.

He loved Adam more than his own life, but they'd had this discussion about Rhone's heterosexuality before, although never to an explosive level quite that fast. Rhone didn't know what the hell he was supposed to say that would put an end to Adam's fears. Jesus, he was beginning to wonder if he ever could. He'd never walked out on Adam before, and he already felt sick to his stomach, but as he stood there listening to Adam fling imaginary future infidelities against him, Rhone knew if he stayed in that hotel room one second longer, he would say something he could never take back.

You told him you might not marry him tomorrow. That's pretty fucking bad.

"Shit." Rhone jammed the heels of his hands against the exit door's bar handle and took some measure of satisfaction in the loud *clank* of metal as the door opened into a hallway near the hotel bar.

"Fuck fuck fuck." He didn't want to call off the wedding, and he goddamned wouldn't let Adam do it either.

Rhone reached into his jacket pocket for his cell phone and belatedly realized he'd left his jacket back in the hotel room with his coat. He cursed himself again, rounded the corner to head for the nearest elevators, and ran smack into a thick, solid body. Rhone automatically grabbed, and the other man did too. After steadying himself, Rhone looked up from the floor into green eyes he felt he knew, if not the person behind them.

Annie's fiancé. Ex now, Rhone corrected himself.

Ford cleared his throat. "Pardon."

"No problem. Excuse me." Rhone moved to go around Ford, but the man blocked his path. Rhone shifted in the other direction, and once again, Ford slid in front of him, cutting off his escape.

"A minute of your time, please." Ford's voice was cordial, but if his stare conveyed his thoughts, Rhone would be six feet under in a pine box.

Oh great. You caught me at the goddamned wrong time, buddy.

Rhone flashed a predatory smile. “Let me guess.” He was in no fucking mood. “You want to take a crack at me about your girlfriend too.”

“Damn right I want a word with you.” Ford took a quick look around the area and lowered his voice to a hiss. “What in the hell did you say to Annie yesterday?”

“Nothing.” The tethers of Rhone's control stretched his stress points extremely thin. “I didn't say a damn thing.”

“Had to be something,” Ford replied with whisper softness. “One stroll in the woods with you and she's calling off our wedding. I want to know what you said.” A hint of ruthlessness iced his stare. “Right now.”

Son of a bitch. Rhone leaned in and got right in Ford's face. “Let me be as clear as I can with you. Hell, let's get it clear with everyone else too.” The band holding him together inside snapped, and he raised his voice to include anyone in hearing range. “I don't want your woman, Ford. I am in love with my fiancé. Why can't he or you”—Rhone bumped his fists into Ford's chest—“believe that?”

A passing hotel employee paused, looking to Ford, but Ford waved the large man off. Ford grabbed Rhone's arm, steered him into the bar to a table, and laid another hard stare on him. “Keep your hands to yourself,” Ford said, “and get your tone under control, or you're going to get escorted right out of this hotel.”

“I could say the same to you.”

Rhone asked a passing server for a beer; Ford indicated the same. Then Rhone leaned back in his chair and assessed the man across from him.

Ford openly challenged with his stare and posed a similar posture right back. “I never shoved you,” Ford said. “And as harshly as I spoke, I never once raised my voice above a whisper.” His voice remained as cool as the other side of the pillow.

“Of course you didn't. It wouldn't be mannerly.” Rhone paused as the waiter brought his beer and slid one in front of Ford too. “Is that how you talk to Annie?” he asked when the server walked away. “Like you're sitting across from her at a board meeting? No wonder she called off the wedding.”

“Don't you worry about what I say to Annie.”

The beginnings of a growl hummed in Rhone's throat. "I have to worry, because you're being an asshole, and the shit is spilling all over my relationship." He pushed his glass of beer slowly back and forth between his hands, staring at the waves of amber liquid that never moved quite enough to spill over the edge. "I'm supposed to be having the best week of my life," he confessed, his voice losing some of its rancor. "Instead, I just got into the biggest fight I've ever had with Adam." Rhone lifted his gaze to Ford's. "He's my fiancé."

Ford looked at him as he took a swig of his beer. "So Annie has mentioned. I'm sorry to hear you argued."

Rhone snorted and took a drink himself. "I bet you are."

"I *am* sorry." A little bit of fire lit Ford's words. "There's nothing in it for me to wish either of you ill. You clearly love each other."

Rhone closed his eyes and felt himself sitting at his desk in Chicago, frustrated. Then, like a miracle, he would hear a little tap and look up to find Adam standing there, asking if he could help. In the bar, now, Rhone could feel the smile that just seeing the man brought to his lips and heart.

"We do love each other." As Rhone shared, the final waves of frustration and anger at his man slipped away. "More than anything."

"Great." Ford lifted his glass in toast. "Then go love each other and quit butting into my relationship."

Son of a bitch. Rhone put his glass down very carefully and breathed through the urge to yell and shake this man. "I didn't do a damn thing to you or Annie. She has a very good mind of her own, which I suspect you already know. I don't have time for your fiancée or wedding or any of your other problems. I have enough on my hands with my own."

"You did something."

"I did nothing. The problem is"—Rhone pointed with his beer—"neither did you."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Look, just admit you love the woman, get her back, and be done with it."

“What?” Ford reared as if Rhone had just thrown a drink in his face. “This is a business deal.” He struck his pointer finger into the table. “I know you are aware of that because Annie told me she confided in you and your boyfriend.”

“Fiancé, and give me a fucking break.” Rhone had no patience for bullshit. “Annie's not anywhere around, and I'm not buying the act. Adam saw right through you in five minutes.” Rhone observed defensive posturing fill out every corner of Ford right now and wondered how he hadn't seen it himself. “Just say it. You love her.”

Ford opened his mouth but then clamped it shut and fell back into his chair. “I never thought she'd call it off,” he finally said. The righteous blaze left his eyes and voice. “I put all my chips on my ability to read her, and I made the one move I could. I challenged her for this place, one hundred percent certain she would rather share it than give it up entirely. I bet wrong.”

“Tell her how you feel, man,” Rhone advised. “You'd be shocked at how quickly that makes everything right.”

Ford laughed, but it sounded hollow. “You don't know Annie. I tell her how I feel, and she's either going to laugh in my face or think she can run roughshod over me the rest of our lives.” He swallowed visibly, and his mouth turned hard at the edges. “No, thanks.”

“Then enjoy your life of solitude.” Rhone shivered at the thought of going to bed alone again, of never having Adam sitting across the table for a meal. “Excuse me.” He stood and pulled out his money clip. “I'm going to go make sure the same doesn't happen to me.”

He threw a ten on the table, his mind already on what he would say when he found Adam in their room.

* * * * *

“Do you see him, sir?”

Adam stood next to the maître d' and searched the crowded five-star hotel restaurant for Rhone but didn't see his dark head anywhere. He'd already searched the lobby, Internet hub, coffee shop, and indoor grill with no luck. He only had the bar left to check.

With Rhone's phone still in their room, Adam didn't know how to contact him. Adam knew the man wasn't hurt physically and that it would humiliate him to have the hotel staff searching for him, so that wasn't an option, and he didn't want their family and friends to find out about the fight, so he hadn't said anything to them.

Best to just go back to the room and wait for him to come back on his own.

“Sir?” the maître d' said politely again, gaining Adam's attention.

“Sorry. No, I don't see him.” Dejected, Adam shook the man's hand. “Thank you for letting me look.”

A finger tapped his shoulder. “Adam?”

He spun and came face-to-face with Annie, her hair upswept and the rest of her dressed to the nines in a green sheath dress and expensive-looking heels. She stood next to a big, intimidating man in a dark suit.

“Hi,” Annie said. She glanced around the waiting area and came back to Adam with a furrow between her brows. “Are you having dinner alone?”

“Ah, no.” Adam hoped like hell his face wasn't as red as it felt. “I'm not dressed for this place. I was just...looking.”

“Mr. Astor.” The maître d' bowed and swept his arm toward the body of the restaurant. “Your table is ready.”

“Thank you, Simon.” The dark man put his arm around Annie's waist. “Annie?”

“Right.” Annie slapped her forehead. “I apologize. Adam, this is my brother, Robert Astor. Robert”—she looked up at the man towering beside her—“meet Adam Reyes.”

Ah, so this is the executive brother. “Nice to meet you.” Adam dipped his head and extended his hand. “You run a beautiful hotel.”

Robert engulfed Adam's hand in his and shook it. “Thank you.” He let his hand fall to his side, and after a prolonged moment of heavy silence, his attention shifted to the waiting maître d' and came back to Adam. “If you'll excuse us?”

Shit. “Of course. Have a nice dinner.” Adam waved as he backed up, mortified that he'd just stood there without saying a word. “I'm going to go. Bye.” He hightailed it out of there in fast strides.

Annie caught up to him in the center of an open lounging area. “Wait.” She tugged his arm and pulled him around to face her. “Are you okay?” Open concern deepened the color of her eyes to toffee. “You seem a little *off*.”

Adam studied this woman, and not a hint of hot jealousy raced through his veins. No freezing uncertainty clenched in his gut either.

Son of a mother. When he found Rhone, he'd have to open up and eat a shitload of crow. *It's not about her.*

"I'll be fine," he finally said. "I didn't mean to drag you away from your meal."

She waved her hand and took a seat on one of the ornate couches. "It's not a big deal. Robert just thinks he should console me, so that's what he's trying to do." She looked up and shot Adam a pointed look. "I don't need comforting or coddling."

Taking a seat adjacent to her, Adam leaned forward and clasped his hands between his spread legs. "I heard you broke things off with Ford. Sorry it didn't work out."

"What's done is done." She pushed her chin up, but Adam also saw her wipe the edge of her eye. "I caught up to see what's wrong with you." Her elbow went to the arm of the couch, and her chin went into her hand. "Lay it on me."

Adam leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. He opened his mouth to tell her everything was fine but ended up shifting to the edge of his seat and dangling his hands between his knees again.

Annie covered his hands and stopped the nervous wringing. "You don't have to tell me anything, but you and Rhone have been really nice to me. You've listened and let me ramble on about my issues. The least I can do is return the favor."

"I'm looking for Rhone. We disagreed about"—Adam stopped and bit his lip, stricken by whom he was talking to about *this*—"something, and I've temporarily lost him." *Please only let it be temporary.*

Annie scrunched her face and put her forehead in her hand. "It's my fault, isn't it?" She pursed her lips as if mad at herself. "God, I never meant to mess up you guys. I *knew* you were upset earlier today when you found me with Rhone; I could tell by your body language. But I swear, there was nothing going on. I didn't make any moves on Rhone, but even if I had, he never would have taken me up on it." She chuckled, and it eased away the tightness around her mouth. "Every time I bitched and moaned about something to do with Ford, or just relationships in general, Rhone was fast on the trigger with a great story about you to counter exactly what I was complaining about." Pausing, Annie finished, "He made me envious, if you want the truth."

"We're fighting," Adam said, his voice dry, "but that doesn't mean you can have him."

"No!" Absolute horror shot Annie upright. "I didn't mean that." She looked away, silent for a prolonged moment. When she came back to him, the light had dimmed from her eyes. "Never mind."

"I apologize," Adam said. Once the dig left his mouth, he could have kicked himself for teasing her. "You meant for Ford and what you might have had with him."

"Doesn't matter what I meant."

"Of course it does." *Goddamn*. Just like Rhone, Adam found himself reaching out and lifting her gaze out of hiding. "You want Ford to want you more than he wants a stake in the hotel, don't you? You want him to want to marry you even if he doesn't get his father's lodge in return."

"He's a twerp." Annie's eyes spit as much fire as her tone. "He's still a kid."

Adam noticed she didn't answer his question. "I don't think so. Twerps and kids don't look at women the way Ford looks at you."

She snapped her focus up, and Adam nodded.

"There's a bigger gap between my age and Rhone's than there is between yours and Ford's," he added.

As quickly as she puffed up, she deflated. "It's different for women. When *she's* the older one." Shooting him another fiery glance, she added, "And please don't be politically correct and pretend it isn't."

It would certainly take a man with some staying power, as well as a hide thick enough to withstand constantly brushing up against some irritating bristle, to get through the defenses of this woman.

"In general," Adam conceded, "you're absolutely right. There is a double standard. But there are always exceptions to the rules, and maybe Ford is one of them."

"No." She shook her head vehemently. "He was looking for a way out; that's why he pushed the change in our agreement. He knew I'd never consent to share this hotel." She rubbed her hand along the arm of the couch and then over the edge of the end table, almost in a caress. "He didn't even fight me when I called it off."

“Did you give him much of a chance?”

She met his gaze with no room for retraction in her own. “He could have found me, if he really wanted to.”

“Or you could go find him and hash out a new agreement. You still have time.”

“Nope.” It was as if her entire being entrenched itself in denial. Rigid—no room for movement. “It was hard enough to figure out a way to approach Ford with a deal in the first place without looking like a complete loser. I was sweating bullets the entire negotiation, but I couldn't let him know just how much I wanted it to happen.” If Adam hadn't been completely focused on Annie, he would have missed her whisper. “For more than the hotel.”

“Maybe you did too good a job.”

“Maybe.” She shook herself, and it was as if the motion dusted off any chips of vulnerability, leaving an untouchable heiress in its wake. “Either way, it's over now.”

“Or you could tell Ford the truth and see what happens.” Adam didn't know why he cared or kept pushing, other than he hated to see pride keep apart two people who clearly weren't meant for anyone but each other. “He might surprise you with the new deal he puts on the table.”

“And give him total power over me?” Annie looked like she asked him to drive her car right into a brick wall. “No way.”

I'd give it to Rhone, if it meant us being together. Shit, I already did.

On the night Rhone had discovered Adam taking a dildo up the ass, dreaming it was Rhone fucking him, Rhone had forced the truth out of Adam. When Adam confessed his love, he gave Rhone the power to destroy him.

It was the second-biggest risk he'd ever taken in his life.

The first was agreeing to take a grunt job with Quinn Security the day he tried to steal Rhone's cell phone.

Essentially, from that day twelve years ago, they'd never been apart.

I'm not about to let anything come between us now.

Adam shot to his feet, frantic once again to find Rhone. “I hope you reconsider. For the right man, it's worth the fear of the unknown.” He touched a hand to Annie's shoulder as he passed by the back of the couch. “Have a good evening. I have to go.”

He'd wasted enough time talking. Adam ran for the bar, back on the search for Rhone.

Chapter Eight

Rhone stormed into the hotel room, desperate to find his man. “Adam!” He shouted again as he passed through the empty living area into their bedroom and then to the bathroom, finding it empty too. “Adam!” He rushed across to the second room and found nothing but a neatly made bed and an unused second bathroom.

He raced to the phone and dialed Adam's cell number, only to hear the soft ring chime in the living room.

“Shit.” Rhone slammed the receiver into the cradle and ran back out into the living room, finding Adam's jacket and phone with his coat, just like Rhone's.

I should stay put and wait for Adam to return.

I can't sit still. I need to move.

Go check the car. If it's still here, at least I know he's somewhere in the hotel.

Rhone took a second to grab his own jacket this time, just in case Adam tried to reach him on his cell. Out in the hallway, as the door swished closed behind him, Rhone pulled out his phone. He walked with his head down, looking for a message or a text. He didn't make it through pushing the second button before the *ding* of the elevator down the hall reached his ears, and he glanced up to find Adam emerging from the doors.

Adam looked up too, connected across the distance to Rhone with the near-black brightness in his eyes, and stalled in place some twenty feet away. Rhone stared back, frozen, his throat clogging with too much emotion to speak.

Christ, he's the most beautiful person in the world.

A rough, inhuman noise suddenly escaped Rhone, and he started running; Adam scratched out Rhone's name and sprinted too, not stopping until Rhone scooped Adam up and crushed him into his arms. An equally bruising hold tightened around Rhone's waist, and Adam leaned his full

weight into Rhone's frame. They stood in the hallway for long minutes in silence, just holding each other and breathing heavily through being in each other's arms again.

Rhone pressed a kiss to the side of Adam's head and held his mouth close to his temple. "I came back, and you weren't here." He tunneled his fingers into Adam's thick hair and pulled his head back, needing to see his partner's face. "It scared me." He admitted to the silly panic. "I didn't like it."

Adam lifted his hand, his fingers trembling as he touched the tips over Rhone's face, as if afraid he was a mirage and would disappear. When Rhone didn't evaporate, Adam buried his head against Rhone's chest and burrowed a hand under his jacket.

"I was so stupid," Adam whispered. "Forgive me for acting crazy. I know you love me." He glanced up again, and his dark eyes filled with tears. "I know you won't hurt me. I'm sorry I made a fight out of nothing."

"Shh, shh." Rhone held Adam's head and brushed kisses all over his face. "I'm sorry too." He tugged Adam backward and started pulling his shirt out of his jeans. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, and I'm sorry I walked out like I did." His voice was raw with his apology. "I want to marry you tomorrow night." Rhone's spine hit the door to their room, and he leaned back against it, pulling Adam to his front. He sipped from his lover's lips again and again, needing the sustenance, and looked right into the blur of his eyes. "I want to sleep in your bed every night for the rest of our lives." Breathing deeply, Rhone caught a hint of Adam's musk under the faint fragrance of his woodsy deodorant, and it stroked a comforting caress all the way to his core.

Rhone inhaled again, letting that heady scent fill his nostrils and lungs, and he rested his forehead against Adam's. Christ, he never wanted to be away from this man again. "I don't care what kind of talks we have to have to be okay with each other every day," he said. "We'll have them and figure it out."

Adam nodded against him. "I don't ever want to be too stubborn or too scared to talk to you." His fingers still clutched against the small of Rhone's back.

"Me either." His chest banding tight, Rhone held a fistful of Adam's hair and brushed his lips up to his forehead. "Best friends, Adam." He blinked away his own tears. "No matter what."

"Yeah," Adam murmured softly. He tilted his head back and met Rhone's gaze, complete adoration filling his. "That's who I fell in love with: my best friend."

“Me too.”

They stared at each other, small smiles growing bigger, and shared a soft chuckle. Then, the light shining in their eyes darkened with smoldering heat and lust, and they attacked each other like animals. Rhone pulled Adam's hair and devoured his mouth with a kiss full of ownership. Adam opened up, crying out as he accepted Rhone's invasion, and tangled back with aggressive thrusts that had Rhone pushing deeper for more.

“Want you.” Adam yanked Rhone's shirt out of his pants and scratched his trimmed fingernails across his back. He dragged his hands around and ran them up Rhone's chest, drawing a tremble from Rhone with the first tease of his nipples. Adam broke the kiss and licked downward, pausing to look up as his hand slipped between Rhone's legs. “Always want you.”

Rhone moaned and pumped his hips, already a slave to this man's touch. “Key card is in my back pocket.” Fuck, his cock was already hard as granite, and he could hardly breathe through the quick shot to arousal. “Get it and let us inside.”

His body ignited even more on the feel of Adam's fingers sliding into his pocket, and Rhone swore the man teased his buttocks through the fabric just to torment him. Rhone wanted those hands smacking and rubbing all over his bare flesh, and he needed those fingers playing with his hole and preparing him for a fucking. “Please.” He curled his hand around Adam's nape and dragged his mouth in for another hot, licking kiss. “Hurry.”

Adam bit and nipped back, cursing as he fumbled with the door handle and with not letting go of Rhone. Rhone couldn't find the power in his legs to straighten away from the door, and when Adam finally got it open, Rhone stumbled into their room, careening to the side and backward, until his spine hit the bar.

After tossing the key card on the floor, Adam stalked Rhone with predatory precision. His gaze touched Rhone from top to bottom, spiking goose bumps in Rhone, even with the warmth of the room. Adam never paused as he peeled his shirt down his arms and let it fall to the floor.

Rhone ate up the sight of Adam's sinewy, naked flesh and swallowed to get some saliva in his mouth. “Baby”—he exhaled unevenly as Adam pushed his pants down past his hips, revealing more dark, taut skin and a long, erect cock—“you're so fucking stunning.”

Toeing out of his shoes and socks and sliding out of his jeans, Adam barely paused in his stride. “Not nearly as breathtaking as you.” He stopped in front of Rhone and braced his hands

on the bar, caging him in. His warm breath fanned Rhone's mouth with a delicious tingle and had Rhone grasping for what little remained of his equilibrium.

Adam blinked, and after he did, nothing but sultry seduction lived in his midnight stare. "You excite me just by being in the same room with me." He darted his tongue out and licked the seam of Rhone's lips but kept their gazes glued together. "I get turned on just thinking about you." He rubbed the moisture away with his thumb and then put it there again with another flick across Rhone's lower lip. "Loving you makes my heart race and my cock stir." A smile lit his eyes. He moved in again, and Rhone's entire being rumbled a guttural noise and shook with desire.

"Please." Rhone lost the battle for control and surged, claiming Adam's mouth with his, hungry for a deeper kiss. A hot, hard body rubbed up against him, burning him through his clothes. "Make love to me." Rhone uttered his request as he tore at his own jacket and shirt, ripping thread and buttons in an effort to get naked too. "I need you inside me."

Adam growled an approving noise and dipped down to take a bite out of Rhone's shoulder and chest, leaving angry red marks in his wake. "Clothes, baby." He lapped lower and sucked on Rhone's nipple, hardening it with shooting joy in an instant and making Rhone lose his balance. Rhone fell into one of the bar stools, but Adam stayed right with him, never missing a beat as he scraped his teeth across Rhone's torso to his other nipple and worried the very tip with excruciatingly wonderful pain. He kept the other one in a stiff peak of arousal with his fingernail, thumb, and forefinger, and Rhone writhed his ass on the chair as if Adam had an equal number of hands and mouths working over every inch of his flesh at the same time.

Biting back a shout of pleasure, Rhone shoved his hands to his belt and jerked hard at the strap of leather and button beneath. Jesus, he needed to free his cock or he thought he might die.

Adam eased up his torment on Rhone's nipples and began kissing his way down the centerline of his torso. He reached the bulge Rhone hadn't yet pulled from his jeans and kept right on going, pecking kisses down the fabric covering the rigid length. "You finish that"—he made eye contact, luring Rhone even deeper into his spell as he folded to his knees—"and I'll get your shoes."

With his belt, button, and zipper open, Rhone watched Adam through a half-slitted gaze, trapped in his beauty. He stuck his hand into his underwear and wrapped it around his dick,

hissing at the good, hard rub he gave himself, from root to tip. He stroked again and then worked his balls over with a firm touch, kneading the lightly furred weight to an internal cry of euphoria. With each tug on his cock or testicles, his passage pounded a fast heartbeat, wanting a piece of the pleasure too. Rhone kept watching Adam undress him, and he picked up the speed of his own handjob.

Adam made a chiding sound, and his palms crept up the front of Rhone's legs. "No hiding it." He slipped his hands around the waistband of Rhone's pants and underwear and tugged down. "It's partly mine."

Rhone lifted his weight and allowed Adam to remove the rest of his clothes. "Not part. You own all of it, honey." He circled the base of his cock and held the stiff length out in offering, the slit eagerly leaking more proof of his excitement. "Just like you own the rest of me."

Adam paused, closing his eyes as a little tremor shook through him. "The things you say." He hooked his arms around Rhone's spread legs and burrowed his face into his crotch, inhaling deeply with a satisfied hum. Then he licked up the underside of Rhone's dick and took it into his mouth. He sucked deep and hard, and Rhone bowed back against the bar with a low groan of pure joy. Adam bathed every inch of his cock with the most incredible focus and attention, and he pressed his hands to Rhone's inner thighs and pushed his legs up and apart.

"Lemme..." Rhone started and slipped into a moan. "Ohhhh fuck..." Adam took him down his throat and swallowed, and Rhone's muscles froze midshift. He hung suspended, groaning and fighting the immediate tightening in his balls, until Adam helped push him the rest of the way up to the bar. With the granite now under his back, and his ass hanging over the edge, Rhone stretched his arms out wide, hooking them over the far side of the bar. He thrust his hips up into Adam's face, feeding his penis into that pretty mouth with jerky stabs. Adam kept hold of Rhone's legs, steadying him back into control. Rhone was grateful for the help...for about a second.

Then Adam licked down, sucked on Rhone's nuts, and played with his taint, and Rhone choked on the deep-seated pleasure. Fingers flickered over that thin triangle of flesh Rhone so loved Adam to touch, and a firm, wet tongue lapped at his balls and the root of his cock.

Rhone pulled a stream of air into his painfully tight lungs, and he bit his lip as he watched his lover please him in the most incredible way. “You’re killing me, baby.” His thigh muscles clenched and released as he struggled to hold back coming.

Adam glanced up, and mischievous, wanton intent deepened his gaze to pitch. “Not yet, I’m not.” He dipped lower and revealed Rhone’s snug ring. He took a moment to rub it with the pad of his thumb, and Rhone’s chute shivered in anticipation.

Oh fuck. Rhone braced himself not to roar the hotel down. *He knows how much I love what’s coming.*

With that smile still in his eyes, Adam wrapped his lips around Rhone’s hole and suckled on the tight muscle. He held Rhone’s cheeks apart and ate at Rhone’s ass with licks, stabs, and flicks from his tongue, in between which he worked in suction that sent Rhone’s passage into a frenzy. Rhone released grunting animal noises through every layer of this raw, elemental kiss. His arms and shoulders shook with holding himself up, but he could not drop his head or bear to look away.

Adam let go of Rhone’s ass with one hand and started jerking on his cock, doubling up on the insanely pleasurable torture. Rhone slipped into a desperate, needy place he’d only felt safe going with Adam.

“Oh yeah... Oh yeah...” Lowering his full weight onto the bar, Rhone shoved a hand between his legs and helped Adam hold him open. “Suck it, suck it.” The delicious pull on his pucker drove Rhone mad, and he couldn’t stop rocking his pelvis into each wet touch. “So good.” He covered Adam’s hand on his dick and helped him squeeze and jerk in long drags from base to tip. “Harder.” Adam used a rougher hand on Rhone’s cock, mastered his ass with his mouth and tongue, and Rhone bit a nick into the edge of his lip. “Suck and pull me harder.” The raw plea stripped his voice bare.

Adam yanked Rhone’s dick past painful, and at the same time, he thrust with his tongue and slipped right through into Rhone’s ass, taking him, just barely, inside. Everything coalesced in a heartbeat, and Rhone shouted, arching his back off the bar as release punched him in the gut. He convulsed, froze; then his prick spewed in the embrace of Adam’s hand. Warm, thick cum rained across Rhone’s stomach, and that only spurred his desires more.

“Don't stop. Ohhhhh shit...” Rhone banged his fist against the wall and shoved his ass into Adam's face. “Don't stop. Fuck me now.” Shudders from his first orgasm still racked through him, and his body heaved with need. “I can come again.”

Adam eased off and smacked Rhone's perineum and bud, leaving a sharp sting on his fluttering hole. “Roll over and push that sweet ass into the air for me.” He stooped down and grabbed his jeans. “I'm coming up there with you.”

Rhone shifted across the length of the bar and did as bade, knowing Adam only took time to grab a packet of lube from his pocket. Rhone pressed his shoulders and cheek into the granite, but even the chill in the stone couldn't cool the blood rushing through his veins. His dick pulsed with renewed life already; he reached back to hold himself open for Adam and didn't shiver until Adam climbed up behind him and fingered his entrance. The muscle automatically contracted, but they'd been together long enough that they both knew one rub and tap would have Rhone opening like a goddamned flower in spring.

Adam teased and applied gentle, insistent force to Rhone's ring with two slippery fingers. After giving a hint more pressure, Rhone's asshole gave way, and Adam eased his digits into Rhone's passage. Rhone gasped at the initial burn as those long fingers tunneled deeper and pushed at his walls, but Adam didn't retreat, and soon cool lubricant coated Rhone's chute. Rhone kept his buttocks spread apart, and as Adam forced a third finger into his stretched entrance, Rhone dropped his hips and groaned low through the hot sting of the thicker taking. Each inch Rhone accepted only made his cock harder.

Adam prepared Rhone with a slow, agonizingly tender, three-finger fuck of his ass. “So sexy the way you offer yourself to me,” Adam murmured. As he withdrew his invasion, he leaned over Rhone's back and pressed a kiss into the damp strands of hair clinging to his nape. “Always gets me so hard.” Adam gently pried Rhone's fingers off his ass and planted them on the counter for him. In its place, he rubbed his erection between the hills of Rhone's buttocks, up and down the length of his crack, right over his sensitized entrance, and Rhone whimpered and wiggled his ass.

Adam's lips brushed across Rhone's shoulder, and a soothing caress moved down his back on either side of his spine. “Don't worry,” Adam said, in complete control. The slick head of his cock rubbed down Rhone's crease, feeling around until it kissed his hole. “No waiting this time.”

Adam curled his hand around Rhone's waist, held him steady, and with one nudge, slid his cock into Rhone's ass.

Oh yes.

Rhone dug his forehead into the granite, squeezed his eyes shut on the first penetration of Adam's long cock, and then groaned with each inch Adam invaded that stretched Rhone so beautifully inside. His channel pulsed and hugged tightly around Adam's penis, working to hold him within. Adam took him all the way to the root, making Rhone gasp and break out in a sweat, but then he moaned, bereft, when Adam withdrew, leaving Rhone empty, only to sink back in, delivering slow friction and claiming him to the hilt.

I love it so fucking much.

Rhone lifted himself up to his hands and pushed backward, needing more, drowning, as he always did when he had Adam inside his body. He didn't know why he'd taken to this bottom position so immediately in their coupling; he just knew he'd never felt more connected to or cherished by another human being as the first time he gave Adam his ass. He rocked back into his lover's cock, worked the thick length into his chute in measured increments, and didn't even stop when there was no more length to take. Needing more, Rhone circled his stretched pucker into the silky fur of Adam's pubes and squeezed his anal muscles around the buried length, stamping Adam's shape inside.

"That's it." Adam hissed and dug his fingers into Rhone's hips. "Ah yeah, tight...tight. God, you fuck my cock so good."

In the reflection of the stainless refrigerator, Rhone watched Adam jerk, shake his head, and regain control. After he did, he guided Rhone forward, making Rhone cry out as at the separation, until only the tip of Adam's prick remained in Rhone's ass.

"Not going anywhere," Adam said, his hold loose on Rhone's hips. "Slide all the way back on me and take what you want again."

Rhone did, losing himself on the repeated ease back and pull away of ass and cock. He set up a slow fucking that denied himself full relief for the surface itch that quickly changed to a clawing need, one that ripped him to shreds inside. His entire body shuddered for more, but even as he picked up the pace and switched to impaling and grinding himself on Adam's prick with faster strokes, he still couldn't find what he needed to release the tension coursing through him.

“Help me, Adam.” Rhone knelt on the bar, stuffed full and rigid as stone, his body aching and exhausted. “I need it.”

The gentlest of fingers threaded through his hair, and the most loving voice spoke right at his ear. “Tell me what you need.”

Rhone looked back at a man in control and knew pure hunger lived in his own eyes. “Take me over,” he begged, his voice rough, “and make me come.”

Adam's pupils flared, and he surged forward to seal his mouth to Rhone's. His lips clung, and his cock swelled and nudged deep in Rhone's ass. Needful little noises escaped Rhone as he slanted his mouth and kissed back, sharing breath that felt like the only stuff with the proper elements to keep him alive. He slid his tongue into Adam's wonderful heat, wanting to tangle, and released a desperate sound as Adam pulled away.

With eyes shining unnaturally bright, giving away his own short tether on control, Adam nipped a kiss on Rhone's cheek. “It's okay. Hold on.” He shifted them, somehow keeping their bodies connected, until Rhone's head and shoulders hung over the edge of the granite. Adam remained behind, lower now, kneeling on the kitchen counter connected to the bar.

Strong, warm palms stroked the insides of Rhone's thighs. “Let your knees slide all the way apart,” Adam instructed and even helped Rhone spread his bent legs across the bar, not stopping until his inner thighs rested against the cold stone. His ass and cock hung off the back lip, and behind him, Adam moaned as his prick automatically slid deeper into Rhone's passage. The move opened Rhone's rectum in a different way, and with his front bent halfway over the other edge, and his legs virtually powerless, Rhone had never felt so physically vulnerable...yet completely safe.

He could chain me to a wall in a dark, locked room, and I would still trust him with my life.

The thought sent a lick of searing heat right through his core. Rhone reached back and curled his hands around the back side of the bar, hanging on tight. “Finish it, Adam.” His skin tingled all over, his ass pulsed in a steady rhythm around Adam's embedded erection, and his own dick sat up so rigid, he thought it might break off. “I want to come for you.”

Adam murmured pleased noises as he pulled all the way out, leaving Rhone open, empty of his mate. “So pretty back here,” he said, his voice a specter that curled itself around Rhone's

soul. He teased the head of his cock back and forth over Rhone's ring, tormenting those supersensitized nerve endings, but didn't push inside. "And all for me."

"All for you." Rhone gritted his teeth, waiting, knowing it would be so fucking good when Adam filled him again. He looked over his shoulder, right into Adam's eyes. "Only for you. Forever."

Adam released a hoarse, pained noise and slammed forward, making them one again, and Rhone shouted, holding on tight through the first sharp stab into his ass. Adam sank his fingers into Rhone's shoulders and knifed deep again, suddenly piercing fast with sharp jabs that rocked Rhone more precariously over the lip of the bar with each thrust. His arm muscles strained to hold on to the counter, his thighs screamed at the position, and his ass flamed with the burning friction, but he reveled in the animal lust of Adam finally losing himself in the mating.

Still looking back, Rhone bared his teeth and took the rough pounding with raw enthusiasm. "Oh yeah, that's right. Fuck me. Ahh!" Rhone roared as Adam doubled over and sank a bite into the tension cording his arm. "Yes, yes." Loving it, Rhone bumped his ass into the mating as best he could. "Fuck me."

Adam licked the marks he'd created and then tongued a line up to Rhone's mouth and latched on. With each snap of his hips that tunneled his dick deep into Rhone's body, a hot shot of breath warmed Rhone's lips. "Love you." Adam's words were hardly more than a winded exhale, but he held Rhone's head back with a fistful of hair and pressed their lips together. "Love you."

"Ohh, baby, yes..." Rhone clung to his partner's mouth, his eyes tearing up as his ass took a loving beating. His balls sucked up close to his body, and tentacles of swirling pleasure reached into his cock, spine, and channel. Clamping his jaw, Rhone fought the rush of coming. *Not yet.* "I love you too."

Adam jerked and then went still and finally drove deep one more time with his cry of release. The sound went right into Rhone's mouth, down into his being. When it combined with the first shot of wet heat hitting his tunnel, Rhone careened right into the sky. In tandem, Rhone's orgasm milked the hard length embedded inside him, Adam dumped hot spurts of cum into his ass with each squeeze, and Rhone spilled onto the counter in one long stream of seed.

It felt like they both came forever, but the tension in Adam's body eventually loosened, and he settled on top of Rhone in a heap. "Holy crap." He exhaled against the side of Rhone's head. "That was incredible." He heaved for breath as if he'd just finished running a marathon. "I don't think we've ever had make-up sex before."

"We don't fight a whole lot." Rhone pecked a kiss on Adam's chin. "Thank God." He lay beneath Adam, happy as hell to have been fucked practically into a coma. As much as his body felt sated, the reason he'd slammed out of the room in the first place sank talons into his chest once again, hurting him, and put strands of fear back into his heart.

Adam grunted and shifted away from Rhone, making Rhone shiver as the move severed the connection of their bodies.

"What's the matter?" Adam asked. Concern immediately sharpened his gaze. "You just went tight on me. Felt good on my dick but sent a shot of cold through the rest of me."

Minefield. Minefield. Didn't matter. It had to happen. His body stiff, Rhone rolled over, his knees popping loudly as they hit the lower kitchen counter, and he knelt in front of Adam. "Should we go ahead and finish having the conversation that started this?" Sharp pinpricks brought life back into his legs, but he ignored them, focused entirely on Adam. "I don't want to fall into sex and pretend it never happened."

Some of the color drained from Adam's dark skin, but his chin stayed up, and he didn't look away. "Yeah. Come on." He hopped down with nary a hobble and reached up to assist Rhone. "We can talk in the bathroom. I don't think I broke skin"—he fingered the teeth marks on Rhone's arm and chest—"but I'll clean up those bites for you anyway, just in case."

Adam took Rhone's hand and led him through their bedroom to the bathroom, ending at the pair of sinks. Adam busied himself in their shaving kit and kept his head down while pulling items from the leather case and lining them on the sink. Rhone let him have the lead and, in companionable silence, grabbed a clean washcloth off the towel rack to wash up. They shared one bathroom at home, much smaller than this one, and he naturally gravitated to sharing one sink and crossing arms over each other as they grabbed what they wanted.

After Rhone cleaned his belly, buttocks, and hole, Adam guided him to the toilet and sat him down on a towel he'd folded across the seat. Rhone let himself be led and tended to, knowing Adam would find his way eventually.

Rhone inhaled sharply at the cool sting and chaser of heat the antibacterial liquid Adam put on his arm pulled out of him, then sighed when the man blew on the area afterward. Adam applied the stuff again, and as he dabbed with a cotton ball, he began. "Your body is the picture I've dreamed about since I was a kid and began to understand what crushes and attraction meant." He dipped down and blew again, and it put him on eye level with Rhone. "Not literally, obviously, but the body parts...the gender. You are what I desire on a purely physical level in addition to the love and need I feel specifically for you. You can't say the same thing about me, and that's where I've always been afraid of losing you."

Adam paused. His hand shook as he doused a new cotton ball in the liquid, but he got himself in line, and Rhone almost shed tears for him.

"As much as I know you love and want me," Adam said, "it's sometimes hard for me to control the fear that your body and psyche, as a rule, want to attach to females, and obviously I am not one." He shrugged, finished cleaning the bites, and tossed the final cotton balls into the trash. "That's all. That's where I'm coming from. And you were right." He went back to moving at a frenetic pace as he refilled the kit he'd just emptied. "It didn't have anything to do with Annie. I know you weren't putting any moves on her or wishing you could be with her instead of me. But the basic fear that I put on you today because of what she drew out of me, does exist inside me."

"I know that, Adam. I swear I do." Rhone watched Adam make busywork, tidying the rest of the bathroom, and his heart squeezed with such pain, he thought it might bust right out of his chest. Christ, his hands felt tied, and a sick knot balled in his stomach. "I wish like hell I could tell you that I haven't had a single sex dream about a woman since we got together. I wish I could, but it would be a lie. I do still have wet dreams about women, and when I see an attractive woman out in public, I do pause to appreciate her. I can't help that; it was hardwired into me for thirty-five years before we got together. As much as I don't act on it, and have no desire to ever act on what I notice, I don't think I can control my dreams or stop noticing. I think that would be asking the impossible." Adam passed by the toilet, and Rhone reached out, latching onto his arm, making him stop. After a moment, Adam looked down, and Rhone finished, "I'm sorry that hurts you."

"It doesn't. At least, not that much." Adam looked at Rhone without fidgeting, and Rhone started to breathe easier. "I think all I wanted was for you to acknowledge the attraction.

Otherwise I felt like you were living in denial and trying to pretend your interest in the opposite sex doesn't exist anymore in order to be with me. If you were doing that, it scared me that you would wake up one day and be bombarded with this truth you're trying to suppress, and that you would explode and not be able to ignore it anymore.”

“Okay.” Rhone nodded. “I acknowledge it. I never denied it to myself, but I guess I did make an effort to keep it from you because I thought it would hurt you if you heard me say it.” He looked up and swung Adam's hand between his spread knees. “I'm sorry if that made it worse.”

Back to that indulgent smile of his, Adam caressed Rhone's cheek. “It's okay. I know you didn't mean to.”

Rhone pulled, and Adam fell neatly into his lap. Planting a kiss on his neck, Rhone whispered, “Can I tell you something else?”

“Anything.”

He curled his hand around Adam's nape and looked into his beautiful, warm eyes. “I have just as many wet dreams about men now as I do about women.” Rhone pushed Adam's mouth closed on that confession. “I swear I do. Being with you has taught me to see the beauty and appeal in both sexes, and it doesn't freak me out anymore to wake up with a boner because I was dreaming about some random guy sucking me off and me fucking his brains out while we're on some tropical island.”

Adam opened his mouth, but Rhone pinched his lips together. “That doesn't mean I have any more interest in leaving you for a man than for a woman. Just like I have to trust that you aren't going to meet some guy one day who has always identified as gay, who sees the world more in accordance with the way you do, and leave me for him. Does it worry me sometimes? Do I have moments of insecurity when I see you talking to an attractive gay man who I know would appeal to you? Yes.” He admitted to fears he'd kept hidden these last two years. “I get scared sometimes, Adam. But I remind myself that you love me and that what we have together goes well beyond sex. It's cheesy to say, but I believe we're soul mates.” His face heated, and his blood raced at saying the words aloud. “I believe we would have found each other in some way, even if you'd never picked my pocket that day at the airport.”

Adam rested his open palm over Rhone's heart. “Soul mates, huh?” he asked softly.

“Yeah.” Rhone did the same to Adam, his voice rough. “I think so.”

With a deep sigh, Adam leaned into Rhone and put his head on his shoulder. “Feels right to me too.”

Rhone squeezed Adam around the middle. “Good. Are we okay, then?”

Adam nodded. “You never hinted at your dreams about other men. That actually makes me feel better, believe it or not.”

Rhone pulled back and raised a brow. “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah. Could be interesting.” Getting to his feat, Adam walked out of the bathroom, his tight, sleek body moving in ways that rushed new hunger straight through to Rhone's core.

Out of his control, Rhone found himself standing too. “Interesting how?”

From the bedroom, Adam crooked his finger, and Rhone followed, like a faithful pet to its master.

“Tell me about one,” Adam asked.

Rhone dipped down, inhaled, and quickly slipped Adam's essence back into every part of his being. “How about I act one out for you instead?” He breathed the words huskily at Adam's ear. “It would involve me folding you over the footboard of this bed and binding you in place so I can have my way with you.”

Adam blinked lazily, and a confident grin graced his lips. He backed up to the closet, slid the door open, and a moment later, held up two strips of expensive silk, one pale blue and the other black. “Will a couple of ties do the trick?” He walked back to Rhone and snapped them tight, like a folded leather belt, in front of his chest.

Christ, I love this man.

Rhone snatched the silk out of Adam's hands and crowded him into the foot of the bed, riding his ass right up against the cool wood. “These ties will work just fine.” He teased the soft edge of one across Adam's thickening cock, twitching himself as he watched the man grow to half-mast. “But that's not how you'll be standing.”

Before Adam could utter a word, Rhone spun him around and bent him over the footboard. Then he started whispering in Adam's ear, performing each wicked task as he explained the dream.

Chapter Nine

December 31

In the hotel coffee bar, Adam took the last swig of orange juice and stood. “Ready to do this?” he asked Rhone as he donned his coat and did up the zipper.

“Are you kidding me?” Rhone threw a five on the table for a tip and got up too. “Hell yeah.” He shot Adam a glance and cocked his brow. “I have a feeling if we don't get those two talking, they are somehow going to bust in and ruin our night.”

“Get him to come.” Adam walked backward toward the exit as he talked. “This is the only chance we're going to get.” He gave Rhone a two-finger salute. “See you in a bit.”

“Hey.” Rhone's deep voice grabbed Adam from a dozen feet away.

With the door halfway open, and a shot of icy wind whipping against him, Adam glanced back at his man. “Yeah?”

Rhone winked, and a sexy smile took over his face. “Happy wedding day, honey.”

“Happiest.” Adam rushed back to Rhone and leaned up to brush a kiss across his lips. “Don't make me wait.” He swatted his fiancé on the ass and then went off to meet Annie for the hike he had set up over the phone late last night.

Rhone headed in the opposite direction for a similar appointment: a meeting with Ford.

* * * * *

Annie walked beside Adam at a brisk pace, laughing and shaking her head. “I refuse to believe this is what you want to be doing when your wedding is only twelve hours away.”

“I love the grounds here.” An easy grin took Adam over as he absorbed the various strains of wintergreens bursting with color and life on either side of the wood-chip-covered trail. “And the fresh air will definitely help settle any nerves that might creep up on me.”

“If you say so.”

He slid a look at Annie, noted the little-girl ponytail, no makeup, and the shock of freckles covering her alabaster skin, and felt that same pull to discover more about her as he had the first time he saw—or rather heard—her inside the chapel. “Aside from wanting to be outdoors for a little while, I also wanted to make sure there aren't any unresolved misunderstandings between us. I know we just met, but I like you, and I don't want you to think I ever thought you were hitting on Rhone. I didn't. That was my insecurity rearing its head, and I'm working on it. I know Rhone loves me and wants us to be together.” Skittering nerves made Adam's throat dry, now that they were so close to the ceremony, but his racing heart and big, idiotic smile easily trumped the small case of jitters. “Wouldn't be marrying him tonight if I didn't believe that were true.”

Annie grabbed his arm and squeezed. “I am so glad to hear that. You don't even know. If I thought I'd ruined another marriage—” She snapped her mouth shut, and pink suffused her face. “I haven't... That didn't come out right.”

“Don't worry. I know what you're saying.” Sympathy softened Adam's voice. “You're talking about your own, right?”

Like day turning to night, Annie's gentle features and easy body language slipped away, leaving her with a cool amber gaze that likely had men, women, and employees shaking when it turned their way. “I've talked about that one enough,” she said. “Next subject, please.”

Amazing. If I hadn't seen her slip up and show her real feelings before, I'd completely buy the disdain. No wonder Ford can't see the point in challenging her.

A few feet ahead lay Adam's target. “Why don't we sit for a minute?” Knowing Annie would follow, he walked to the meeting point he and Rhone had designated this morning.

Annie strolled to the ornate wrought-iron bench and sat down next to Adam. She tilted her head back and breathed deeply. “It's peaceful this far out from the hotel, isn't it?”

Low voices approached from a distance, both male. *Damn.* Rhone was ahead of schedule, and Adam started mentally slashing parts of his prepared speech.

Truth time.

He shifted on the bench, drawing up a knee as he faced Annie. “I need to be honest. I had one more reason for calling you last night.”

She rolled her head on the back of the bench to face him. “What is it? You can tell me.”

Pointing in the direction he knew Rhone approached from, Adam waited a heartbeat, letting the two male bodies come into sight. “Him.”

Annie surged to her feet. “Son of a bitch.” That cool gaze lit with yellow fire and flamed right in Ford's direction. “You orchestrated this. You set me up.”

“Me?” Ford exclaimed. “I didn't do anything. What the hell?” He turned a narrow-eyed glare on Rhone. “You sneaky little bastard.” He leaned in so close, he almost chest bumped Rhone before shoving him aside. “Get out of my way.”

“Big.” Rhone used his frame, spread his arms, and blocked Ford from leaving. “If you're going to call me a name, at least get my size right.”

“It wasn't Ford,” Adam told Annie. “It was me. Well, us.” He gestured between himself and Rhone. “Rhone talked to Ford last evening—”

“And Adam ran into Annie,” Rhone said, his focus on Ford. “The conversations helped us out; we'd like to see them do the same for you.”

Adam got up, put his hand under Annie's elbow, and eased her closer to Ford. “You guys really need to talk about what happened between the two of you, and at the very least, try to find a way to get your friendship back.”

Annie looked Ford up and down and pushed her shoulders back, as if doing so gave her petite frame the height and width to take on her bigger foe. “I think I said everything I needed to say.”

Ford snorted. “Yeah, you sure did all the talking, all right.”

Annie bit off a very blue word and got right in Ford's face. “Are you implying I don't let you talk?”

“Oh, I'm sorry. Let me clarify.” Ford didn't lean in with his larger size, and he didn't raise his voice, but nor did he give up an inch of his space. “I'm saying it doesn't matter if I do, because you either don't listen or you find some way not to believe what I say.”

“You broke our deal!”

“No, I altered the specifics of our deal.” Ford slid his hands into his pockets. “You're the one who broke it when you called off the wedding.”

Annie rolled her eyes, and Adam could tell that each time Ford remained calm, it dug a thorn right under her skin.

“That is *so* like you to split hairs,” she said, unable to keep her voice controlled. “I’m surprised you’re not a lawyer.”

“Nice.” Ford’s lips twisted in a sneer. “I’ll let your brother know you’re insulting his profession. And I’m not splitting anything. I’m merely stating the facts.”

“Oh, I know how you love your facts.” Annie poked him in the chest, very likely jabbing hard through the layers of coat and suit. “Even when you make them up and present them as such.”

Adam sidled closer to Rhone, out of the way. He rose up and whispered, “They’re both hot and angry now, even if he’s not showing it.”

Rhone put his mouth right on Adam’s ear. “He’s pissed. Let’s hope it stays that way until something good spills out.”

Both men backed farther out of range, just in time for Ford’s mask to start slipping.

“I’ve never lied to you.” A slight hiss laced his tone. “But you go ahead and keep telling yourself I did, so that you feel justified with ending our engagement.”

“Look at you and look at me,” Annie said with a wave of her hand. “We are not even close to compatible.” She rubbed her temples, and her voice dropped as she looked away. “I don’t know what madness possessed me to think it was a good idea to broker a deal and marry you.”

Adam noticed a glint of deep green—that, with her head turned, Annie missed—darken Ford’s eyes. The man tunneled his fingers through his chestnut hair, raking it back in thick tufts. “Probably the same affliction that had me jumping to agree. Not my most coherent moment.”

She jerked her gaze up to his. “Infant.”

“Shrew.”

“Tyrant wannabe.”

Wow. Adam knew he should look away, but he couldn’t tear his attention from the two trains barreling right at each other into a full-on collision. *Talk about twenty years of unresolved issues.*

“That's right,” Ford said, a growl taking over his tone. “Slip back to hiding behind calling me names. You're good at that.”

“You did the same thing!”

Ford towered over Annie, never touching, but crowded right into her personal space. “You're just mad because I'm not quite the malleable little boy you thought you'd be getting when you dangled my father's lodge in front of me.”

“I don't care about malleable, damn you.” Annie butted against his frame, touching him again. “But your father's business wasn't enough for you, was it? You had to push for more.”

“Ryan's Lodge was more than I ever needed,” he said, his tone clipped and half under his breath. “You were just too bullheaded to see it.”

“Then why did you ruin everything?”

Adam could hear the first hints of pain slip into Annie's plea, and he hoped like hell Ford picked up on it too.

“Why did you try to steal my hotel?” she asked.

“For God's sake, Annie. Look at me”—rawness edged Ford's voice as he stepped back and spread his arms—“and figure it out.”

Annie pulled up taut, and her gloved hands clenched into tight fists. “Don't answer me with another one of your riddles, goddamnit. Tell me why.”

Ford stood there, pitting stubborn against stubborn, with his jaw clicking visibly a mile a minute.

“Now!”

If anything, Ford somehow became more statuelike and stoic.

“Tell me right now, or I'm walking for good.” Annie looked at him, held through his long silence, and finally added, “If you don't, any friendship we had will be over forever.”

Adam saw Ford flinch. He held his breath, praying, but Ford didn't open his mouth.

“Fine,” Annie said.

She pushed past Ford. As soon as she did, he snapped his arm out, grabbed her wrist, and swung her back to him. She struggled, and he wrestled her against his front. Adam watched as a storm brewed in Annie's gaze. Ford held on to her around her waist with one arm and brushed

loosened strands of her hair off her face with his other hand. As he did, his face softened with a half smile, and she stopped fighting him.

"I didn't think you'd ever let the Astor-Grand go," he told her. "You weren't supposed to walk away. You want this place more than anything." He tugged and plastered her fully against him. "And I want *you* more than anything. Really look at me. Can't you see it? I knew once we married that this hotel would become your whole life. I needed the Astor-Grand as part of our contract so that I could be near you, and so you would have to deal with me every day.

"Working together was my only chance to get you to stop seeing me as a boy. I'm not a boy, Annie. I'm an adult. I'm your equal. It's time you started seeing me as a man." He slid his hand up her back and into the thickness of her ponytail. With one tug, he tipped her face up to his and lowered his mouth to hers.

Adam wasn't even sure it was a kiss at first, but then Ford groaned and slanted his lips across hers, deepening the exchange, and there could be no mistake Ford took Annie's mouth with passion.

Annie slipped her arms around Ford's waist and started to lean into him but abruptly pulled back, her eyes wide. "But you never... We never..." She touched her red-tinged mouth. "Why would you—"

Ford pinched her lips and effectively shut her up. "Stop trying to get ahead of it right now and just accept that I'm in love with you. I have worshipped you since I was five years old, and as much as it kicks me in the teeth every day, I can't make it stop." He loosened his hold and swayed her in his arms. "I don't care about the hotel, Annie. I don't need to own it. I don't even need to own mine, if that's what it takes for you to believe me. I don't want a deal. I just want you."

Annie circled her arms around his neck, but she blinked, looking dazed. "I can't believe it."

"Then believe this." Ford took her mouth again, clearly harder this time, and it looked like he plundered her depths. Annie finally threw herself into him, kissing back, and pressed herself thoroughly against his front.

Ford tightened his hold around her waist and lifted her up to her tiptoes. He broke the kiss and said, "We need to go somewhere." Thickness coated his voice. "Right now."

“Yes.” Annie pulled him, walking backward as she pecked kisses all over his jaw and cheeks. “Agreed. Now.”

“Finally.” Ford latched his mouth back to Annie's and lifted her right off the ground, never breaking his kiss or stride as he walked them away from Adam and Rhone.

Rhone chuckled, staring at the retreating couple. “I highly recommend the chapel,” he called out. “The balcony is awesome. No?” He answered himself when their rapidly retreating forms didn't respond. “Okay, you do your own thing.”

He turned to Adam with a playful light sparking his gaze. “They have interesting foreplay.”

“Yeah, but I still consider it mission accomplished. I just hope it lasts more than one passionate encounter.”

“It will. Ford's not going anywhere now that he put himself on the line. Annie better hold on tight, because that man is coming for her.” Rhone put his hand up in the air. “Lay it there, honey.”

Adam bit his cheek to keep from laughing. “Do you want us to high-five what just happened?”

Rhone kept his hand up high, and the humor crinkling his face slipped to deadpan. “I really think the situation calls for it.” He ruined it by comically shifting his gaze back and forth between his hand and Adam. “Come on, baby. Don't leave me hanging.”

This man. Adam went up high and slapped his hand against Rhone's; the sound ricocheted among the trees.

Rhone pumped his arms and made devil horns with both hands. “That's what I'm talking about.”

“Oh God.” If anyone had been around, Adam would have hid his head in shame. As it was, he held out his arm in offering. “Wanna do a little more exploring before we absolutely have to head back to the hotel?”

“As long as you let me make out with you in the gazebo up ahead.”

“Umm...” Adam studied Rhone while stroking a nonexistent beard. “Okay. Only one kiss, though. Gotta save myself.” He tapped his finger to Rhone's nose and lips in a little tease. “I'm getting married tonight, you know.”

“I had heard.” Rhone linked his fingers with Adam's, started them walking, and leaned down close. “Tell me more about this incredibly sexy, amazing man who somehow managed to capture you...”

* * * * *

Rhone tugged Adam to his side as they drew close to the hotel. “Tell me again why I'm not allowed to see you until the ceremony? It's not as if you're wearing a gown and it'll jinx us if I see it. I've already seen the suit you're wearing.” Right where he stood, Rhone's cock twitched a little as he recalled how fucking stunning Adam looked in it too. “And you've seen mine.”

“Come on, Rhone.” Adam bumped his hip as they walked. “Don't you want a chance to have a few jitters and build anticipation? It won't be nearly as exciting if we've been together all day and night and talked in the chapel alcove two minutes before we cross to meet each other at the altar. It can be our own tweaked form of tradition.” He smiled up at Rhone in that sweet way Rhone could not deny. “You like things that are slightly twisted.”

“All right, fine.” Rhone grumbled. “It's just going to be a long afternoon and evening without you to talk to, though.”

“Aww.” Bringing them to a stop, Adam tugged Rhone's coat, and Rhone let him turn them until they faced each other. Rhone looked into eyes flecked with obsidian and full of mischievous allure. “You really do say the sweetest things to me,” Adam said. As he rose up and leaned in, Rhone dipped down to meet that pretty mouth halfway. Before their lips touched, a big body barreled past them into the hotel, shoving Adam out of its path.

“Hey!” Rhone lunged but missed grabbing the speeding man.

Adam took Rhone's wrist and started running, pushing through the hotel doors to the inside. “That was Wes.” He dragged Rhone a few steps until Rhone found his own footing. Rhone pulled up alongside Adam just in time to see Wes jab his finger in Jared's face.

Without breaking his stride, Wes said, “You went too far, Jared. I'm telling Mr. Astor everything.”

Jared ran out from behind his desk and lunged at Wes but missed catching him. Wes moved with breakneck speed and disappeared down a hallway. Jared ran after him, and Rhone and Adam picked up the pace, urgency in their steps. Rhone veered into the long hallway with Adam hot on his heels, just in time to see Jared catch up to Wes. He grabbed Wes by the neck and slammed him into a wall so hard, the pictures shook, and people emerged from offices left and right.

“You fucking keep your mouth shut,” Jared hissed as he smacked Wes in the head. “You’re not doing anything.”

Wes whirled, and his eyes burned the hottest blue of a fire. “Don’t you ever hit me again.” His hands balled into fists, and it looked like his entire body vibrated. “Not anymore.”

Jared sneered and leaped on Wes. “Don’t you tell me what to do.” He shoved Wes into the wall again and wrestled him to the floor.

Wes landed a punch to Jared’s jaw, and Rhone threw himself into the fray. “Whoa whoa whoa.” He grabbed Wes by the back of his jacket, but the man coiled with power, and Rhone didn’t have a good-enough hold to drag him away.

“Get the fuck off me, asshole,” Jared snarled at Wes. He spit at Wes and slammed a knee into his crotch.

Wes gasped and reared, and Rhone quickly swooped in for a second round. He hooked his arms under Wes’s pits and dragged him off Jared, fighting against the younger man’s returning surge of strength.

When Jared rebounded and took a free swing at Wes, Adam jumped in and yanked him a half dozen feet away, out of both straining men’s hitting range.

Wes pulled against Rhone’s hold, his focus still entirely directed at Jared. “I’m done being with you.” His voice held so much acid, it could have stripped paint. “You’re so greedy, you got Rosa hurt today, and I’m done keeping quiet. About everything.”

Jared wiped the blood off the edge of his mouth. “Shut up, you dumb son of a bitch.”

“I am dumb,” Wes said. “For staying with you.”

The door at the end of the long hallway crashed against the wall as it opened, and a big, dark man in a suit stormed onto the scene. “What the hell is going on here?”

Wes turned to the newest member of the crowd. "I need to speak to you, Mr. Astor. There's stuff going on in your hotel that you need to know."

Jared immediately straightened and looked at the suited gentleman. "I don't know what is wrong with Wes, Mr. Astor," he told the man, his voice one of calm. "He's out of control."

"You do know what's wrong." Wes's entire body shook. "And so do I."

The genial mask of the concierge didn't right itself for an audience this time. "Pussy," Jared hissed. "You wouldn't survive one day without me taking care of you. Remember that."

Red suffused Wes's face, and he dropped his gaze to the floor. He took a deep breath, though, and after a moment, lifted his gaze to Mr. Astor. "He sells drugs to the hotel guests." Standing so close, Rhone saw and felt a tremble go through Wes, just before he whispered roughly, "And he sells me too."

Chapter Ten

Holy fuck. Rhone's hands slipped away from Wes and fell dead to his sides. Jared, selling drugs and prostituting his own boyfriend. Plus—it sounded like—a woman too. Rhone looked at Adam, and the exact same thought translated in his gaze. *This is so much worse than we thought.*

Ignoring everyone else in the area, Jared appealed straight to the suited man who had to be Robert Astor. “He's lying, sir. Wes is a vindictive boyfriend trying to get me because he knows I'm about to break up with him.”

Robert took a fast look around at his gawking employees, as well as a small crowd that had gathered at the foot of the hallway, and his jaw went so rigid, Rhone thought it might shatter with one crack at it. “Okay,” he said, his lips tight, “this can't happen here.”

He strode to a female and exchanged a brief, under-his-breath conversation with her. She replied, “Of course, Mr. Astor,” gathered the three other women with her, and moved down the hallway in the direction of the rubbernecking hotel guests, all while putting a cell phone to her ear.

Robert returned and pointed at Jared. “You”—he shifted and did the same to Wes—“and you”—he snapped his fingers—“follow me. *Right. Now.*” He walked down the hall, clearly a man used to everyone obeying him.

Wes did, but Jared took a step away. Adam grabbed one arm, and Rhone did the other. Between them, they made sure he got to a conference room, where Robert held open a door.

As soon as they ushered Jared inside and “guided” him into a seat, Robert turned and offered a tight-lipped smile. “Thank you for your assistance, gentlemen. I have the head of security joining me in a moment. We can take it from here.”

“No,” Adam said, before Rhone could open his mouth. “We're here to look out for him.” He jerked his head in Wes's direction, and Rhone knew he remembered the slap and the bandaged wrist. “We're not going anywhere.”

Rhone took out his cell phone and placed a quick call to Logan, telling him where they were and why. Couldn't hurt to have a former cop in on this conversation. He let Adam handle Robert Astor, and by the time Rhone finished his phone call, Adam had convinced Robert of who they were and why they should remain in the room.

Jared sat petulantly on one side of the conference table, glaring in Wes's direction. Wes sat opposite him, his head hanging low and his shoulders slumped.

He's ashamed.

Son of a bitch. Rhone didn't know the story, but he had to take a step back and regroup anyway so that he didn't ram his fist through the back of Jared's head.

A knock sounded at the door, and a moment later, an African American man entered the room. Robert introduced him as Leon Stakes, his head of security. Adam and Rhone introduced themselves and exchanged handshakes. Robert hadn't yet fully shut the door when Logan appeared and nudged his way inside, stating his experience as a former cop and detective.

Robert took a seat at the head of the conference table, and Leon stood back and to his left. Rhone and Adam remained standing too. Oppressive silence reigned, and Wes finally lifted his head out of hiding.

"I know this won't look good for me," Wes started. "I don't know what's going to happen, but this place has treated me right, and I can't let other people get hurt. Rosa is a nice woman, and what Jared did to her... Anyway, it finally hit me in a way I can't turn away from that he isn't going to stop unless someone makes him."

"You made some pretty serious accusations, Wes," Robert said.

Jared released a shrill noise and threw his hands in the air. "You can't seriously plan on listening to him?" His shock of blond hair contrasted sharply with his ever-reddening face. "He's a glorified bellboy, for God's sake. He's talking out of his ass."

Wes came to full life again and leaned aggressively over the conference table. "No, I'm not. I'm not doing anything anymore except telling the truth. I know what I'm talking about, especially since I'm in the middle of it. Nearly as much as you."

Jared's face twisted, and he gnashed his teeth. "I should have let that jock beat the shit out of you and left you under the bleachers to rot."

Robert slammed his hand on the table and pointed at Jared. "You shut up." He turned to Wes. "Please continue, Wes." Some of the hardness left Robert's tone, and Rhone thought he sounded almost human. "When we were in the hallway, you mentioned someone named Rosa. Let's start there. Is this woman okay?"

"Yes, sir." Wes wiped the corner of his eye as he answered, and Rhone wondered at the story behind Jared's verbal jab, which had so clearly pierced its mark. "She'll have bruises on her arm by tonight, and she says her shoulder hurts, but she's all right. She got away." Wes turned to Jared again, his entire being clearly straining to stay in the chair. "She told you she didn't want to anymore, and you set her up." A fierce rumble erupted in him. "She got hurt." He fell back into his chair. "Because of you."

"Set her up how?" Robert asked.

Wes went silent, and what little color remained in his face drained away.

Logan stepped in and touched Wes's arm. "Right now you're just talking. None of this is an official statement of anything. I used to be in law enforcement, okay? I know what I'm talking about. You're not going to get Rosa or yourself or even Jared in legal trouble right now. Go ahead and say what you want to say."

Robert added, "I just want to know what the hell is going on, so I can decide how to proceed."

After wiping his hand across his mouth, Wes began. "Sometimes guests want Jared to find them a companion. We know what that means when they ask for it. Rosa has some money problems, so Jared approached her. She agreed to a couple of...meetings. She changed her mind, though, and said she didn't want to do it anymore. That was a couple of weeks ago. Rosa thought it was settled. Then today Jared sent her up to the suite on the top floor. She thought it was work related." Wes's Adam's apple bobbed visibly, and his gaze went around the room. "It wasn't." His hand shook as he rubbed it over his perspiring upper lip. "I'm guessing the guest didn't know Rosa wasn't in on it either, and he handled her kind of rough before she was able to make him understand and get away. As soon as she did, she came down and found me in the employee lounge; she was all shaken up, terrified about what might have happened if she hadn't been able to stop the man. That's when I finally understood if Jared could do that to someone like Rosa,

then he would do it to anybody. I knew I had to come tell you, no matter what, and take whatever happens to me in the end.”

Robert leaned back and exchanged a whispered conversation with his head of security, wherein Rhone heard Rosa's name and the word “hospital.” Leon nodded and left the room.

Meanwhile, every puzzle piece tumbled into place for Rhone, and he zeroed right in on Wes. “So when you... The other morning...” He touched his own fingers the way Wes had that morning in the hallway.

“Yeah.” Wes chewed on the edge of his lip. “I'm sorry. I didn't want to do it. You look happy, but you're in a suite, and it's easy for Jared to research and see that your company makes good money. He looked at both of you and thought you looked more like a guy who would go for one last indulgence before you got married.” The man's gaze darted to Jared and came back to Rhone. “He wanted me to feel you out to see if you showed any interest. It doesn't make me real proud, but I agreed. I always did.” He put a hard stare on Jared. “Until today.”

So much for Adam's theory of a crush.

“And when I invited you to take a walk with me yesterday, you thought I'd taken the bait.” Rhone pressed for the rest.

Another nod from Wes. “It made me sad, because I thought you were a nice guy, but yeah, I thought you were looking to hook up.” He opened his mouth, but it took a minute for him to speak again. “I would have given you a taste and then hinted at what it would cost to have me for the night.” Tears finally filled his eyes, and he couldn't wipe them away fast enough to keep wet tracks off his cheeks. “There are some regular guests, and they go to Jared about what they want, and I just go to the room and don't handle any of the money, but he saw you and thought it could be a onetime, quick-cash kind of thing.” He started to look down but at the last second brought his head up, facing everyone in the room. “I do that sometimes too.”

A soft knock sounded at the door, and Leon Stakes reentered the room.

Robert exchanged a glance with him, got a nod, and turned his attention back to Wes. “What about the drugs? You said Jared is bringing stuff into my hotel and selling it to my guests?”

Wes dried his face with his hands and exhaled a visible, long breath. “To the ones who want it, yes.”

“What about anyone else?” Robert asked. “My other employees?”

Wes shook his head. “Selling to employees is too big a risk. Someone might want revenge and talk if Jared makes them mad. Guests come and go. Most you never see again. And he makes sure they approach him.”

“Are you part of his deals for drugs too?”

“No.” Wes looked at a silently seething Jared as he answered. “Jared is paranoid about the drugs. He's afraid I would either start using them myself, get hooked, and be useless to him, or that I would steal them out from under him and sell them myself. He keeps them in a locked trunk in our closet. I've seen it open, but he doesn't even let me touch the trunk, let alone all the pills, vials, and baggies he has inside.”

Logan swooped in and took a seat next to Wes. “Be straight with me, Wes.” He turned the man's swivel chair to face him. “Is that true?”

“Yes.” Wes looked right at Logan. “I swear.”

Logan pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. “Then stop talking right now.”

Robert ripped Logan's phone out of his hand. “What the hell kind of authority do you have to tell him that? This is my hotel, and I'm not finished getting information.”

With a slow blink, Logan delivered a dark look in Robert's direction. With a second blink, the hardness slipped away before he circled back to Wes. “Here's what is going to happen, Wes,” Logan said, Rhone knew for everyone's ears. “We're going to go down to the local police station. I'm going to go with you, but you are not going to say a word on the record about anything until we get you a lawyer and we make a deal for leniency in exchange for everything you know about Jared's drug activities. If you've never touched his stash of drugs, then only his fingerprints will be on them and the trunk. That is great evidence to back up your claim that he's the drug dealer in your home, not you, as I'm sure he will try to counter.”

“Stupid bitch,” Jared said. He flew across the conference table, and every other man in the room leaped into action. Rhone and Adam got to him first and dragged him across the table back into his seat. “You say one damn thing to a cop,” Jared hissed as he struggled, “and your ass will be open for free to every taker in prison by the time I'm done with you.”

Wes looked at Logan. “What about the things I did? It's some bad stuff, and I've been doing it for a long time. He knows about everyone.”

“Don't worry about that right now,” Logan answered. “I'm going to wager that you're not going to get any guy who has paid you for sex to admit it in a court of law. Jared can spout all he wants once he's arrested. It won't matter. You'll have your deal in place—one that will protect you—and he won't have anybody backing up his ramblings that you are a prostitute.”

Jared sat back, and Rhone caught a wash of confidence settle over him that shivered cold down his spine.

“Go ahead, Wes.” Jared locked in on his lover. “Take his deal. Sell me out after I took care of you all these years.” As Jared's voice calmed, Wes started to shake. “You would have starved without me, if you'd even lasted through ninth grade. Have them take me away from you and see how long you survive on your own.”

Wes flinched, and Jared smiled. “Remembering that you don't even know how to secure an apartment on your own, aren't you? You'd better sit and think, long and hard, and remember *I* loved you and got you out of that hellhole you called a family. *I* made sure we had a roof over our heads. *I* made sure we always had jobs. *I* take care of paying the bills and fixing things when they break. The world would beat you to a pulp if *I* weren't here to protect you.” Jared shrugged and lifted his hand, as if to examine his fingernails. “But go ahead and forget all that. Go make an official statement. Put me behind bars and see if you can take care of yourself for a month without me there helping you every time the big bad world scares you and you don't know what to do.”

Logan leaned forward to brace his hands on the arms of Wes's chair. “Look at me, Wes.” He held the chair in place, and Rhone knew Wes could only see Logan. “What he just said to you... I've heard it a thousand times from men who control and abuse their spouses. He's not any different just because you're both men. Physical abuse and mental cruelty can happen in all kinds of relationships.

“You want away from him?” Logan jabbed his finger in Jared's direction. “You want to stop dying inside every time he tells you you're worthless without him? You want to stop making up lies about sprained wrists, limps, and bruises you can't hide from your coworkers and friends? You want a chance to start over? You want to come clean and take some real, positive steps toward becoming your own man? This is how you do it.” Strength infused Logan's voice; Rhone felt it from across the room, and he knew Wes had to feel it too. “You've already made a damn

good start by what you've chosen to do today. What Jared has done to you, and what he did to Rosa today, has gone on long enough. I can tell you it's time for this to stop, but you are the only one who can make it happen.”

Adam circled the table, stooped down next to Logan, and spoke to the top of Wes's downturned head. “None of what you confessed today changes our offer. You are welcome at Quinn Security whenever you can get there. We'll help you get started somewhere new, if that's what you want.”

Robert cleared his throat, automatically commanding everyone's attention. “We need to talk some more, Wes, but know now that I'm not going to fire you. You still have a job here, if you want it. I can also get you that lawyer Mr. Jeffries mentioned you need. I am related to one of the best, and he will give me the name of a good criminal attorney in the area. I only care about getting Jared and his drugs out of my hotel. Tell me to make the call, and I will.”

Everybody froze, in limbo, and Rhone held his breath. Wes finally dipped his head to Robert. “Thank you, sir. Make the call.”

Jared barked an ugly laugh and smacked the arm of his chair. “Dumbest thing you've ever done. You'll be dead in a year without me.”

Robert rounded on Jared. “I am sick of your mouth, you jackass son of a bitch. Leon”—the man never took his eyes off Jared—“get him out of here right now. Call the police and hold him in your office until they arrive.”

“Yes, sir.” Leon swooped in and hauled Jared up with a big hand around his upper arm. He none-too-gently escorted Jared from the room.

“Let me make that call to my brother.” Robert got up and let himself out too.

Logan stood and started pacing the room, his limp pronounced, as Rhone had noticed it tended to be in the winter months. He circled the table and then hoisted his hip on the corner. “I'll wait here with Wes,” he said, looking at Rhone and Adam. “I'll go with him to the station. This will take hours, and you guys have something important to prepare for tonight.”

“Oh God.” Wes shot to his feet, and his eyes widened with horror. “I messed up your wedding day. I'm so sorry.”

“You didn't,” Rhone promised.

Adam squeezed Wes's arm. “It's fine. This is a good day, Wes. For everyone. Yes?”

“Right.” A little smile pushed up the edges of Wes's lips. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Thanks are not necessary,” Adam said. “Just finish the good thing you started today. All right?”

“Go.” Logan jerked his head in the direction of the door. “Time's ticking away.”

With one last wave, Rhone and Adam left Logan with Wes and found Robert finishing his call right outside the conference room.

Robert extended his hand. “Thank you for your help.”

Adam shook his head. “Thank you for allowing Wes to keep his job. He knows he has options now, and that's important.”

“It's not charity; it's business. Shit, the kid is a great employee. I don't like what he did in my hotel, and we'll have a long conversation about that, but the department heads might string me up in the formal gardens if I let the guy go.” Robert clasped his hands behind his neck, exhaling as he looked up at the ceiling. “How the fuck did this happen under my nose without my seeing it?”

Rhone slipped his arms around Adam's waist and tucked him against his chest. “Maybe you don't love this place enough,” he said.

Robert snapped his gaze down from the ceiling with amazing speed.

“Or at least,” Adam added quickly, with a discreet jab of his elbow to Rhone's side, “not as much as your sister might. Something to think about.” Ever the diplomat, his Adam.

Robert offered a barely perceptible nod and backed up to the conference-room door. “I wish you well tonight. Thank you again.” With that, he disappeared inside.

Adam turned in Rhone's arms, and Rhone growled because he knew what was coming.

Up on his toes, Adam pressed his lips to Rhone's ear. “Time to say good-bye for a while.”

With great difficulty, Rhone unlocked his arms from Adam's waist and stepped back. Dark eyes looked up at him, no fear, no hiding, and recaptured Rhone's heart.

Rhone leaned his shoulder into the wall as he watched Adam back away. “I'll see you at the altar.”

Before Adam turned the corner, he called out, “I'll be there,” and blew Rhone a kiss.

Rhone remained in the quiet hallway for an extended heartbeat, absorbing everything he'd witnessed today. Christ, he'd never been so in love or grateful for the friendship and respect he had with his soon-to-be husband.

He couldn't wait to say, *I do*.

* * * * *

Adam paced in the little chapel dressing room and looked at his watch for what had to be the thousandth time.

Ten more minutes.

"It's really almost here." Adam stared at his reflection in the mirror and adjusted his perfectly straight tie one more time. Silver-gray in color, it had a thin black-striped pattern. Rhone would wear the reverse: black with accents of gray. Their suits were black, with crisp white shirts beneath.

A knock sounded at the door, followed by, "Adam, it's me."

"Rhone." Adam rushed to the door and leaned his cheek against it. "What are you doing over here? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine," Rhone answered. His voice held a slight strain Adam didn't recognize. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right. A lot happened today, and we weren't together to talk about it the way we always do."

"Baby, are you nervous?" Adam asked, not liking Rhone's tone. He wondered if he should just say *the hell with it* and open the door. "What's the matter?"

"I just want everything to be perfect tonight." A husky quality slipped into Rhone's confession. "For you."

God, I want to touch him.

Then it hit Adam. Something else had worked once before.

He stooped down to his knees. "Look down, Rhone." Adam slid his hand through the crack at the bottom of the door.

Rhone's chuckle carried through the door, and a second later, warm, calloused fingers covered the back of Adam's hand.

Adam rubbed the pad of his thumb against Rhone's familiar skin. "It's already perfect," he whispered, touching lightly some more. "I'll see you in five minutes. Now go take your place, so I can take mine."

"I'll be waiting." Their fingers brushed again, and then Rhone pulled his away.

Adam pressed his forehead to the cool wood, kneeling and breathing deeply until his racing heart slowed back into control.

This is it. Time to go.

After sliding his hand back into the room and picking himself up, Adam smoothed his suit one last time and fingered the black and silver ring on his thumb. He didn't dare let it out of his sight. He left the small dressing room and walked the dozen steps to the entrance where he would wait for the signal to enter the body of the chapel.

The justice of the peace already stood waiting at the altar.

Not long now.

Holding himself back a few steps in the shadows, Adam scanned the pews where their family and friends sat, and paused on his tia wiping the corner of her eye with a lacy handkerchief. She leaned in and whispered something to Nate that made the younger man smile, and Adam's chest constricted with the best kind of pain. Kasey looked beautiful in a long pewter-colored dress, and Canin wore his dark suit well. Farther back, waves of strawberry hair and chestnut locks had Adam grinning from ear to ear. He'd left a message inviting Annie and Ford to attend the wedding but wasn't sure they would come up for air long enough to get it. Seems they had. Adam couldn't help noticing they had their heads close in what looked like whispered conversation, so he took that as a victory.

He searched for Logan's dark head but didn't see it and wondered if he was still with Wes at the police station. The man had called Canin with a message once, which Canin delivered to Rhone and Adam separately, sharing that a lawyer had arrived to help Wes and that his professional opinion was that things would work out for Wes.

The hairs on Adam's neck suddenly tingled, and awareness swirled down his spine. His attention naturally shifted to the opening on the other side of the chapel, and he found Rhone watching him with intensity in his gaze.

Rhone stared at Adam, boring right into his core. Then he lifted his hand and put it against his heart in the shape of the sign language symbol for “I love you.”

Every last jitter in Adam washed away. He smiled at the love of his life and put the same message against his heart with his hand.

Soft strains of music started right then. Everyone rose to their feet, and the justice of the peace presiding over their wedding spread his arms, beckoned to Adam and Rhone, and said, “Let us begin.”

Chapter Eleven

After midnight, January 1

“Thank you, Tía.” Adam hugged Loretta and did his best to choke back a tidal wave of emotion. He never dreamed his aunt would congratulate him on his marriage to another man; yet she just had.

She pulled back and took him by the shoulders. “You look so handsome.” Tears filled her eyes, and she touched his cheek. “And happy, mijo.” Her voice wavered. “You look so very happy.”

“I am happy. You look beautiful tonight yourself.” Adam pulled her back into his arms and pressed his cheek against her Aqua Net-sprayed hairdo. “I’m so grateful you’re here.”

His aunt wet his collar with her tears. “It is I who am grateful that Rhone brought me back into your life.”

Adam looked across the span of filled tables in the softly lit reception room and found Rhone talking with Canin, Kasey, and a few of their Quinn employees. Damn. Adam smiled at the vision; Rhone looked elegant and sexy in his suit.

They’d wanted a casual atmosphere for their reception and didn’t have a formal dais or even seating arrangements; people were free to roam the tables of food abutting one long wall of the hall and then sit or mingle among friends and coworkers, not tied to one position all through the night. They had a DJ there only for the purposes of making sure the music played nonstop and didn’t overpower conversation. The woman had strict instructions not to get on a microphone and make any introductions or announcements, and not to coerce people into dancing or start any kind of conga line. If that happened naturally, great, but Adam and Rhone agreed they didn’t want to force anything on anyone.

It was perfect. Exactly what they wanted. Except they hadn't counted on one tiny hiccup. The casual nature of the party lent itself to people coming up and speaking to Adam and Rhone individually—right from the moment they walked into the hall—and the pair of grooms quickly ended up separating.

I want my man back.

Just as Adam had that thought and a little rumble of discontent vibrated through him, Rhone looked up from his conversation and caught Adam's gaze.

A slow smile turned his features downright sinful, and with a wink, he shook hands with his brother, kissed Kasey on the cheek, and took a step away from the small group.

Time to meet him halfway.

Adam untangled himself from his aunt's arms. "If you'll excuse me, Tía?" he said, his focus on Rhone working his way through the crowd.

"Ahh, yes." Loretta followed Adam's gaze. "Of course, mijo." She busied herself tucking her purse under her arm. "I must go see if any of these Latin choices are made correctly."

With a chuckle, Adam let his tía's hand slip from his. "It won't be as good as yours, but I promise you the chefs know what they're doing. Have fun."

"Yes, yes, I promise." She wiggled her fingers at him and toddled off in the direction of the food.

Adam waved and nodded at friends as he worked his way toward Rhone, who now stood chatting with Annie and Ford. Rhone caught Adam's attention, shrugged, and went back to his conversation.

Logan took that moment to intercept Adam and offer his congratulations. The man had slipped into the chapel just a few minutes after the ceremony had started, and it wasn't until afterward that Adam and Rhone noticed he had Wes with him. Logan wore the clothes he'd had on all day, and Wes had on a white button-down shirt and dark pants.

"How's he doing?" Adam asked. He knew only that Wes had his deal, and that right now Jared sat in a jail cell.

"He has attached himself to Nate. There they are," Logan said, pointing. Adam followed the line of Logan's arm to the buffet and found Nate yakking and Wes nodding. "One

introduction and Wes took right to him.” A rough noise escaped Logan. “Never seen the kid talk so much.”

“Who?” Adam glanced at Logan, confused and suddenly curious. “Nate or Wes?” Logan wasn't nearly old enough to think anyone in this room a kid.

Logan's stare narrowed and pinpointed on the pair. “Nate. Anyway, I didn't want to leave Wes at home by himself. He did great at the station, and he said he would be fine, but today would be tough on anyone. I could see the strain in his eyes.” With a grimace, Logan slid his hands into his pockets. “It's going to take Wes a while to work past the conditioning Jared subjected him to.”

“Well, if he decides to come to Chicago, I think Nate will help him with that. He'll take Wes under his wing and won't come across as a threat. If Wes makes the move, we'll put him with Nate, so it'll help if they spend some time together over the next few days and become friends.”

“With Nate?” Logan swung his gaze back to Adam, the pale green irises swirling with shoots the color of new grass. “You want to put them together?”

Adam nodded. “Nate is still in Canin's old place, and it's plenty big enough to share.”

“Yeah.” Logan's mouth pulled, and Adam heard the man's jaw make a clicking sound. “That makes sense.” His hand slipped behind his neck, and he glanced around the room. “Excuse me.” He sounded like he had gravel in his mouth, and his stare slipped to an even-darker shade. “It has been a long day, and I need a drink.”

Interesting. Maybe. Adam watched Logan hightail it to the bar.

“Hello, husband.” Rhone sneaked up on him, leaned over his shoulder, and planted a kiss on his cheek. As he circled around Adam, his attention drifted to Logan too. “What was that about?”

Adam blushed, loving Rhone's newest endearment. “Not sure yet,” he replied. “Ask me to dance”—he held out his hand as a slow song started—“and maybe we'll get two minutes of privacy together to talk.”

Rhone led him onto the dance floor and tugged him into an intimate hold. As he swayed them in a slow circle, he dipped down and pressed his face into Adam's neck. “Mmm, you smell heavenly.”

Adam couldn't help it; a little bubble of laughter escaped him. "Heavenly?" He pulled back and studied Rhone quizzically. "Really?"

"So sue me." Rhone nipped the top of Adam's ear. "It's my wedding night; I'm allowed to be poetic." He put them rocking side to side again but held back enough so they could see each other. "Now, what did Logan have to say? Is Wes doing all right?"

"As best as he can be, I suppose," Adam replied. "He's apparently taken to Nate right away." Rhone swirled Adam in a half circle, and Adam's attention caught on their dark-haired ex-detective hanging back at the bar alone. "I'm not sure, but I think Logan seemed jealous."

"Really?" Rhone looked around the hall, not stopping until his focus settled on Logan too. "Hmmm. I've never heard anything about Logan wanting a man before."

Adam stopped, turned Rhone back to face him, and shot him the *most* exaggerated eyebrow raise he could manage.

"I know." Rhone somehow even made looking sheepish sexy. "Not that it can't happen unexpectedly, *obviously*. I'm just making a statement." His gaze flicked briefly in the direction of Nate and Wes, now sharing a table with a few Quinn employees. "Which one brought out the growl I heard as he walked away?"

"I think it was Nate."

"Interesting."

"Exactly the word I thought. What about Annie and Ford?" Adam asked, noticing Ford pull Annie into a slow dance. "I haven't had a chance to talk with them yet."

"They wanted to say thank you, for both the push and the wedding invite," Rhone shared. "They also said not to be offended when we don't get one in return right away. They've decided not to get married next week after all."

Adam frowned and brought his gaze back to Rhone. "Not that we'll be here anyway, but seriously?"

"Yeah. They figured it might be a better idea to get to know each other in this new way and not rush anything the way they did before."

Adam glanced Annie's way and found her smiling up at Ford. "She's willing to put the hotel on hold?"

“She says if she was clever enough to convince her father to accept this marriage deal in the first place, then she sees no reason she can't wear him down without a wedding attached. And you'll like this.” Rhone offered a fast smile. “It seems a certain brother of hers might be open to backing her cause.”

“Well, good for Robert.” Mentally, Adam flashed back to that focused, driven man in the conference room. “In the beginning, I wasn't sure there was much beyond sharp, stubborn, and cold lurking in him.”

“I think he surprised Annie too, from what she said.”

“I'm happy for Annie and Ford.” Adam linked his arms behind Rhone's neck, pulled their faces close, and leaned in for a kiss. “But I'm happier for us.”

Rhone tightened his hold on Adam and scraped their mouths together again. “Me too, honey.” He lingered, and his arms contracted, pulling Adam in even more.

A solid bulk of loving, passionate man rode Adam's front, pushing a stir in his cock and a tingle in his balls and ass. He put his mouth on Rhone's ear and let his desire of a lifetime slip out. “I've dreamed about you taking me on our wedding night for far longer than we've been together. I'm aching inside for you. I want every inch of me naked rubbing up against you naked.” He kissed his way across Rhone's cheek and looked up into the silver shots lighting his eyes. “At what point is it no longer rude to ditch our own party?”

“Shit.” Rhone exhaled against Adam's mouth. “You just pushed me to half hard. Screw rude.” He took Adam's hand and pulled. “Let's get out of here right now.”

They turned and almost ran right over Wes and Nate.

Wes smiled, and it only wobbled a little bit. “I just wanted to say thank you one more time for everything you've done for me.”

Nate lifted his tumbler of fizzy soda. “And I haven't had a chance to say congratulations yet...”

Adam swallowed down his groan as Nate went on. He plastered a smile on his face and put a lid on the erection striving to tent his pants. From the corners of his vision, he saw other people approaching from both sides.

Shit.

Rhone winked at Adam over Nate's head and mouthed, *Soon*.

* * * * *

“Ohhhh fuck...” Adam wrapped his arms around Rhone's shoulders, moaning as Rhone slowly pushed up for their first time as a married couple and invaded his ass. Adam straddled Rhone, pushed their foreheads together, and rocked into the mating with a hiss of pleasure.

Rhone held Adam's ass in a digging grip, and his gaze penetrated just as deeply. “Feel good?” With a slow withdrawal that sent shivers through Adam's chute and into his spine, Rhone gritted his teeth as he pushed his cock deep again, burying himself to the hilt.

“Never been like this.” Adam shook droplets of sweat off his face and worked himself off on Rhone's thick cock. God, Rhone didn't fuck him enough, and he couldn't stay still. “Feels different.” He clamped his thighs around Rhone's waist and ground himself into the taking. “Ohh...shit.” Rhone's dick swelled, and Adam's channel clamped down hard on the new thickness, sending shock waves of pure joy through his system. “It's so fucking good.”

“Because you're mine now.” His voice slipping to savage, Rhone dragged Adam's mouth to his and took it in a searing kiss of ownership. “In every way.” He held their lips together, linking their breathing, and speared his prick up in one sure stroke, owning to the root. Adam cried out and bucked into the connection, the burn and stretch of a mating never having felt so good.

“More” and “yeah” came out of Adam and Rhone respectively, and soon Adam just clutched Rhone like a lifeline and tried to survive the cataclysmic intensity of the ride. The heat of their naked bodies entwined and undulating together shimmered around them in a shroud under which only the two of them existed. Tears leaked out of Adam at the rough yet intimate pounding his ass took from his husband. His rectum flamed with tenderness from a lack of use, but Adam welcomed the fire and even shoved himself into it, needing to sear this moment into his mind and body with every memory and sense he could. His dick, already sucked off to the point of blowing his seed once tonight, stiffened with a swiftness that had Adam gasping and rubbing himself against the flat ridge of Rhone's stomach, searching for relief.

Rhone grunted and reached down, giving Adam one tight pull on his cock. “Make yourself come on me.” He took his hand away and put it back on Adam's ass. “I want to see it.”

As Rhone continued to fuck him, Adam took himself in hand and milked his length with full, gripping drags. His prick beat furiously with a heady rush of blood, he leaked precum on himself and Rhone, and his balls pulled up tighter and tighter to his body with each long stroke.

“Oh yeah... Close.” Adam dropped his forehead to Rhone's shoulder and watched himself jerk off. In rhythm with the beating of his own hand, his chute started to squeeze down in a vise on Rhone's driving erection.

“Damn it... Making me come.” Rhone shuddered and clutched Adam to him, fusing their torsos together from shoulder to belly, trapping Adam's hand between them. He bit across Adam's head and down his cheek until he found Adam's mouth and latched on. On a hoarse shout, he drove up and tucked himself deep inside Adam. “I love you.” Just as he said it, he exploded in Adam's ass and shot him full of hot, steamy cum.

Adam jerked at first contact, and he automatically tightened his fist around his cock. With Rhone's second tremble and wave of seed, the tentacles of orgasm whipped out and released to every corner of Adam's being, sending his nerve endings into overdrive. He pumped his length one time against the sandwich of their stomachs, and by the third wave of Rhone's losing control, Adam moaned, his muscles seized, and then he shook as he came himself, unloading a long stream of thick seed.

They held entangled in silence for long minutes, the sound of their heavy breathing the only noise in the living room. Their clothes and shoes lay strewn in a trail from the door of their room to the living area, and in their haste to come together, they hadn't made it much farther. Two sconces on the entry wall bathed the room in soft light, the only lights Rhone had pulled himself away from kissing Adam for long enough to switch on.

Eventually, Adam's muscles protested his position. Although he hated doing it, he unwound himself from Rhone and rolled off his lap, severing the connection of their bodies. “Holy mother.” He flopped right down at Rhone's side and stretched his arms and legs. “You are amazing.”

Rhone turned his head and made eye contact. “So I guess that's it, husband.” He stretched his arm above him, grabbed his discarded shirt, and wiped his face. “We've consummated it; so we're officially married.”

With a soft laugh, Adam pecked a kiss on Rhone's shoulder. "I don't think so, husband." His insides sparked saying that word as much as they did hearing it. "Not until I take you too."

"Well..." With ninja-fast reflexes, Rhone pulled Adam on top of him. As he curled his hand around Adam's neck and drew him in, he added, "Never let it be said I'm not amenable." He skimmed their mouths together with the softest contact but quickly pulled Adam closer and deepened the kiss.

Adam tunneled his hands into Rhone's hair and sank into the exchange, moaning as Rhone licked the inside of his lower lip and then swept their tongues.

My gift to him. "Wait." Remembering, Adam pulled away and shot to his feet before things got out of hand again too quickly. He walked backward to the second bedroom and reached inside to flip on the light. "I have something to show you."

Remaining on the floor, Rhone shifted to his side and kept his focus on Adam. "Oh yeah?"

Adam paused at the entrance and crossed his arms against his chest. "You can come too, you know."

Rhone laughed as he pulled himself up from the floor and stalked with pantherlike moves to Adam. "Check your ass, honey." He spanked Adam with a sharp sting as he walked past. "You'll find I just did."

"Hardy har har." Adam rolled his eyes. Turning, he walked into the bedroom but could still see Rhone move to the sink and bathroom. "That's why I married you, you know, for your killer sense of humor. The hot body, incredible cock, and sweet disposition are things I merely tolerate so I can always have jokes just like that one."

"All right, wise guy." Rhone came to Adam with a wet washcloth and towel, his own stomach and penis already cleaned and dry. He wiped down Adam's dick and even turned him around to clean his backside. The man kissed his nape while he teased Adam's still-sensitive hole with the nubby fabric of the washcloth and quickly drew a whimper and a shiver out of Adam.

"Uh-uh. No more." Rhone took the small torment away from Adam's pucker. "That's what you get for being sarcastic. If you'd just laughed at my incredible joke, I would have slipped the cloth inside you with my finger and made you come a third time."

Adam trembled, and his ass tingled in response to the suggestion. His voice a little hoarse, he said, "Leave something for the honeymoon."

Clear interest had Rhone swallowing, and his cock twitched visibly. “Remind me in Bora Bora, baby.” He tossed the dirty towel and washcloth into the bathroom.

Rhone came back to the unused bed and threw himself on it. As was his way, he shifted to his side and laid his head in his hand. “Lay it on me. Whatcha got?”

Adam pulled the package wrapped in silver out of the closet. “It's my wedding gift to you.” He put it on the bed in front of Rhone and held his breath.

Chapter Twelve

Rhone ran his fingers over the textured silver wrapping paper, following the raised lines of intertwined rings.

He looked up at Adam, feeling a little choked up. “You didn't have to get me anything.” He flipped the package over and slipped two fingers under the seam. “This is so sweet.”

Adam lunged across the bed and covered Rhone's hand. “Don't get too excited. It's not like what you did for me. In fact”—he snatched the present back and scrambled to the edge of the bed—“it's kind of lame when you put them side by side—”

Rhone covered Adam's mouth. “Don't say that. You put thought into all of your gifts when you choose them, and nothing about that is lame.” He removed his hand but still delivered the evil eye. “Got it?”

His cheeks burning with new blooms of red, Adam knelt at the corner of the mattress. “Right.”

With his hand outstretched, Rhone said, “Now hand it over.”

Adam returned the present, and Rhone quickly tore through the wrapping before Adam could change his mind again. Tossing the paper to the floor, he revealed a white gift box, approximately ten by twenty in size. He lifted off the top, set it aside, peeled back a dozen layers of white tissue, and unearthed a beautiful black frame with a custom matte. Two photos, tickets, and an invitation were captured under the glass.

“Oh wow.” Rhone lifted the long rectangular frame from the box, his complete attention on the picture at the top.

“Hold on a sec.” Adam hopped off the bed. “I'll be right back.”

The man darted out of the room, and Rhone studied the photo again. Of Adam and Rhone, the photo had lines and lines of crisscrossed white cracks that made it look like a road map. In the photo, between the imperfections, they both leaned against a battered metal desk, in an office

Rhone recognized as his from the first Quinn Security offices, way back when Rhone and Canin were working like dogs trying to get their business off the ground, and Adam was just a gofer. Rhone had his arm thrown around Adam's shoulders, and Adam looked up at him, laughing.

Adam returned, pants in hand, and crawled onto the bed beside Rhone. He pointed at the photo Rhone couldn't take his eyes off, and said, "That's a copy of the first photo anyone ever took of the two of us together. It was the first year you brought me in to work for you. Canin snapped it one afternoon." Blushing even harder, Adam picked up his discarded pants and withdrew his wallet. "You've never seen it because I took the film to the drugstore for Canin; I picked it up too. I adored you, even back then, and I stole the photo of us for myself." His fingers trembling, Adam opened his wallet, tucked his finger under a flap, and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

Only, it wasn't paper at all.

Adam unfolded the white square and revealed a duplicate of the picture in the frame. "Here's the original." He handed it to Rhone. "I've kept it with me every day for the last twelve years. You can see all the lines from how many times I've taken it out to look at it and then folded it back up."

Rhone held the photo in the gentlest of fingers, amazed at the soft texture in the folded lines that felt almost like cloth from Adam handling it so much over the years. Wonder filled his voice and brought moisture to his eyes. "I never knew you had this. I've been in your wallet a hundred times since we got together, and I never saw this once."

"I keep it tucked away, where I know it's safe." Adam took the picture from Rhone and put it next to the duplicate under the glass. "I could have had the copy I put in the frame touched up, and color filled in where the cracks are, but I thought you might like an exact replica of what I still take out and look at, at least once a day."

"I do." Rhone shook his head, still amazed. "I'm glad you didn't fix it." He pressed his lips to the side of Adam's head and held there while he blinked down tears that wanted to fall. "You know me so well."

Adam wiped the corner of his eye and cleared his throat. "Anyway." He took the old photo, folded it with obvious care, and tucked it back into his wallet. Then he pointed to the next two items in the frame. "Nobody took our picture on our first official date, but those are the

ticket stubs from the Cubs game we went to see.” He tapped his fingers to a set of numbers in between the tickets, done in calligraphy. “And that’s the date and final score.”

“Cubbies won.” Rhone chuckled. “I remember. It was all the proof I needed to know the gods were happy that we had hooked up.”

“Yeah, it was a good night all around,” Adam replied. “Then”—his finger slid down on the glass—“you recognize our wedding invitation, and finally”—he tapped his finger against the bottom photo—“that’s the first picture of us taken after we were married.”

Rhone swung his gaze up to Adam. He obviously recognized the captured moment of them kissing in the chapel tonight, but... “You never left the chapel or the reception.”

“The photographer knew I needed the first one right away,” Adam answered. “The hotel let him use their offices to print it, and Canin and Kasey slipped away and did the rest. They put the final piece into the frame and wrapped it up for me.”

Rhone let his attention drift back to the gift Adam had given him. He absorbed every bit of it, but his eye went back to the copy of the battered old photo time and again. “It’s perfect. I love it.”

Adam linked his hand in Rhone’s and put his head on his arm. “You know, back at the offices, when you swivel your chair and kick your feet up, and every so often you say you have to get something to put on that one narrow bit of wall space that’s right in your line of sight?” He turned and put his chin on Rhone’s shoulder. “I thought maybe you could put it there.”

Leave it to Adam to know the exact right spot to display his gift.

Rhone turned and planted a kiss on Adam’s forehead. “That’s where it’s going the minute we get back to Chicago.” His focus slipped back to the old photo. Through the glass, he rubbed his finger on a younger Adam’s cheek. “Look at you. Look how cute and sweet you were, even back then.”

“Look how sexy you were.” Adam rubbed his fingertip against the glass too, over Rhone’s jaw. “And look at me.” He laughed. “I’m looking up and worshipping you already.”

Rhone flashed back in his mind to shoving a dark-haired, black-eyed teenager up against a wall and demanding his cell phone back. “Christ. Who knew you’d end up being my life that day at the airport?”

“Or that we'd end up married one day.” Adam brought their twined hands to his mouth and kissed Rhone's wedding band. “That went well beyond all of my wildest dreams.”

“I'm happy to exceed your expectations.” Rhone smiled as he finally gave the second photo—of the two of them lip-locked and taken only hours ago—a good long look. “Look at you there too,” he chided his man. “You're damn well getting into kissing me after the justice of the peace announced us married.” He leaned closer, feigning a deeper examination. “I think I see some of the tongue you slipped me.”

“I didn't!” Adam reared back and slapped Rhone's arm. Rhone remained pointing at the photo, a brow raised, and Adam finally offered a sheepish shrug. “Well...at least not until I felt you going for it first.”

“Guilty as charged. I have a hard time keeping it clean when I'm close to you.”

“I'm grateful for that and hope it never changes.”

Sobering, Rhone took his gift in hand, admiring it one more time, and then looked into Adam's eyes. “Thank you for this.” Emotion thickened his voice as he put the frame back inside the box and carefully wrapped it in its protective tissue before setting it on the nightstand. “It's perfect.”

His gaze turning somber too, Adam nodded. “Thank you for giving me my aunt back.” He looked down at his hands, picked at a hangnail, and then fidgeted some more until he finally stretched out on his side and tucked his hands under his cheek. “There aren't words to properly express what having her back means to me, and you're the one who made it happen.”

“I'd do anything for you.” Rhone shifted to his side, mirroring Adam's position so closely, their noses almost touched. “I thought we already established that.”

Adam swallowed visibly, and his eyes brightened with more moisture. “You give me the most amazing gift, and then you go and somehow make it better by saying stuff like that.”

“It's just the truth.” Rhone hadn't yet probed Adam about the nature of his talks with Loretta, so he went ahead and said, “Your aunt won't be able to go back to her home with your father, you know.”

Adam's lips thinned and pulled in a tight frown. “She mentioned the bastard was still hanging on.”

“Yep.” Rhone reached out and rubbed his thumb across the brackets forming around his husband's mouth, relaxing the hardness away. “I've discussed the situation with Loretta some. Canin and Kasey are going to set her up in a hotel when they go back to Chicago, and they'll make sure she's able to get what she wants out of his apartment.”

“I'll make sure to thank them,” Adam answered. Rhone studied Adam's face and could see the to-do lists already taking shape in his mind. “When we get back from our honeymoon,” he went on, “I'll take her apartment hunting and assure her she doesn't have to worry about money.”

“*We'll* make sure she's comfortable in a new place.” Rhone left no room for argument in his tone. “I can already tell that her pride is like yours, and she's going to fight us some on it. This is an *us* family issue, though, Adam, not a *you*.” He raised a “don't argue with me” brow and held Adam prisoner with his gaze. “Are we clear?”

This man. For the millionth time since crossing paths with Rhone, Adam asked himself what great thing he must have done somewhere in his life to be given such a perfect gift as *this man*.

He scooted in until their fronts touched and then pulled Rhone even closer with a hand around his nape. Pale eyes shone at him, open with love, and it nearly swallowed his voice. “Did I ever tell you how much I love you?” he asked, his tone scratchy.

“Yeah.” Rhone flashed a big smile. “But you can tell me again.”

Returning the grin, Adam grazed his hand down Rhone's back to his ass. He slipped a couple of fingers into the snug crease and pushed down to tease his hole. With a nip on the man's lips, and a flick over his pucker, Adam murmured, “How about I show you instead?” Fiddling around with his other hand, he unearthed the tube of lube he had grabbed from the other bedroom when he went to get his wallet.

“Mmn...” Rhone captured Adam's mouth in a leisurely kiss and at the same time circled his ass into the play on his hole. “I like the sound of that.” He reached between their bodies and took hold of Adam's semierect prick. “Let me get your cock all warmed up first, and then you can finish consummating this wedding night.” Rhone stroked Adam's dick, and Adam rolled to his back and spread his legs, moaning as the rubdown quickly grew harder and he stiffened to full staff.

Rhone smiled against Adam's mouth. "That's what I like to feel." He alternated between pumping his fist up and down the rigid length and tormenting the already-slick head.

Adam rocked his hips into the handjob, moaning and exhaling through the torment of the firm touch. He tipped his head back into the bedding, and as if he'd given Rhone an invitation, the man kissed his way down Adam's neck. Rhone paused to suck on his collarbone, stinging Adam's flesh in the most wonderful way as he drew blood to the surface.

"Baby." Adam bit his lip, fighting the joy in the second love burn Rhone put on him, this time to his chest. "I don't need a lot of foreplay here." He tore his gaze off the ceiling, grunting as Rhone grazed and nibbled on his nipple. "Do what you want to my cock right now, or I'm gonna shove it into your ass."

Rhone delivered a wickedly in-control glance and let out a soft chuckle. "So impatient." He licked his way down Adam's stomach with a faster pace, though, and headed right for the dark thatch of hair below.

Thank you, God.

With a swirling lick around the root that had Adam's balls twitching, Rhone worked his way up to the head of Adam's cock and slipped it past his lips. He suckled, as if seeking nourishment, and Adam provided him plenty of precum to suck down. It felt like Rhone tortured Adam by staying at the sensitive tip forever, only occasionally letting the flat of his tongue rub against the smooth underside, something he knew Adam loved.

"Oh shit..." Adam dug his heels into the mattress and latched hard onto his own nipples, twisting and tugging the hardened discs in a way that only drove him crazier. "You're gonna make me shoot before I ever get inside you."

His eyes on Adam, Rhone cupped Adam's nuts and rolled the weight on his fingers. "Control it." Keeping their gazes locked, he opened wide and went all the way down, surrounding Adam in humid heat to the base. His throat massaged the head with a swallow, once, twice, and then he pulled up with agonizing slowness, leaving strings of saliva in his wake. "I've seen you handle more." With a wipe of his hand across his mouth, Rhone then darted out his tongue and swiped it across the slit.

"Those times weren't our wedding night." Adam grabbed hold of the comforter as Rhone laved a line down his length again. His body twisted off the bed under the onslaught of pleasure,

and he swallowed convulsively through a tantalizing tingle in his nuts. “Oh fuck.” He jerked his cock out of touching range. “Get your ass ready.” Adam gave the order through gritted teeth. His cock jumped with only the contact of air in the room, and his skin felt like it could burst into flames. “I’m not gonna be able to wait.”

Adam closed his eyes, took a moment to breathe, and silently started counting backward from one hundred until he regained control over his libido. *Better*. His heart rate almost retreated to normal. *Gotta last more than two strokes when I get inside*. Then Rhone said, “I’m ready for you, love,” and wrenched Adam straight back to the precipice.

He pulled himself up into a sitting position, and there Rhone lay on his back, nude, his hand outstretched, waiting.

“God,” Adam uttered, struck into momentary paralysis. “You are beautiful.”

Slivers of mercury darkened the pale gray in Rhone’s eyes, and his prick twitched toward his stomach. “The things you say to *me*, honey.”

Adam crawled on top of Rhone and settled in the space provided between his legs. With their gazes locked, Adam dipped down and grazed their lips in a too-brief, tantalizing caress. “It’s just the truth.”

As Rhone recognized his own words, a twinkle of laughter lit his eyes. He opened his mouth, and Adam stole whatever he wanted to say with a kiss. He latched onto Rhone, slipped his tongue inside to mate, and sank into the heat of his husband, body and soul. He curled his arm around Rhone’s head, angling him for a deeper plundering. Rhone undulated beneath him and kissed him back, driving Adam mad. It pushed him to rub their bodies together all over, tangling tongues, cocks, and legs, and creating friction and heat that soon had both men covered in a sheen of perspiration.

With a strangled-sounding whimper, Rhone forced his hands between their stomachs and circled Adam’s prick. He rubbed up and down the shaft, and Adam could feel the slick of lube transfer from Rhone’s palms to his erection. Rhone jerked harder and fondled Adam’s balls, making Adam break their kiss with a gasp. He choked on the sharp stab of pleasure Rhone pulled out of him with one simple touch.

Adam blinked, looked at Rhone, and found unforgiving, sharp lines mapping his features.

Rhone stared up at Adam, stripped bare of any walls. “Take me, Adam.” His voice slipped past raw, and he drew up his legs, spreading himself open. “I need to feel you now.”

“Me too, baby.” Adam's hand shook as he reached for his cock and rubbed the head against Rhone's entrance. Rhone sucked in a big breath, but he held on to Adam's shoulder with one hand and rocked into the pressure Adam put on his hole. Sweat pooled at the small of Adam's back, and his breathing grew choppy, making him feel green, as if he had never fucked Rhone before.

Adam lifted his gaze and looked into Rhone's eyes just as he nudged with more force, drove his weight up harder, and with a rough moan, broke through, sinking into the hottest, most intimate embrace he'd ever known. Rhone's jaw dropped, and he released a broken noise. He blinked rapidly, tilted his head back into the pillow, and his fingers clutched Adam's upper arms with such strength, Adam knew he would bear bruises tomorrow. Rhone's passage stroked Adam's buried cock in the most delicious wave, and Adam automatically withdrew and eased back inside, needing the friction.

Rhone pulled his focus off the ceiling and lowered it back to Adam, revealing a storm behind his stare that conveyed his slipping control. He wrapped his arms around Adam's back, holding him, and Adam didn't think he had ever experienced a moment that felt as *God created* as this.

“Christ.” Rhone circled his hand around Adam's nape and drew their faces close. “You have the magic touch.” He twined his legs around Adam's, fused them together from top to bottom, and made them both tremble. “Nothing in the world feels as good as this.”

Adam bracketed Rhone's head with his arms and touched their foreheads, shutting out everything but them. “I love you.” He didn't look away or blink as he started to move his cock in Rhone's ass. “I love you.”

His dark pupils nearly drowning out the gray, Rhone seared his lips to Adam's in a hot kiss. “Love you, Adam.” He tunneled his fingers into Adam's hair, and he strained against the mating, pushing his hips up to meet Adam's every thrust. “Thank you for picking my pocket.”

Something between a chuckle and a sob escaped Adam, and the press on his chest stole away his breathing. “Thank you for catching me.” Stilling the snapping in his hips, he licked

Rhone's nose and then bit the tip. "You are my everything." As he confessed, he slid back inside Rhone's hot, tight hole, making them one again.

Rhone rose up with a cry and slashed his mouth across Adam's. "Mine too." He forced Adam's mouth open and swept his tongue inside, licking and tasting with a voracious bent. He ate at Adam with a taste of hunger and desperation in his kiss, and with the first drop of blood he drew, he sucked Adam down with him to the rawest reaches of need.

Unable to make this last, Adam picked up speed and shoved his cock into Rhone in rapid-fire order, fucking him into the soft mattress with an ever-more-aggressive pounding. The nerve endings in his cock screamed for him to go even faster, and every muscle in his body strained to put more power into the slam of his hips. He tunneled his prick into the farthest reaches of Rhone's hot, tight chute, stealing as much connection between their bodies as he could, and then jammed himself even harder, grinding his pubes into Rhone's stretched ring and demanding he feel that too. His lower body delivered fast, sharp hits, taking what it wanted. Adam fused his forehead to Rhone's and never looked away from the swirl of emotion in his eyes. He registered every grunt that escaped Rhone and each tightening of his jaw when Adam drove his cock deep inside.

Adam hadn't lost control with Rhone this fast in forever, and it sent fingers of fear down his spine. "I-I..." He mentally commanded his body to stop moving, but each nerve ending sat strung so tight, fighting to reach the snapping point that would shoot him into the stars, that Adam could not slow down. On another piercing stab into Rhone's scorching passage, Adam looked even deeper into Rhone's moonlit eyes. "I'm sor—"

Rhone shook his head, moving Adam with him, and claimed a hard, fast kiss. "It's so good, Adam." He locked his legs high on Adam's back and clutched his buttocks, helping to keep the rough fucking going. "Let me feel it. So hard..." He twisted and knifed his ass up to meet Adam's every downward stroke. "One more..."

Adam thrust deeply and up, claiming Rhone with such force, he rocked his lower half right up off the mattress. Rhone shouted and dug his fingers into Adam's flesh in immediate response, holding them poised together. His body locked tight, and then without a sound, he shuddered and came. His channel squeezed and squeezed and squeezed, handshaking the hell out of Adam's cock.

Adam held stuck, poised at the edge of the cliff, clawing for the fall. “I need...”

Rhone pushed a finger deep into Adam's ass, creating a wonderful burn in his passage. He whispered, “Love you,” and Adam tumbled in free fall. Faster than he could stave it off, orgasm sucked his balls up to his body and raced through his being, touching each nerve ending in its race to his dick. He gritted his teeth as the first pulse hit his penis and rocked a convulsion through him, and seconds later, he unloaded, spitting lines of seed into his husband's ass.

My husband.

Adam jerked on a choking swell of emotion and shot within Rhone again, marveling at the tie that bound them to each other forever.

His muscles suddenly gave out, and he slumped onto Rhone, noting the tightening of Rhone's frame as he took Adam's weight. Rhone slipped his finger out of Adam's chute and moved his hand to caress his hip and ass. They lay in silence for a long time, Adam listening to the beat of Rhone's heart under his ear and enjoying the full, gentle strokes of Rhone's big hand up and down his spine.

Rhone had a larger, solid body, but Adam was no lightweight himself. So, eventually, he crawled off Rhone and flopped onto his back. Still full of wonder, though, he looked at Rhone and laughed out loud. “We're fucking married,” he told the man.

“Yeah, we are.” Rhone rolled to his side and propped himself up on his hand. He brushed his knuckles against Adam's hair, pushing it off his forehead, and a lazy smile appeared. “I like it so far.”

“Me too.” Adam took Rhone's hand in his and fiddled with the wedding band. *God, I love seeing it there.* He peeked up and met his gaze again. “So, what do you want to do now?”

Rhone's attention drifted to the pulled curtains. “It'll be sunrise soon,” he shared, coming back to Adam with a twinkle in his eyes. “And we have this great balcony that we've hardly used...”

Adam didn't need the rest of that hanging sentence. He read the intention in Rhone's naughty gaze. “Are you nuts? It's freezing out there.”

Rhone jumped out of bed with far too much energy and tugged the comforter out from under Adam too. “So we wrap this thing around us”—he pulled the quilted fabric around his shoulders—“to keep the wind off our backs.” He waggled his brows comically, but his gaze held

nothing but scorching heat. “I have a feeling we can generate enough body heat that by the end we won't need the comforter at all.” He held his arms open in welcome, making room in the cocoon for Adam. “What do you say? You up for it?”

God, he knows I'd walk across Antarctica with him.

“I'm up for anything with you.” Adam crawled out of bed and right into Rhone's arms. He looked up, his heart smiling as he accepted a sweet kiss from his husband. “Lead the way.”

“My brave man.” Chuckling, Rhone planted another kiss high on Adam's cheek and did just that.

Epilogue

January 8

Rhone only half listened to his brother on the other end of the line. A bright sun hung high in the cloudless blue sky, beating warmth on his bare skin and reflecting off the sandy beach and turquoise water of the ocean crashing waves in front of him some twenty-five feet away.

He barely took note of his surroundings any more than he did Canin's voice buzzing in his ear. No one in his right mind could really blame him, though.

Good Christ, he was made for walking out of an ocean.

Adam emerged from the water, and Rhone stared, riveted, cataloging as if watching in slow motion. Adam's deeply tanned skin glistened with droplets of water, highlighting the cords of perfectly hewn muscle that roped the length of his tall frame. Tiny drops clung to the ends of his raven black hair, each one sparkling like diamond tears against the rays of the sun. Adam ran his hands over his face and through his wet locks, pushing the short length away from the sharp lines of his handsome face, and Rhone's mouth went dry. His focus slipped down Adam's chest and taut abdomen to the snug black swim shorts he wore, a scant piece of fabric that showed off his tight ass and package to their full advantage, and Rhone swallowed with difficulty. Adam was stunning, from top to bottom.

And I get to watch him do that for seven more glorious days.

Adam looked up from his morning swim and found Rhone on the beach. As had happened each of the last six days, when Adam located Rhone in the small crowd, his eyes lit, and his mouth turned up in a smile, as if he couldn't possibly anticipate Rhone's gaze on him, studying him so intently. He probably didn't expect it, still, to this day, which was only one of a thousand reasons Rhone loved the man so damned much.

Right then, Adam nodded toward the outdoor bar. Rhone shook his head, passing on a drink. Adam lifted one finger, mouthed, *Be right back*, and headed for the bar, offering no less an enticing view of his backside.

An irritating, droning noise grew louder in Rhone's ear, distracting him from his view. Canin's voice finally translated into actual words in Rhone's head, and it said, "Have you heard a word I said?"

"What? Yeah, of course." Rhone tried to pay attention to Canin, but he couldn't take his eyes off Adam leaning against the bar chatting with another couple. "Something... Work stuff."

"Not even close."

"Damn it, Canin. I—" Rhone bit his lip as a couple lying near him on the private beach looked at him sideways. He pushed to his feet and took a dozen steps away to an emptier area. "I'm not going to apologize for not listening. I'm on my honeymoon, for Christ's sake, and you're distracting me from some incredible sights."

"Yeah." Canin snorted. "I bet what you're looking at isn't on any tourist map for the area."

"Well, it ought to be"—Rhone looked over his shoulder, saw Adam shake hands with the couple at that bar and pick up his orange juice—"if I were willing to share. Which I'm not, so good-bye."

"Wait!" Canin's strident tone stalled Rhone's jamming the End button on his phone. "At least tell Adam we retrieved his aunt Loretta's stuff without incident. It's safe in a storage unit until she finds someplace new to live."

Guilt softened Rhone's tone. "I will tell him. Thank you for that."

"Everything else can wait," Canin said. "We'll see you in a week."

"Bye." Rhone ended the call and slipped his phone back into the pocket of his loose swim trunks.

Adam sneaked up on him and pressed a kiss to his shoulder blade. "Is everything all right?" He slipped around to Rhone's front, and furrows marred the area between his brows.

"Fine." Rhone leaned down and lingered with another good-morning kiss. "Mmm, you taste like oranges." He went in with another lick before he said, "Canin said your aunt's stuff is somewhere safe, waiting for a new apartment."

Clear relief washed the lines from Adam's face. "Good. No trouble?"

"It went well."

"Good. Good." As Adam nodded, his attention drifted back to the bar. "You know, while I was waiting for my juice, I had a chat with this couple. They're on their honeymoon too. They were both friendly, but I don't know, I sensed something more was going on, and—"

Rhone clamped his hand over Adam's mouth in a shot. "No. No no no no no." Adam's gaze burned up at him, but Rhone kept his palm pressed firmly over his husband's lips. "This is our honeymoon, and we are not getting involved in anyone else's problems. Not this time."

The second Rhone took his hand away, Adam leaped. "But—"

"No way." Rhone pinched Adam's lips but at the same time suppressed a laugh. "We are not repeating what happened in Vermont."

"But you'll want—"

"No, I won't." This time Rhone bit Adam with a nipping kiss and shut him up that way. "All I want on this honeymoon is you. And if I have to implement the threat I made in Vermont here in Bora Bora"—he started backing them toward their rented bungalow down the beach—"I happily will. It has been a good six hours since we made love anyway." His cock stirred, and he felt Adam's push against his too-tight trunks. *Christ, the damn thing will likely poke out the top and get us arrested.* Rhone nudged and kept himself glued to Adam's front. "Walk faster."

"Fine." Adam twined his arms around Rhone and picked up the pace, conversing with their lips constantly brushing. "Have your way with me. I go with you willingly. But you're gonna want to know what I know before the night—"

Rhone sealed his lips to Adam's with a long, voracious kiss. He didn't let Adam come up for air, even when they made it to their bungalow.

* * * * *

Adam shouted as pleasure consumed him, and his entire body vibrated his release. He shoved his cock down Rhone's throat and came hard, spilling himself in the hot, wet cocoon of his husband's mouth. Rhone swallowed, delivering that last ripple of joy, and Adam pulled away to slide down the wall and fall back on the floor.

Reds, oranges, and yellows, signaling that sunset had arrived, refracted into their honeymoon bedroom. It bathed the wood floor in shimmers of twinkling light, but Adam didn't have the strength to walk to the window and look out, nor to climb into the bed only a dozen feet away.

Rhone stretched himself out next to Adam, his chest rising and falling in visible waves. Adam had made him come four times since getting back to their honeymoon house, and he doubted the man had an ounce of energy—or cum—left to spare.

“I think I'm going to sleep right here tonight,” Adam said, his voice drowsy. “It's feeling more comfortable every minute.”

Rhone murmured something wordless and soft, and Adam went silent, figuring Rhone had drifted to sleep. A moment later, though, Rhone poked Adam in the shoulder and drew his attention. The man was wide awake.

“So,” Rhone began, “not that we're doing anything, but I just want to know.” Red stamped his cheeks. He bit off a curse and looked away, but quickly came back to Adam. “What was it about the couple at the bar that so captured your interest?”

“I knew it!” Adam burst into peals of laughter and found he did have enough energy to crawl to his husband and climb on top of him. He couldn't stop laughing, no matter the glare he got for it. “See? You need to know.” Pausing, he dipped down and pressed their lips together in a kiss. Lingering, Adam teased with his tongue, tasting himself, and felt certain his love beamed through his gaze and every pore in his body. “This is why I love you.”

Rhone slid his hand down Adam's back, inducing a shiver, and settled it on his ass. He got them comfortable and looked up with loving indulgence clear in his eyes. “You got me, honey. Tell me everything.”

THE END

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A Fostered Love
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Knowing Caleb
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Finding Home
The Ultimate Kink
Saying I Do

Cameron Dane

I am an air force brat and spent most of my growing up years living overseas in Italy and England, as well as Florida, Georgia, Ohio, and Virginia while we were stateside. I now live in Florida once again with my big, wonderfully pushy family and my three-legged cat, Harry. I have been reading romance novels since I was twelve years old, and twenty years later I still adore them. Currently, I have an unexplainable obsession with hockey goaltenders, and an unabashed affection for *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.

I'd love to hear from you! Visit me on the Web at <http://www.camerondane.com>.