



Bodyguards in Love



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SEB'S
Surrender

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Seb's Surrender

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-sizzling*.

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SEB'S SURRENDER

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Dedication

Thanks, Theresa A., for all you do for me. I wouldn't be half as organised or productive without you.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

El Camino SS:	General Motors Corporation CORPORATION
Ford Fairmont:	FORD MOTOR COMPANY CORPORATION

Chapter One

Jared Grant pulled his thin jacket tighter around him and walked into the cold, blowing wind of a cloud-covered Albuquerque evening. He was so intent on getting to work on time, he didn't notice the car that pulled up beside him until a horn honked.

Jared jumped and spun around, ready to run. The driver of the shiny black El Camino SS rolled down his window.

"What're you doing out here?" Sebastian James asked.

Jared took a tentative step towards the car, truck, whatever it was. "Going to work."

Seb sighed and put the car in park. "Get in."

Jared opened the door and a blast of heat warmed him within seconds. He buckled his seatbelt and waited for Seb to pull away from the kerb. "It's just up here another six blocks."

"Yeah, I know where it is. Mind telling me what the hell you're doing walking to work in this weather?"

Confused by the man's anger, Jared inched closer to the passenger door. "Um...going to work?"

"Are you asking me?"

"Huh?" Seb confused Jared more than anyone he'd ever been around.

"You do that a lot, you know."

"Do what?"

"Make statements into questions. It's the lilt up on the end of your sentences, like you're not sure if you're going to work or not."

"Oh. Yes, I'm going to work."

Seb shook his head and pulled back into traffic. "So why are you walking instead of catching a ride?"

"Brier went home sick."

"So why not ask someone else?"

Jared tried to concentrate on the questions, but he kept getting distracted by Sebastian's dangerous-looking beauty. "I don't know anyone else well enough to bother."

With a disgusted sigh, Seb reached into the pocket of his black leather jacket and handed Jared a business card. "Call me when you need a ride. If I'm not on a job, I'll take ya."

Jared read the black and red printed business card. It listed Sebastian James as a security specialist and gave his phone number. "What's a security specialist do?"

"Whatever needs doing. Mostly I assess situations and make recommendations on the level of security a specific job requires."

Sebastian pulled into the small gas station parking lot. Jared opened the door, glancing back at the handsome man. "Thanks for the ride."

Seb reached out and grabbed Jared's arm. Out of reflex, Jared tried to jerk his arm back and lowered his head. Sebastian released his grip with a growl of what sounded like irritation. "How late're you working?"

"I don't get off until two."

"In the morning?"

Jared nodded his head. He knew his job sucked, but beggars couldn't be choosers. "It's the only shift they had available."

Seb rubbed his hands over his face. Jared could tell he irritated the man, but he wasn't the one who'd asked for a ride. "Call me, and I'll pick you up. You've got no business being on the streets that late."

Jared walked home from work every night at that time. He wondered why he was suddenly being told he had no business doing it. As grouchy as Seb acted, Jared doubted the man would appreciate a wakeup call at two. Instead of arguing, he stuffed the card into his jacket pocket and got out of the car. "Thanks again for the ride."

He walked into the store and acknowledged the older woman behind the counter. Mrs. Bell seemed nice enough, but she was the nosey type and Jared preferred to keep the skeletons in his closet safely locked away.

Jared stowed his jacket under the counter and watched out the window as Seb pulled out of the parking lot. Why had he waited so long? Jared shook his head. In the three weeks since he'd come to Albuquerque with Brier, Sebastian seemed to run hot and cold where he was concerned.

Seb was the one who'd insisted Jared file assault and rape charges against Rick Sutcliff, but since then, it seemed like Seb could barely stand to be around him. Jared couldn't help but to think Seb was disgusted by him now that he knew everything Rick had done to him.

Even thinking of Rick had Jared's stomach clenching into knots. It had been bad enough that Rick terrorized and raped him, Brier and Peter while in the hospital, but then Rick had showed up on his doorstep in Lubbock demanding to be let in.

Jared had been so afraid of the man, he'd done as he was told. From that day until Brier came knocking on his door, Rick had made his life a living hell. It was the lowest point of his twenty-five years, which was saying a lot.

He glanced down at the long straight scars running up both wrists. Even the events that had pushed him into trying to end his life hadn't been nearly as hard as the punishment Rick doled out on a daily basis.

"I'm off," Mrs. Bell called, grabbing her purse from the locked cabinet under the counter.

"Have a good evening."

Officially on the job, Jared took out his hideous smock and put it on. Some nights were harder than others, but Fridays and Saturdays sucked. He knew he shouldn't complain, even to himself. Getting the clerk job in the first place hadn't been easy.

Without a high school diploma or a work history, Jared knew the owner was taking a real chance hiring him. Jared had promised the kind man to be the best employee in the store, and he tried on a daily basis to keep his word. The drunks who stumbled in near midnight always put him on edge, but he often bluffed his way through it.

It didn't matter what he had to endure. For the first time in his life he was making his own money. He was finally free of his abusive parents, the hospital where they'd kept him for so long, and the man who'd almost succeeded in completely erasing what little humanity Jared had left.

He smiled as a customer stepped up to the counter. He may be wearing an ugly smock and doing a job he hated, but at least he was safe to live his life on his own terms. Could his life possibly get any better than that?

* * * *

Seb watched to make sure Jared got inside the store safely before pulling out of the lot. He still couldn't believe the man would walk over two and a half miles in the cold with a jacket at least two sizes too small.

He reached in his pocket and retrieved his phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Jackie, is Brier there?"

"He's sleeping. Why, what do you need?"

"I need to know why the hell no one's bothered to get Jared a decent coat. I just found him walking to work with that pitiful excuse for a jacket he has."

"Walking? Shit. I didn't even think about him going to work when I took Brier home early."

"Yeah. That's something else I'm not real happy about."

"Hey, man, Brier's my priority, not Jared. He's a nice kid, but there are times I have my hands full with my own business."

Seb pulled into his parking spot and turned off the engine. He knew Jackie was right. Although Brier had helped Jared get away from Rick, neither of them had taken Jared to raise. "Sorry. I guess seeing him walking beside the road like that just got to me."

"By the way, Brier offered to buy Jared some clothes, but he flatly refused. You know Brier, he didn't want to hurt Jared's feelings by pointing out the fact his wardrobe was lacking."

Seb had noticed Jared seemed to wear the same holey jeans and T-shirt almost every day, but he figured it was more a want than a need. "Maybe I'll run by the thrift store and pick him up a few things."

"I'm sure Brier would appreciate it. Not so sure about Jared though."

"Leave that to me. It's the reason I'm not buying him new clothes." After saying his goodbye, Seb started the El Camino and headed towards the thrift store on the other side of town.

He knew what it was to be too proud to ask for what was needed. Maybe he could get Jared to understand what had taken him years to figure out. There was nothing wrong with asking for help from your friends.

Where the hell had that come from? He barely knew Jared. He certainly wouldn't call the younger man a friend. Seb knew in any other circumstance, he probably would have

already had the cute little blond in his bed, but Jared definitely wasn't someone to mess with. The blue eyed beauty made Seb feel too many things to allow him to get that close.

* * * *

Seb was in a dead sleep when his alarm clock woke him. He reached over and automatically smacked the snooze button, affording himself another ten minutes. He picked up his dream almost immediately and groaned as the rose coloured lips sucked his balls before moving up to engulf his cock.

"Do it, baby," he groaned, grinding his cock against the mattress.

His dream lover somehow managed to swallow Seb's cock to the root, which he knew from past lovers was no easy feat.

"That's it. Take it all." Seb wound his fingers around the near-white strands of hair as his lover continued to bob up and down on his length.

He felt the signs of his imminent release when the alarm clock once again disrupted his sleep. Slapping once again at the snooze button, it finally registered why he'd set the alarm in the first place. "Shit."

He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. It wasn't until he reached for his jeans he remembered the blond-haired head bobbing up and down on his cock. "Ahh, fuck."

Having dreams about Jared definitely wasn't allowed. It would be hard enough chauffeuring the guy around without dipping his finger in the honey pot. Dreams? Not going to help his control one bit.

Still half asleep, Seb pulled on his boots and shrugged into his jacket. He grabbed his keys off the small kitchen counter on the way out the door. Stepping outside into the cold air, he shivered and quickly got into his car. He wished he had the luxury of letting the car warm up, but he was late as it was.

Seb pulled out of the parking lot and headed towards town. A glance at the clock on the cassette player told him it was already twenty after two. "Shit."

He stomped on the accelerator, and almost immediately saw the flashing red and blue lights of a city police vehicle riding his ass. With a groan, Seb pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the engine. He reached into his back pocket and came up empty. I'll be a sonofa...

A tap sounded on the glass and Seb rolled down his window. "Evening."

"License and registration, please."

Seb reached over to the glove box, extracted his registration papers and handed them to the policeman. "Sorry officer, I seemed to have left my wallet at home. I was just going..."

"Is this the correct name?" the officer asked, gesturing to the papers.

"Yes. I work at Three Partners Protection."

"Just a minute." The officer walked back to his car.

Seb just knew the asshole was going to give him a ticket. Movement in front of him caught his eye. Jared walked to the driver's side window.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"Forgot my wallet. I'll probably get a ticket."

Jared looked at the police car and smiled. "No you won't."

Seb watched in his rear view mirror as Jared approached the police car. He couldn't hear what was being said, but both men ended up laughing. The officer got out of the car and approached Seb's window as Jared climbed into the passenger seat.

The cop handed Seb's registration over. "Watch your speed and grab your wallet next time."

After the officer walked back to his car and pulled back onto the road, Seb looked at Jared. "What the hell did you say to him?"

"That you were my friend who insisted I was too frail to walk the two and a half miles back to the dorm."

"And that worked?"

Jared grinned. "I know him. I give him free coffee and donuts when he comes into the store."

Seb couldn't get over the difference in Jared's face when he smiled. Already gorgeous, the younger man practically radiated angelic light with a flash of those shining white teeth and big blue eyes.

Jared yawned as Seb pulled away from the kerb. "Thanks for picking me up."

"You didn't call," Seb grumbled.

Jared yawned again. "I'm used to walking home, and I didn't want to wake you up."

Seb's hands gripped the steering wheel even tighter. The thought of Jared walking alone, down the country road towards the training facility dorms, bothered him. The

convenience store was at the edge of town, but once you reached the limits, the sidewalks disappeared. The thought of some drunk ploughing Jared down on his way home from a bar, sickened him.

"It's getting cold."

"Yeah," Jared agreed. "When I think of New Mexico, for some reason cold doesn't come to mind."

"It gets this cold in Lubbock."

"You're right, but Texas doesn't have Mexico in its name."

Seb chuckled. He parked the El Camino SS in its usual spot and got out. Jared joined him in front of the door, and Seb tapped his security code into the pad. He heard the locks disengage and held the door open for Jared.

"I did a bit of shopping at the thrift store in town. I needed some more long-sleeve T-shirts. Anyway, I picked up a few things for you while I was there." Seb waited for the protest he knew was coming.

"I can't take them. I don't get paid for another week."

The elevator doors opened and Seb stepped in behind Jared. He knew he couldn't make a big deal out of the clothes. If Jared thought Seb was trying to give him a hand out, it would never work. After pushing the button for their floor, he shrugged. "Whatever. You might want to look at them though. They had a good sale going on for some reason. I got a pretty big bag of stuff for twenty-seven bucks. I don't mind waiting for the money until you get paid."

Jared didn't say anything as they got off the elevator and walked towards their assigned studio apartments. At his door, Jared dug his key out of his pocket. "I don't know. I still haven't been able to find out how much this room's gonna cost me, and I already owe Brier and Jackie for the groceries they've brought over."

As soon as Jared opened the door, Jelly Bean, his long-haired calico came out to rub against his legs. Seb reached down and gave the little lady a scratch behind the ears. "Let me run over and get the bag. You can try stuff on, see what you think."

Before Jared could protest, Seb had his key in the lock and opened his door. He grabbed the two plastic sacks just inside and followed Jared into his small apartment. Unlike Seb's studio, Jared's was devoid of any personal touches. The plain brown sofa and chair that came with the room depressed him.

Seb handed over the bags. "One has some jeans and shirts, the other a coat," he said in a casual tone.

Jared looked at the closed bags for several moments before pulling the bright red down-filled coat out. His eyes lit up, and Seb knew he'd chosen wisely.

"By the way, I'm sure the partners won't charge you much for rent. Mine's built into my salary. This entire floor's employee housing. When you have a job like mine, you're usually not in one place long enough to justify the cost of a real house or apartment."

Jared looked confused. "What do you mean a real apartment? This is nicer than anything I've ever lived in."

Seb knew from Brier what the living conditions for Jared had been in Lubbock. He swallowed around the foot lodged in his mouth. "Anyway, what I was trying to say is that these rooms aren't meant for students, so Mac, Amir and Nicco aren't losing any money by letting you stay in one."

Jared's gaze was still on the coat he held in his hands. The expression on the smaller man's face bothered Seb more than he cared to admit. "Well, uh, I'll get out of here and let you get some sleep. The receipt's in the bag, and I got them to throw in some wire hangers in case you want to keep them. Like I said, pay me when you can, I won't strong arm you if you have to wait until the end of the month."

Seb turned to leave.

"Thanks. You know, for the ride and the clothes."

Seb could tell by the soft tone of Jared's voice the gestures meant more to him than what they actually were. "You're welcome."

He got out of the apartment before he said something he'd regret. He'd given the guy a ride and a bag of used clothes, yet Jared spoke as if Seb had handed him the keys to a brand new car.

As he let himself in to his own studio apartment, he looked around at the top of the line furnishings he'd brought in to replace the generic shit that came with the place. His transformation into the man who had a couple of grand to drop on a couch had been so slow he hadn't noticed how much he'd really changed.

There was a time when an actual mattress to sleep on would have seemed like a dream. Seb pulled off his jacket and tossed it across the back of the expensive black leather sofa. There were times he wanted to remember every moment of the hell he'd endured as a child.

The memories of scrounging the neighbourhood garbage cans for food for him and his brother, Alexander, helped him appreciate what he had. The images of a sick and mentally handicapped Alexander being driven away by a social worker, helped strengthen the walls he'd erected.

Being around Jared made him both want to remember and try to forget. Although Jared's situation was still largely unknown to Seb, he knew what it felt like to have someone offer kindness without expecting something in return.

The first time Seb had experienced it was in the Army. His commanding officer was a genuine, grade A asshole. One Thanksgiving, the hard-nosed man had invited Seb to join him and his family for a day of eating and football. It was the first normal Thanksgiving Seb had ever experienced and he'd sat all day with the family expecting them to ask his help putting a new roof on the house, or something similar. In his world, nothing was free. Nothing was given without expecting payment in one form or another.

Seb thought about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. He wondered if Jared would be spending it with Brier and Jackie? Amir, Nicco and Mac had already invited Seb along with several other bodyguards to their place. Maybe he should ask Mac if he could bring Jared along.

Jared spending the holiday alone wasn't an option. One way or another, Seb would make sure Jared wasn't stuck in his room, eating a turkey pot pie with only Jelly Bean for company.

* * * *

After he'd tried on the clothes, Jared sat at the small table and added the twenty-seven dollars to his IOU column. He knew he'd be lucky to make two hundred dollars on payday and he already owed Brier ninety-two dollars for groceries for the previous three weeks.

He needed to talk to Mac, Amir or Nicco about his rent. Despite what Seb said, he wouldn't stay without paying something. From the look of his budget though, he doubted he'd be able to give the partners more than three fifty and that was if he was lucky to maintain at least forty hours a week at work.

Jared's gaze once again wandered to the stack of clothes. Had he ever had so many? He knew he should probably take some of them back, but... His eyes landed on the red coat.

Jared couldn't keep the smile off his face. How long had it been since he'd actually had a winter coat and a red one was icing on the cake.

Maybe he could pay Seb half when he got paid and the other half out of his next cheque? He stood and walked over to the clothes. Even he knew they should be washed before he wore them. Without the money for the laundry room downstairs, he'd need to do them all by hand.

With a shrug, Jared picked up the stack of six shirts and carried them into the bathroom along with the small bottle of detergent Brier had brought him. If he hung the shirts near the heating vents he might get lucky by having something new to put on the next day.

The thought made him smile. He couldn't believe how rich he'd become since Brier had knocked on his door.

Chapter Two

"Wake up."

Seb jerked and straightened in his chair to the sight of a grinning Mac. "Sorry."

Mac sat on the corner of Seb's desk and crossed his arms over his chest. "What's up with you lately? I've noticed you haven't been your normal cheerful self."

Seb snorted. He'd never been cheerful in his life. "I've been picking Jared up from work. Guess the change to my sleep pattern has me more out of sorts than usual."

"Doesn't he work the night shift?"

"Evenings. He gets off at two in the fucking morning." Seb scratched at his beard. He hadn't had the energy for a couple of days to trim his beard or shave his cheeks and neck.

"And you've been staying up every night to get him?"

Seb shook his head. "I've been trying to catch a few hours of sleep before and after I get him."

Mac stood. "Let me talk to Nicco and Amir. I'm sure there's a better solution."

"Thanks. I've been meaning to ask if I can invite him to Thanksgiving. I talked to Brier and he, Jackie, Bram and Declan are headed to Oklahoma to be with Thor's family."

"Sure, bring him along." Mac headed towards the door.

"By the way, has Jared asked you about paying rent?"

"He's asked. I keep dodging the question."

"He won't give up. It's important to him, and it's good for his self-esteem."

Mac stood in the doorway leading to the hall. "So tell me what I should tell him?"

"The best way would be to actually sit down and figure out how much it's costing Three Partners to house a person. Tell him you don't intend to make a profit, but give him a figure he can trust as the truth."

Mac nodded. "I'll see what I can come up with."

Seb stretched as Mac disappeared. It took him a moment to figure out what he'd been doing when he'd fallen asleep. Remembering, he picked up the phone.

"Archer."

"Hey, it's Seb. Where're you at?"

"Phoenix. Soaking up the sunshine. Why?"

"Slap on your earmuffs and get to Albuquerque. I might have a job for you."

"I just got off a job," Archer growled.

"Hey, if you don't want to live like a rock star for the next few months it's no skin off my nose."

"Babysitting? You know I hate those gigs. Besides, the holidays are coming up."

"It's for Keifer Zane." Seb sat back and waited. Keifer was one of the hottest rock stars out there. He'd also recently come out of the closet.

Archer whistled. "Damn. Is he getting backlash?"

"He's getting too much attention from both sides of the fence. There are some who want him dead and others who want him wed, to them, if you get my drift."

Seb knew Archer may very well blow up over what he had in mind, but it was the only way in Seb's opinion. "Just get here. We can discuss the details then."

Archer was still grumbling when he hung up. Seb sat back in his chair and grinned. Archer was more than a fantastic bodyguard, he also happened to be the only guy in Three Partners' employ who could pass as a rock star himself.

The leanly muscled, six-foot man was specifically trained in close quarters security. Archer was the kind of guy you wanted to have your back. With his blond, spikey hair and the light brown soul patch under his lip, Archer didn't look like the typical bodyguard.

Seb thought Archer would be the perfect choice to fool the media and fans into thinking he was simply Keifer's new boyfriend. It was Keifer's feeling that it was someone within his entourage that had outed him to the media for a chunk of money.

Once Archer accepted the job, he'd be seen on Keifer's arm at every available opportunity. The hope was that Archer would not only be able to root out the Judas, but keep Keifer safe from the new onslaught of interested men.

Seb set the file aside and went to the next. He tried to concentrate on the papers in front of him, but soon his eyes began to close. God, he hoped Mac came up with a safe solution for Jared because his job was really starting to suffer.

* * * *

Jared was sprawled on the couch watching television when there was a knock at his door. He jumped up, secretly happy to have a visitor. Opening the door, he stared at the man standing in the hall. He'd met George a few times, but didn't really know him.

"Hi."

George smiled and bent down to pet a curious Jelly Bean. "I noticed this stuff had been in your mailbox the last couple of days, so I thought I'd bring them."

"I have a mailbox?"

George chuckled. "Sure. It's to the right of the entrance. Your room key opens it."

"So how did you open it?"

George's grey eyebrows bounced up and down. He handed the small stack of envelopes to Jared. "Because I'm the one who sorts the mail."

"Thanks." Jared picked up Jelly Bean, cradling the sweet cat in his arms.

George gave Jared a teasing salute and turned to walk back down the hall. "I put your name on your box, by the way."

"Thanks again." Jared shut the door and looked at the mail. He still couldn't believe he had letters. Who the heck did he know who'd even write one, and how did they find out where he...

Jared dropped the letters. As they fluttered to the floor, he caught sight of his name and the address of the dormitory. The handwriting was all too familiar. A knock on the door made him jump.

"Jared?" Seb called through the door.

Jared quickly kicked the offensive mail under the couch. After several calming breaths, he picked up the ever-curious Jelly Bean and opened the door. "Hi."

Seb's head tilted to the side. "You okay?" he asked as he reached out to scratch the cat behind her ears.

"Yeah." He took a step back in case Seb wanted to come in. While he waited for Seb to tell him what he wanted, Jared's gaze went back to the couch, hoping none of the envelopes were in view.

Seb's eyes followed Jared's, narrowing, as if he knew Jared was up to something. "I came by to invite you to Thanksgiving at Mac's tomorrow. A bunch of us have been invited."

"Me? Really?" Jared didn't want to admit he'd never understood the appeal of the holiday. Growing up, Thanksgiving had been yet another excuse for his parents to get drunk and mean.

"Yes. You. Mac said dinner will be served around two, but he invited us over early to watch the football game." Although Seb was speaking, he continued to study the small apartment with his eyes.

"I have to work my regular shift tomorrow."

"You're working Thanksgiving?"

"Sure. I'm the low man on the totem pole. But don't worry. I won't pull you away from your party to take me." For some reason the holiday seemed like a big deal to Seb. Jared wouldn't do anything to ruin it for him. Seb had been more than nice to him, even if the man did get grumpy on occasion.

"I'll pick you up at eleven. You should have more than enough time to enjoy dinner before I take you to work."

Jared bit his bottom lip. "Will there be drinking there?"

"You mean booze? Probably. Why?"

Once again, Seb gave Jared that narrow-eyed stare like he was trying to see into his soul. Jared knew he needed to do some thinking about the situation. His bruises had finally faded. He actually liked not being ashamed of the way he looked when he ventured out in public. "Can I let you know?"

Seb rested his hand on the wall beside Jared and leaned towards him. "What aren't you telling me?"

With the handsome man so close, Jared became flustered. Did Seb suspect he'd received mail? Or was his uneasiness about the holiday showing through? Maybe he could pick up an extra shift at the gas station?

When Seb leaned in further, Jared pressed against the wall. "N...nothing. I just want to check on my hours before I commit to anything."

With a grunt that told Jared the bigger man didn't believe him, Seb straightened. "I'll pick you up later for work."

Jared nodded.

With one last glance around the apartment, Seb turned and walked out. Jared shut the door and let out the breath he'd been holding. He noticed the half-hard cock pressing against the fly of his jeans. What the heck was up with that?

* * * *

Seb parked in front of Jackie's house and got out. When he'd finished with Jared, he knew he needed some answers. A quick call to Brier, and he was informed they were getting ready to leave for Oklahoma. Seb had asked if they could wait long enough for him to stop by for a few minutes and here he was.

As he walked towards the front door, Seb's mind was whirling. How was he supposed to watch over Jared when he knew so little about him?

The front door opened before he could even knock.

"Hi," Brier greeted, giving Seb a hug.

Seb didn't accept that sort of thing from most people, but Brier reminded him so much of Alexander, he couldn't push him away. "Sorry to hold you up, but I need to talk to you about Jared."

Brier led Seb into the living room. "Is there something wrong with him?"

Seb sat in one of the chairs and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. There's something going on with him, but I can't put my finger on it. I thought it might help if I knew a little more about him."

"Like what?" Brier asked, smiling when Jackie came into the room and sat beside him.

"I think I know as much as I need to about his life with Rick, but what about before then?"

Brier's brows knitted together. "You mean the hospital?"

Seb shook his head. "Before that. Do you know anything about his life growing up?"

Brier looked at Jackie. The two men seemed to have a silent discussion with their eyes before Jackie finally nodded. Brier turned back to address Seb. "He tried to kill himself."

"Yeah. I saw the scars. I assumed that's what put him into the hospital where Rick and the others began abusing him."

Brier began rubbing at the side of his head. It was something Seb noticed Brier did a lot when he was anxious about something.

"I don't know much. But he's mentioned a few things."

"Like?"

"When I told him the story of what happened to me to make me stupid..."

"Hey," Jackie cut in. "We don't use that word."

Brier smiled and kissed his partner. "I'm sorry."

Seb had heard the story of how Brier's parents had abused all of their kids. Brier's brain damage was a direct result of an episode with his father when he was only an infant. "Go on."

"Anyway, I was telling Jared about me and he got this look on his face. He told me that I was lucky to escape my parents by being put into the hospital. He said he wished he'd been that lucky."

"He was abused as a kid?"

Brier shrugged. "I think so, but he won't really talk about it. I know he can't stand the smell of whisky. He's mentioned that before when we talked about his job. He said sometimes men come into the store and he can smell whisky on their breath and it makes him want to throw up."

Seb knew he had some research to do. "Do you happen to know where Jared grew up?"

Brier nodded. "Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. I remember because I thought it sounded like some place I should've been from."

Seb couldn't help but wonder why Brier thought that. Was it his Native American ancestry or did the man feel he was like a broken arrow? He knew he'd gotten all the information he was likely to get from Brier. From the sound of it, Jared didn't tell his best friend much either.

He stood and held out his hand. "I'll let you two get on the road. Thanks for letting me come over."

Jackie and Brier stood. Jackie gave Brier a kiss on the temple. "Why don't you go into the kitchen and make sure you turned the oven off?"

Brier nodded. "Have a good Thanksgiving, Seb."

"I will. Thanks." Seb knew Jackie wanted to say something to him without Brier being around, so he started to walk towards the door with Jackie at his side.

"What's going on that you aren't telling Brier?" Jackie asked.

"I don't know. I went to invite Jared to dinner at Mac's tomorrow and he got kinda weird about the whole thing. But then again, he was acting strange when I got there." Seb shrugged. "I can't help but think something's going on he's not telling me about."

"Well, if you find out what it is, make sure to give me a call. If there's bad news, I'd rather Brier heard it from me."

Seb smiled. Jackie was so incredibly protective of his partner. Seb had known the man for a number of years and never would have expected him to fall so hard for a lover.

"Have a good weekend." Seb slapped Jackie on the back before retreating to his El Camino. He glanced at the clock and decided to go back to the office for a couple of hours before he had to drive Jared to work.

The bosses had been nice enough to give the entire office staff the afternoon off, but Seb needed to know more about Jared's background. He drove the distance to the office in town that was connected to Mac, Nicco and Amir's home. He parked in front of the redesigned schoolhouse and unlocked the front door.

As he walked down the short hall, he noticed the light in Mac's office was on. "Hey, didn't the boss give you the day off?"

Mac looked up from his computer and grinned. "Nicco and Amir were arguing over the best way to make the stuffing for tomorrow, so I decided to make myself scarce. What're you doing here?"

"Research."

"On?"

Seb knew Mac well enough to know he wouldn't be satisfied until he knew the whole truth. "I need to know about Jared's childhood."

"Why? There are some things that should be left in the past."

Seb thought of his own childhood and couldn't agree more, but this was different. "I need to know why he doesn't want to come over here for Thanksgiving."

Even to his ears, the excuse sounded flimsy. Seb noticed the hurt expression on Mac's face.

"Maybe he's not comfortable with us yet. Or maybe he doesn't like us."

Seb shook his head. "I don't think that's it. It's Thanksgiving he doesn't seem to want any part in. He said he'd think about it, but I could tell he was trying to think up excuses. He asked me something strange though."

"Yeah? What?"

"He wanted to know if people would be drinking."

Mac leant back in his chair and rubbed his neck. "You think his folks were alcoholics?"

Seb nodded. "Brier said something about Jared getting nauseous at the smell of whisky."

"Well, tell Jared we'll be having beer during the game and wine with dinner."

Seb noticed Mac hadn't forbidden him from digging into Jared's past. "I'll find a way to slip that in."

Seb started towards his office, but the sound of Mac's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"If he finds out you dug around in his past, he'll never trust you again."

Seb continued on to his office. As he fired up his computer, he thought about what Mac had said. Was finding out the truth more important than Jared's trust? If he didn't learn the truth, how could he hope to help the younger man, but on the other hand, would Jared even let him help if he found out what Seb had done?

"Shit!" he growled as he shut off his computer.

"I knew you were a better man than that," Mac said from the doorway.

Seb glared at his friend. "You don't have to look so damn smug."

"You like him, huh?"

"What? No. I mean, yeah, I like him, but not the way you're thinking."

"I think you're wrong. I think even if I managed to get Jared another ride to and from work, you'd still insist on doing it yourself."

"No I wouldn't," Seb protested. The last person he'd truly cared about was Alexander and those feelings had nearly killed him. He wouldn't willingly put himself into that position again.

"Fine. I talked to Raven. Since he's the night owl of the group, he's agreed to take over the job as chauffeur."

"Raven? Are you nuts? That prick jumps on anything that moves." The thought of Raven being alone at two in the morning with Jared made Seb's skin crawl. It was bad enough that Three Partners specialised in gay bodyguards, but why did they have to employ sluts like Raven?

"He's good at his job and you know it."

"I'm not talking about his job skills, and we *both* know it."

"Does Raven even know who Jared is? Because Jared's still pretty skittish around people he doesn't know."

Mac's grin got even bigger. "He knows Jared, don't you worry about that."

Seb narrowed his eyes at his friend. He knew exactly what Mac was doing. Nope. There was no way Seb was going to bite into that apple. "Fine. I'll tell Jared this evening when I take him to work."

"Yeah, okay." Mac was chuckling as he turned and walked away.

Seb put his feet on top of his desk and leant back in his chair. Raven was known as the shopper because he always got assigned to protect rich men's wives. Like most men, husbands didn't want a straight, good-looking bodyguard following their wives around all day. The perfect solution was hiring a gay man to do the job.

Seb happened to know that didn't stop Raven from getting his groove on though. The man was relentless in his pursuit of cock. As a matter of fact, on more than one occasion, Raven had ended up fucking the husband. The thought of someone like that being with Jared... "Dammit!"

He heard another round of laughter coming from down the hall which pissed him off even more.

* * * *

Jared sat on the couch with his feet tucked under him. The letters continued to taunt him from their hiding place. He kept telling himself nothing good would come from reading them, but he couldn't get them off his mind.

He knew Rick. They were probably filled with hate, or warnings. Jared knew how pissed Rick was when Brier filed rape charges against him. He knew because Rick took his mood out on him. But Rick was in jail. What could he possibly do to him?

Oh no. What if he was getting out of jail? Maybe Rick was writing to let Jared know?

Jared jumped off the couch, landing as far away from the letters as possible. He knew it was irrational, but he could picture the simple white envelopes staring at him, waiting to reach out and grab him.

He found the broom in the corner of the small kitchen area and turned back to the sofa. He gave the inanimate object a wide berth as he paced back and forth with the broom in his hand. *You can do this.*

Nearing the couch, he stuck the broom under it and snagged one of the letters. He swept the envelope into the centre of the room, well away from the others. Jared took the broom back to its spot in the corner of the kitchen and made himself a glass of ice water.

He sipped at the cold liquid as he circled the waiting envelope. Come on. It's a freaking letter. Don't be such a wimp.

Jared set down his glass and chewed at his fingernail for several moments before reaching down and snatching the letter off the floor. His fingers felt like they were on fire as they tore open the envelope.

As he stared down at the scribbled handwriting, he wished, not for the first time, his reading skills were more advanced. He decided to read what he could and find a way to get hold of a dictionary to help with the rest if he needed.

Pussy Boy,

Jared closed his eyes at the name Rick had always called him. He hated that it still had the power to humiliate him.

I've already told you what I'm plan... to do to you when I get out of here. Well, my brother Bill came to see me today. You rem... Bill, don't you? Even though, like me, Bill's no fag, he sure liked fucking that ass of yours. Bill said he might stop in to say hi. Just tho... you should know.

Rick

Jared took a deep breath as memories of Bill assaulted him. Bill was even meaner than Rick. He was a long-haul trucker who stopped into Lubbock about once a month. It got so bad one time, that Rick actually ordered Bill out of the house.

Jared dropped the letter and retrieved the broom to sweep it back under the couch with the others. What would happen if Bill found him? He looked around his apartment. Never had he been so grateful to be surrounded by strong men.

The longer he thought about it, the more he began to think Rick was bluffing. The last Jared had heard, Rick wasn't even talking to his brother. Besides, Bill worked all the time.

By the time the knock came on the door, Jared had calmed himself down. A quick glance at the clock told him it was Seb. "I'll be right there."

He made sure Jelly Bean had food and water before grabbing his new red coat. "I love you," he told his sleeping cat who was curled up in a chair.

Jared opened the door. "I'm ready."

Seb nodded and led the way towards the elevator without saying anything. Jared wondered if he'd angered him earlier. He knew the Thanksgiving thing seemed to be important to Seb. Maybe Jared should just accept?

He stepped into the elevator beside Seb. "I'll try to come to the dinner."

Seb didn't say anything until they got to the El Camino. Once inside, Seb started up the car and turned the heater on full blast. "What's the real reason you don't want to come?"

"Huh?"

Seb turned to face Jared. "What's your favourite Thanksgiving memory?"

Jared did not want to travel down that road. "I don't have one."

"Why?"

Jared turned away from Seb's intimidating stare and looked out the passenger window. "Just don't."

A loud grunt came from the driver's seat. "I'm not moving this car until you tell me why you don't have at least one good memory of Thanksgiving."

Refusing to be drawn into the discussion, Jared opened his door. "Fine. I'll walk."

With his hands stuffed into the pockets of his coat, Jared stormed off towards town. He heard a car door open and shut and took off running.

"Dammit! Get back here."

Jared shook his head and picked up speed. The blood was pumping so loud in his head, he didn't hear Seb get back into the car. It wasn't until the sleek black El Camino pulled in front of him and slammed on the brakes that Jared realised he was still being followed.

The driver's door opened and Seb flew out of the car straight towards him. It wasn't the first time Jared had been in this position. He did what he'd always done, drop and cover.

Jared didn't know how long he'd been on the ground, but he eventually peeked up around the arms that were covering his head. Seb stood, looking down at Jared with an expression he couldn't read.

Despite Seb's lack of attack, Jared still maintained his position.

"Get up," Seb finally said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Although the bigger man had said the words, the tone he'd used caused further doubt in Jared's mind.

A strong arm wrapped around Jared's waist and hoisted him to his feet like he weighed nothing.

"Come on, you're gonna be late for work." Seb released him and walked towards the El Camino.

Jared stood rooted to the spot for several moments. Surely if Seb was going to hurt him, he would have already done it. Jared concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other until he was seated in the warm car.

Before pulling away, Seb reached across the distance and put a hand on Jared's thigh. "I'll never hurt you."

Seb removed his hand and put the car into gear. Shame suddenly filled Jared. "I'm sorry."

"If you don't want to go to dinner tomorrow, don't go. I just thought it would be nice having you there."

Jared bit the inside of his cheek. Would his company really make a difference to Seb? "I'll go."

Seb nodded. Within two minutes, Seb pulled in front of the gas station. "I'll be back at two."

"Thanks." Jared felt like he should say more. He knew he'd hurt Seb's feelings, but he wasn't sure how to make it up to him.

"You're welcome."

Jared got out of the car and tried to muster a smile for Seb as he shut the door. Between the letter and questions about his childhood, Jared felt exhausted before he even stepped foot into work. Hopefully the night would go smoothly.

Chapter Three

Parked right in front of the doors, Seb watched Jared as he mopped the shop's floor. He'd yet to get a wink of sleep, throwing his schedule off even further, but his mind had been on Jared. Why that surprised him, was anyone's guess.

The events earlier in the evening still had him shaken. The expression on Jared's face when he'd dropped to the ground was one of trained fear.

Jared spotted him waiting and waved to let him know he would be out soon. Seb acknowledged the gesture as he continued to follow the man with his eyes. What was it that seemed to draw him towards Jared?

Seb gripped the steering wheel. And why did he feel the overwhelming desire to wrap the man in his arms and kiss the life back into him? He knew Jared wasn't the kind of guy who could handle a casual affair, which was the only thing Seb had ever offered a partner, so why did he still keep dreaming about him?

He watched Jared put the money from the cash register into the safe under the counter. Seb knew Jared hadn't locked the door before he did it. He wondered if Jared felt safe knowing Seb was outside waiting or if it was a common practice.

The fluorescent lights over the gas pumps were shut off first, signalling the station was officially closed. It didn't take Jared long to dim the interior lights of the building and lock the front door.

Jared opened the passenger door and climbed in. "Sorry to make you wait. Someone spilled a big slushy in front of the beverage counter."

"That's okay."

The ride back to the dorm was quiet, almost too quiet. Seb wondered if Jared was angry with him, now that he'd had a chance to think things over.

"Would you like a cup of hot tea?" Jared asked as the elevator doors opened onto their floor.

Seb was surprised by the invitation, the first of its kind. "Sure."

He followed Jared into his apartment and was immediately met by Jelly Bean. "Hey there, girl."

Laughing at the way the cat wound herself around Seb's legs, Jared dug into his coat pocket and held up a dented can. "I brought you a treat, Jelly Bean."

Jared gave Seb an apologetic smile. "It was damaged, so my boss said I could buy it for half off."

Seb wondered why Jared felt the need to justify buying a can of food for his cat. "I think you got a good deal."

Jared's smile turned genuine. "I'm not sure if Jelly Bean has ever had the canned stuff. It'll be interesting to see if she likes it."

Jared walked into the corner of the big room and opened the cabinet to get a plate. He pulled the top off the small can and spooned out about a third of it. At the first whiff, Jelly Bean left Seb's side to run into the kitchen area.

"Be patient," Jared scolded his cat as he set the plate on the floor.

Jelly Bean sniffed at the lump of brown goo for several moments before practically inhaling it.

"I think she likes it," Seb chuckled.

"I think you're right," Jared giggled. He filled an old tea kettle with water and set it on the provided hot plate. "Do you want decaffeinated tea?"

"Anything's fine." Seb wasn't normally a tea drinker. It all tasted like hot water with a bit of flavour to him.

Jared got two tea bags out of the box. "My parents were drunks," Jared blurted out without turning around.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Seb moved closer, but not enough to touch.

"You'd never know it by looking at them. Church goers." Jared glanced at Seb and rolled his eyes. "There was a tiny sliding panel in the back of my closet. I'm not sure what the purpose of it was, but when I was little, if I scrunched up real tight, I could fit in there. I can still remember my parents screaming my name as they hunted for me."

The tea pot began to whistle and Jared turned away from Seb to pour the hot water into two mugs. "Believe me. You didn't want to be found when they'd been drinking."

Before he gave himself a chance to rethink his actions, Seb stepped up behind Jared and put his hands on the smaller man's shoulders. "What happened when you were too big for your hiding place?"

"They usually found me," Jared whispered.

How could such a small declaration say so much? Seb leant in and kissed the back of Jared's head. He wondered how far he could push before Jared shut down. Taking a huge chance, Seb released Jared shoulders and reached around the slim body. He ran his fingertips over the scars on one of Jared's wrists. "Is this because of them?"

Jared didn't immediately pull away like Seb half expected him to. Instead he stared down at the scars as Seb continued to smooth over them with his touch.

"I didn't know how else to get away."

"How old were you?"

"The first time? Um, thirteen, I think."

It wasn't until Jared said it that Seb realised there were two sets of slash marks, side by side. "And the second time?"

"Seventeen. That's when the police put me into the hospital."

Seb lifted Jared's wrist and placed a soft kiss on the clean white lines. "Did you ever tell the police the truth?"

"When I was younger. I had an assembly at school that talked about abuse. The film said you should go to an adult like your teacher or a policeman. I went to my teacher. I'm not really sure if she believed me, but she did call the police. They investigated, but like I said, my parents were good at hiding their demons."

Jared shook his head and held up Seb's cup of tea. "You'd better drink this before it gets cold."

Seb could tell Jared was starting to shut down. Seb decided to share a little about his own history. "I was an adult, well, twenty, before I knew what Thanksgiving was supposed to be about."

Jared turned and took a sip of his tea. "Really?"

Seb nodded and took a drink of the god-awful tea. "It's a nice holiday when spent with the right people."

"I know Brier seemed excited about it, but I thought it was because he was going to see his family."

"Yeah, that's part of it. Basically, you lay around watching football until it's time for dinner and then everyone sits down to a big table with more food than they can eat. You talk, you laugh, you finish eating, go back to watching football and then do it all over an hour later with dessert."

Jared yawned. "Sounds nice."

"It is." Seb finished his tea in two swallows and set his cup in the sink. "I'll pick you up at ten-thirty. Will that give you enough time to sleep?"

Jared nodded. "I don't sleep much anyway."

Seb reached out and rubbed his thumb across the dark circles under Jared's eyes. "I know, but try."

"I will. Thanks for coming in."

"Thanks for trusting me enough to invite me." God he wanted to kiss those soft-looking pink lips. Instead, Seb spun on his heels and out the door. Feeling sympathy for the man was one thing, but he couldn't let it become more than that.

* * * *

Jared glanced across the seat to Seb. He had on a pretty black sweater that fit him perfectly. He looked down at his own blue button down shirt. "Are you sure I'm dressed okay?"

Seb smiled. "You look good. It's casual, so you'll fit right in."

"I like your cowboy boots." He wasn't sure what they were made of but some kind of exotic animal no doubt. Jared didn't think he'd ever seen skin like that on a cow.

"Thanks. They're not as comfortable as my regular boots, but I didn't figure I'd be on my feet much today." Seb chuckled. "Actually, I'll probably be sitting on my ass most of the time."

"And you're sure I didn't need to bring anything?"

Seb pointed towards the back of the El Camino. "Hope you don't mind, but I was elected to bring the beer."

"Why would I mind?"

Seb shrugged. "I know you got a little wigged out when I told you there'd be alcohol there."

"I know I did. Sorry about that."

"Don't apologise. It's understandable given what you went through with your folks."

Jared knew it wasn't just his parents' drinking that tainted his views on alcohol, but reminding Seb of the way he'd been abused and kept a virtual prisoner by Rick wasn't something he cared to get into.

Thoughts of Rick brought the letters to mind. He'd gone back and forth with himself since reading them. If he really thought Rick would send Bill to find him, he would tell Seb and the others. Without proof, though, he was afraid of coming off like the pussy boy Rick always accused him of being.

Seb pulled up to the Three Partners' offices, and turned off the engine. "You know, I never asked if you even liked to watch football."

"It's okay. I don't really know the rules, but I can usually figure out what's going on." Jared hoped he could do some work in the kitchen. Groups tended to make him uncomfortable, but then, at least he knew most of the people that would be at the dinner.

It wasn't until he got out and looked in the back of the El Camino that he noticed the two cases of beer. He lifted one, surprised at the weight.

"I can get 'em," Seb offered, lifting the other case easily.

"That's okay. I got it." He repositioned the cardboard box in his hands and followed Seb up the steps to the front door.

Seb balanced the beer on one arm and opened the door. He gestured with his head for Jared to go in.

Once inside, Jared stopped, letting Seb lead the way into the living quarters. He could hear people yelling and started to hang back.

Seb turned and grinned. "They're yelling at the television, not each other."

Jared smiled, feeling stupid. "Good to know."

It was the first time he'd been to Mac, Amir and Nicco's home and couldn't believe the size of the rooms. They entered the living area and sure enough, five guys were sitting on the edge of their seats watching a huge TV screen.

"About time you got here. I thought I'd die of thirst," Raven joked.

Jared didn't really know the man who spoke, but he had met him once or twice in the dorm. He was surprised by the glare Seb shot Raven's way. Jared tried to smooth over the awkward situation by smiling.

"Glad you came, Jared," Nicco called out, momentarily taking his eyes from the television.

"Thanks for inviting me." A few of the other men waved, but their attention was definitely on whatever game they were watching. Jared shuffled from foot to foot, not really sure what to do.

"Come on, Jared, let's put these away," Seb said, nodding to the cases of beer.

Relieved to have something to do, Jared followed Seb into the large open kitchen. He stopped when he spotted Mac grinding his hips against Amir as he kissed him.

"Break it up." Seb chuckled and set his beer on the island.

Although embarrassed at walking in on such an intimate scene, Jared was still unable to take his eyes off the two men who had ignored Seb's order. Had he ever witnessed anything more beautiful than the obvious passion the two men shared for each other?

Seb took the beer out of Jared's arms, breaking his attention away from Amir and Mac.

"You okay?" Seb asked.

Jared wasn't sure he could speak without giving himself away. His gaze went back to the two men. He couldn't stand it, he had to know. "Is that normal?"

"What?"

Jared gestured to the men.

"For them? Yeah. Does it bother you?" Seb asked.

Did it? Jared knew it did but probably not for the reason it would most people.

Seb stepped in front of Jared, blocking his view of Mac and Amir. "Jared?"

Jared gazed up into Seb's dark eyes. There were times when he felt so out of touch. "Is that what it looks like when people really like each other?"

Seb reached out and brushed the back of his hand across Jared's cheek. "Have you ever been kissed because you wanted it?"

Images of Rick forcing his tongue down Jared's throat made him shiver as stomach acid began to churn in his gut. "No, I guess not."

Seb's hand moved to cup the back of Jared's head. As he spoke, his lips got closer and closer to Jared's. "A kiss can be the most sensual touch in the world if done correctly."

Jared felt the heat of Seb's breath caress his lips. He stood mesmerised, wanting to close the distance more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. *Please. Kiss me.*

"Where's the beer?" Nicco asked, coming into the kitchen.

Seb stopped his forward progress and straightened to an upright position, the moment lost. "On the island. I was getting ready to put it in the cooler."

Still caught in the spell of want, Jared watched Seb turn away. *What just happened?* If it wasn't for the glance Seb gave him over his shoulder, Jared might have thought he'd dreamt the entire moment. He answered Seb's glance the only way he could, with a smile.

Seb returned his smile and began unloading the beer into a large cooler of ice. "Are we gonna leave this in here or take it in the other room?"

"Take it in the other room. The fewer people coming in and out of the kitchen, the better," Mac replied, wiping his mouth.

Jared wanted to offer his help, but the way the three men were looking at each other, he thought they'd prefer he got lost for a while. Resigned to watching football, Jared followed Seb into the main living area. Most of the chairs had already been taken, so he sat on the floor.

With his back against the wall, he watched the group of men yell and scream at the television. Jared didn't understand the point. It wasn't as if the guys playing could hear them, so why do it?

Seb opened the cooler and passed out cans of beer, before finding his own spot to watch the game. Seb sat as far away from Jared as he could get and still see the TV. Jared wondered if the man was regretting the moment they'd shared in the kitchen.

Why wouldn't he regret it? Jared knew he was screwed up. He had absolutely nothing to offer a man like Sebastian. He rubbed his stomach. Something about the near-kiss still had his insides all fluttery.

It was easy to see Seb was nothing like Rick. Jared wondered if it was possible to actually want to do the things Rick had done to him. He was ashamed to admit it, but the few times Seb had touched him in a compassionate way, Jared had actually liked it.

"So I guess I'm going to be your new driver," Raven announced from the chair closest to Jared.

"Huh?"

Raven smiled. Jared knew he'd never seen teeth as white as the Native American's. "Mac asked if I could pick you up from work. Since I'm usually up way past that time anyway, I said yes."

Jared looked at the gorgeous man across the room. Seb met his gaze. Had Seb complained to Mac about picking him up? Jared wouldn't lie to himself, the idea that Seb would do that hurt. He turned back to Raven. "I never asked for a ride. I can walk."

Suddenly the room became claustrophobic. He stood, grabbed his coat off the floor beside him and headed towards the front door. Once outside, Jared sat on the top step. He stared at the bright red coat in his hands but couldn't bring himself to put it on. Had Seb also complained to Mac about Jared not paying him all the money he owed for the clothes?

"Why the hell are you sitting out here in the cold?" Seb asked.

Jared held the coat out. "You should take this back."

"What? Don't be stupid. Put it on." Seb ignored the coat and sat on the step next to Jared.

"I never asked you to pick me up from work. I told you all along I could walk."

"I know you did. But like I told you, it's not safe."

Jared looked up at Seb. "It wasn't the ride I started to enjoy. It was spending the end of my day with you."

Seb broke eye contact and suddenly seemed to find something on the street fascinating. "Guess I enjoyed it too."

Jared snorted. "Yeah, you enjoyed it so much you complained to Mac about it. That's okay. I'm not a charity case. I'll walk."

Seb reached out and touched Jared's hand. "It wasn't like that."

"Whatever." Jared pulled away from Seb's grasp, dropped the coat to the step beside him and stood. "I'm gonna take a walk."

He started down the steps only to be pulled up short when Seb darted in front of him, blocking his path. Seb held the coat in his fist and shook it in Jared's face. "This! Is yours. I may have picked it out, but you bought it. Now put the fucking thing on."

"Is everything okay out here?" Raven asked from somewhere behind Jared.

Freezing his ass off, Jared reluctantly took his coat and did as instructed. Once he had it zipped, Seb grabbed the puffy down in his hands and pulled Jared towards him.

Jared's eyes widened as Seb's mouth closed over his. He opened his mouth to protest when he felt Seb's tongue glide across his own. *Oh*. The soft moan that erupted from Jared's throat was unexpected but not totally unwelcomed.

As if by instinct, Jared's arms wrapped around Seb's neck as the kiss deepened in intensity. Seb's demand gentled and soon the two were trading tongue caresses on the steps of the agency. With Jared standing on the step above, it put their mouths and bodies into almost-perfect alignment.

Want and need threatened to overwhelm him as his hardened cock brushed against the front of Seb's jeans. He felt the strong grip of Seb's hands as they landed on his hips, pulling their lower bodies even closer.

Jared broke the kiss as he struggled to get a breath. What was happening to him? Even not kissing Seb, Jared still felt light-headed. He stared into Seb's eyes, willing himself to ask the questions swirling through his mind. "Why'd you do that?"

Seb opened his mouth before snapping it shut. His eyebrows drew together before separating again. "Because I couldn't not do it." Seb ran his fingers through his hair and stepped away.

A sinking feeling replaced the flutters Jared had earlier. From the expression on Seb's face, he wasn't happy. "So...do you regret it?"

Seb started walking up the steps. He stopped and held out his hand. "Let's go eat."

"But..."

Seb shook his head. "I don't know. Let's just go eat."

Jared reached out to the only man he'd ever wanted. "Will there be pie?"

* * * *

Seb dropped Jared off at work and returned to Mac's. He'd thought about going home to get away from Raven's shitty grin, but knew it would only prompt further snide comments from the asshole.

He wasn't ashamed of kissing Jared in front of Raven, but he was ashamed of the reason behind it. Who the hell did Raven think he was barging in on such an obviously private conversation?

Seb had known in that moment if he didn't stake his claim on Jared, Raven would quickly try to move in. As he pulled Jared into the kiss, he'd told himself it was to protect the smaller man from Raven. At the first swipe of his tongue against Jared's he'd known it wasn't true. He wanted Jared. He'd always wanted him.

Walking through the living room, Seb retreated to the kitchen. He knew Raven and Sal were on clean-up duty and there was something he needed to take care of. "Hey, Sal, can I have a moment alone with Raven?"

The heavily muscled Italian grinned and threw the dish towel at Seb. "As long as you finish up for me."

Seb nodded. "Thanks."

He waited until Sal was out of the room to take the position beside the sink. "Thanks for offering to pick up Jared, but I'll continue doing it."

Raven smiled and handed Seb a plate to dry. "I figured as much."

"It's just that, well, he's not comfortable around most people."

"Mmm hmm, keep telling yourself that," Raven replied, rolling his eyes.

It was obvious Seb wasn't fooling anyone, including himself. "Okay, yeah. I like the guy. There's something about him that brings out my protective instincts."

Raven started to laugh. "You jackass. There was nothing protective about that kiss you laid on him earlier and we both know it. You want to fuck him. You may even actually feel something for him, but don't blame his past for your current feelings."

Seb started to argue but cut his protest short. "Just don't start trying your smooth moves on him, okay?"

Raven shrugged. "Wouldn't do any good anyway. I'll save my moves for the men who can afford them."

"You slut."

Raven chuckled. "Yep, but I'll find a sugar daddy, mark my words. And when I do, I'll be able to give up risking my life to babysit rich society wives."

"Whatever floats your boat." Seb couldn't care less whom Raven let fuck him as long as it wasn't Jared.

He worked with Raven to finish the kitchen. As the evening continued at a snail's pace, he decided to take Jared a plate of leftovers, complete with another big piece of pumpkin pie. Maybe he'd even stick around to keep the man company until he got off work.

Seb couldn't explain his new feelings, but he knew he'd rather spend the evening in a tiny store with Jared than sitting around drinking beer with his buddies.

Chapter Four

With two foil-covered plates on the seat beside him, Seb turned onto the street that would lead him to Jared. As he neared the station, flashing red and blue lights lit up the chilly Thanksgiving evening.

Seb's chest tightened as he pulled as close to the apparent crime scene as he could. He ran towards the gas station and was stopped by a uniformed policeman.

"Sorry, sir, you can't go in there."

Although his heart was racing, Seb knew the guy was just doing his job. "I came to pick up the man who's working. Is he okay?"

The cop gestured to the ambulance. "The techs are checking him out."

"Can I see him?" Seb asked, getting impatient.

The policeman spoke into his radio. "Wait here. The detective would like to talk to you."

"Just tell me if Jared's okay."

"Sorry, sir, I haven't seen him."

Seb began to pace back and forth. He wanted nothing more than to break through the crime scene tape and run to Jared. After everything Jared had been through, Seb couldn't imagine how freaked he must be.

"Sir?" a middle-aged man asked, holding up the bright yellow tape. "Detective Clint Long. Can I speak with you?"

Seb ducked under the tape and started walking towards the ambulance. "If you'll tell me how Jared is."

"He'll be fine. He's bruised, and he suffered a small cut below his right eye. The real problem is he won't talk, so we still don't know what happened here. There was a call placed by that guy over there. He came upon what he thought was a robbery, but if that was the case, the perp sucked at it. As far as we can tell, he didn't even take the money out of the cash drawer."

Seb's training took over. "What did the witness see?"

"A big guy beating up the clerk. But why beat him up if he wasn't after the money? And like I said, your friend isn't talking."

"Did you get a description of the guy?"

The detective shook his head. "Big, white. He was wearing a ski mask, which is why we think it was an attempted robbery."

Seb nodded. "Can I speak to him?"

"Can you get him to talk?"

With everything Jared had gone through, Seb honestly didn't know. "I can try. He's been through a lot. Jared recently pressed charges in Lubbock against a rapist."

Detective Long eyed Seb for several moments before nodding his head. "Do what you can. Our investigation hinges on the information the clerk can give us."

Seb broke away from the detective and jogged towards the ambulance. He knocked on the closed back door and the paramedic opened.

"Yes?"

Seb's gaze zeroed in on the fragile-looking man inside. Although they had several blankets draped over his shoulders, Jared's body was visibly shaking. Seb noticed Jared didn't even glance his way. "Detective Long said I could talk to Jared."

The paramedic nodded. "I put a butterfly bandage on the cut to his head. I think it needs a couple of stitches, but Jared's assured me the bandage will suffice. Other than that, he's bruised. He'll probably be stiff and sore in the morning though."

"Thanks." Seb waited for the paramedic to exit the ambulance before stepping up and in. He ducked his head as he went to sit next to Jared. Finally in the position to do what he'd wanted to do since he dropped Jared at work hours earlier, Seb wrapped the smaller man in his arms.

Jared's body tensed.

"It's okay, babe. I'm here," Seb tried to soothe.

For the first time since he'd arrived, Jared looked at Seb. He collapsed against Seb's side, sinking into the embrace.

Seb kissed the top of Jared's head as the man started to cry. "Shhh, it'll be okay."

Jared shook his head. "No. It won't. Rick won't let it."

Rick? "Jared, what does this have to do with Rick?"

"The police think it was a failed robbery," Jared mumbled.

"But it wasn't?"

Jared shook his head again. "It was Bill."

"Who's Bill?"

"Rick's brother. He warned me. I should've listened." Jared's watery eyes gazed up at Seb. "Why didn't I listen?"

Confused, Seb cupped the back of Jared's neck, keeping him in place. "When did Rick warn you?"

"Letters." Unable to turn his head away, Jared closed his eyes.

"Letters? What letters?"

The ambulance door opened.

"Anything?" the detective asked.

"Jared said it was Bill Sutcliff, the brother of his rapist."

"Do you know this for sure? Did you see his face?"

Jared shook his head, inching even closer to Seb. "I didn't have to see his face to know. His eyes. I've always hated them. It's like he looks at you, but never really sees, ya know? Like there's absolutely nothing behind them." Jared shivered. "I could also tell by the way he hit me. Bill always was a fan of kidney punches."

"He's done this before?" Why wasn't Seb aware of the threat Rick's brother posed Jared.

"Many times." Jared pulled Seb's head down to whisper in his ear. "Rick used to share me with Bill when he was in town."

One thing was certain. Rick wasn't the only one who needed to be brought up on charges of rape and assault.

"Can you arrest him?" Seb asked Long.

"I don't know. I'll take my report back to the station and let my chief and the prosecutor argue it out. Without a positive ID, it might be a tough conviction."

"Can I take him home?"

Clint Long looked over his notes before nodding. "How can I get hold of you?"

"I work for Three Partners Protection. Just call their number and ask for Seb James. Jared doesn't have a phone, but he and I live at the agency's dormitory outside of town. I'll get a message to him if you need me to."

Detective Long turned and said something to one of the policemen. "I'll have Jared's coat brought out. The owner's on his way down to close up the station."

"Tell him Jared won't be back," Seb informed Long.

"I have..."

Seb cut off Jared's protest with a soft kiss. "We'll figure something else out."

He glanced back at the detective. Where he expected to see disgust on the man's face, he saw only acceptance. Whether the guy was gay or not, at least he wasn't a bigot. That moved him up several spots in Seb's book.

Seb felt lips begin to kiss his neck. He knew it was Jared's way of seeking comfort, but he also knew the back of an ambulance wasn't the place for it. "Let's go home, babe."

* * * *

Jared pressed himself against Seb's side once they got in the El Camino. He couldn't explain it, but touching the much bigger man made him feel completely safe. There was something in the way Seb held him that was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like to make love.

Jared wasn't completely naïve. Even though he'd never experienced love, he knew it was a real thing. Brier had told Jared many times sex was different with someone you cared about.

Taking a chance, Jared reached over and put his hand under the opening of Seb's leather coat. He felt the man's muscles as he slowly ran his hand over Seb's chest. "Thank you for coming to get me."

With his right arm already around Jared, Seb began to rub his side through the big puffy red coat. "I was bringing you over some supper. My heart stopped when I saw the police cars."

At a red light, Jared pulled Seb's head down for a kiss. He opened his mouth and brushed his tongue against Seb's, making the bigger man moan. He couldn't help but smile. He liked that. It made him feel he had some power even though he was so much smaller and weaker than Seb.

The light turned green and a car behind them honked. Seb broke the kiss and continued towards the dorm.

Jared rested his head on Seb's shoulder. He knew he should tell Seb about the letters, but there was plenty of time for that. First he wanted to see if what Brier had told him was

really true, plus he wanted to feel that control again. He could think of several ways to make Seb moan.

Seb pulled into the dormitory parking lot and turned off the engine. "Grab that plate beside you. I bet Jelly Bean would love a cold turkey sandwich and mashed potatoes."

Jared removed his hand from Seb's chest and reached to the seat. "What's on the other plate?"

"Pumpkin pie. Bring it too if you feel like eating."

Jared had seen a movie once where the man and woman ate food off each other. He wondered if pumpkin pie would taste better if he licked it off Seb. His cock hardened at the images swirling through his head.

He stacked one plate on top of the other and slid out of the car. Seb wrapped an arm around him as they walked to the front door.

Jared sank further under Seb's protective embrace when they stepped into the building. A group of men, some of them he didn't know, were playing pool in the large common room.

"It's okay." Seb kissed the top of Jared's head. "There's no one here who will hurt you."

Seb pressed the elevator button, shielding Jared from the rest of the room.

As soon as the doors opened, they stepped inside, Seb's back to the closing doors. Jared held the plates to the side and pressed himself against Seb's body. "Can I stay with you tonight?"

Seb ran his hands down Jared's back, more in a comforting caress than a sexual one. "I'd like that."

The doors opened and they exited the elevator. Stopping in front of Jared's door, Seb took the leftovers out of his hands. "You'd better get Jelly Bean. If you don't she'll worry."

Jared hadn't thought of his cat. "Maybe you should just stay at my place. I don't want Jelly Bean to ruin anything."

Seb bent down and kissed him, running his tongue across Jared's lips. "I've got a bigger bed. Besides, a little cat hair never hurt anyone."

Jared was surprised. Rick used to kick Jelly Bean if she got on the furniture. It was one more way the two men were so different. "What about her litter box?"

Seb chuckled. "Unless she's toilet trained, you'd better bring it."

At least Jared had invested in one of the fancy, enclosed boxes. Living in such a small space, he felt it was important. Jared unlocked his door and the fluffy calico immediately came out into the hall to wind her way around Seb's legs.

"Hey, girl, you wanna have a sleepover at my place?" Seb asked the cat.

Seb dug his keys out of his pocket and unlocked his door. "Go on and get what you need. I'll take care of Jelly Bean."

Jared left Seb, trying to coax the cat into his apartment. He took off his coat and hung it in the closet. He was cleaning out the litter box when he thought of the letters again. *Tomorrow.*

He set the litter box and bag of food in the hall as he locked his apartment. The door to Seb's place was shut but not all the way, and Jared carried Jelly Bean's things inside. He wasn't surprised to see his hungry cat already attacking the plate of leftovers.

"Where would you like me to put this?"

"Where do you keep it at your place?" Seb asked, stirring something at the stove.

"Bathroom."

Seb nodded. "Probably be easier to put it in there then."

Jared sited the litter box, then strolled back to the kitchen and interrupted Jelly Bean's dinner to carry her into the bathroom. "See? Just like home."

Jelly Bean looked annoyed and scrambled back into the kitchen to finish her food. Jared picked up the bag of dry food and carried it to the small kitchenette. "What're you making?"

"Hot chocolate." Seb opened a cupboard and handed Jared two bowls. "Do cats drink milk?"

Jared filled one of the bowls with water and set it on the floor out of the way. "They like it, but I don't think it's good for them. Water's fine."

"I've never had a pet. Probably a good thing since I know so little about taking care of them." Seb poured the cocoa into two mugs and rinsed out the pan.

"Pets are easy. All they want is food, water and love." Jared took the offered cup and carried it to the couch.

"Well then, it sounds like pets aren't that different from people." Seb set his hot chocolate on the coffee table and took the mug from Jared's hands. "Let's let those cool for a minute."

Jared flinched as Seb's embrace squeezed against the bruise on his lower back. The action seemed to remind Seb of the earlier events.

"Why was Bill at the station?"

No. No. No. Jared didn't want his night jaded by Rick and Bill. "Can we talk about this in the morning?"

"What about the letters you mentioned? If I'm going to protect you, I have to know the truth about what I'm dealing with."

"Please, Seb. Please let's talk about this later," Jared pleaded.

Seb brushed a kiss across Jared's forehead. "Why don't you want to talk about it now?"

"Because I want you to make love to me," he admitted. It was the first time in his life he'd asked for sex. It started to worry him until he realised it was the first time he'd actually wanted it.

"I'll hold you all night long, but I think you're still too shook up to get into anything as heavy as having sex."

"You don't want to?"

"I didn't say that. I'm sure if my dick could punch me in the mouth it would. But I need to make sure you're doing it for the right reasons. I'll protect you no matter what, but I can't go to the next level without knowing you're ready for it."

Even though Jared knew Seb wouldn't hurt him, he couldn't bring himself to argue back. He knew he was ready. For the first time in his life he was ready. Maybe he could ease Seb into the idea of fucking him.

"Can I still see you naked?"

Seb chuckled. He stood and held out his hand. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

Jared shook his head. "Do you really want me to?"

Seb led the way across the room, turning off lights as he went. He turned on the small lamp beside the large bed and began to pull the black sweater over his head.

Jared stood mesmerised by the display of sculpted muscles. Seb's body put Jared's to shame. Suddenly, he was sorry he'd asked about getting nude. He studied the intricate tattoo on Seb's chest. It took him several moments to figure out what it said, but when he finally did, he felt sick. He watched as Seb removed the rest of his clothes. Completely nude, Seb put his hands on his hips. "Well, you gonna strip for me?"

"Who's Alexander?" Jared traced the tattoo with his finger. He followed the swirls as they spelled out the name.

Seb reached up and pressed Jared's hand flat against his chest. "He was my brother. But if you can put off talking about the heavy stuff, so can I."

Brother. Knowing it wasn't an old lover helped to put Jared's mind at ease. It was obvious from the expression on Seb's face he didn't want to talk about him. Jared nodded. "Can you turn off the light?"

Seb shook his head. "No hiding that gorgeous body of yours."

"I don't look like you."

Seb reached out and began to unbutton Jared's shirt. Jared turned his head away, unable to witness the disappointment in Seb's eyes once he was finally revealed. Unlike Seb, Jared didn't have tattoos. What he did have were faint scars. The healed wounds were like a journal of his life. He could tell you when and where he got each one of them.

He closed his eyes as Seb's hands began to trace them. "These bruises look pretty nasty. Are you sure you're up for cuddling?"

Jared opened his eyes and looked at Seb. "I know what the paramedic said, but after a lifetime of getting hit, I barely feel it anymore. The bruises will remind me what happened, but they'll be gone in a few weeks."

As Seb continued to explore his chest, Jared reached down and unfastened his jeans. He toed out of his sneakers and pushed his underwear down with the denim. After stepping out of the rest of his clothes, he turned and tried to pull back the covers.

Seb stopped him. He wrapped his arms around Jared's chest from behind and began to explore more of Jared's body. "You're breathtaking."

Jared couldn't hold back a snort. He knew what he looked like and breathtaking definitely wasn't the way he would describe himself.

Seb ignored Jared's non-verbal disagreement and reached down to fondle Jared's balls. "I like the way you feel in my arms. Your skin is so smooth. Makes me wonder what you will feel like to my tongue as I bathe your entire body."

Jared rested his head back against Seb's shoulder. "That's probably the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"Well get used to it. I may be quiet in my everyday life, but I'm a very verbal lover." Seb licked the side of Jared's neck.

Goosebumps broke out on Jared's body at the slight rasp of the goatee against his heated skin. He couldn't wait to touch the bigger man. "Let's go to bed."

Chapter Five

Before getting under the covers, Seb opened the drawer in his small bedside table and tossed a bottle of lube onto the bed. Jared's eyes followed his progress with what seemed to be genuine want. Seb hoped his soon-to-be lover didn't get the wrong idea. "I said I wasn't going to fuck you, but there are other ways to make love."

"Like what?"

Jared lifted the covers, exposing himself to Seb's view. *Damn, the man was sexy.*

"Just relax and feel the moment," he whispered. He kissed the butterfly bandage under Jared's eye, still grateful the man hadn't been hurt worse than he was. Although he'd been fighting his feelings for weeks, Seb knew as soon as he saw the police outside the station, he didn't want to live without him.

For the first time since being separated from Alexander, he yearned to love someone and have them love him back. Maybe it was his age? The older he became, the less he wanted to fuck random men. Images of fucking Jared crept into his mind. God, he wanted to bury his cock as deep as it would go inside the smaller man. One thing Seb's line of work had taught him was that victims of violent crimes often thought they wanted sex when all they really wanted was to feel safe.

Seb refused to allow his relationship with Jared to start off that way. He needed to know for sure the man was in his right mind when Seb truly made love to him for the first time.

He took his time, enjoying the deep, passionate kiss he shared with Jared. Of their own accord, Seb's hands began to wander down Jared's back to cup and squeeze the perfect ass. With a light covering of peach fuzz, Jared's butt fuelled even more fantasies.

Jared broke the kiss and began working his way down Seb's neck before continuing on to his chest. Seb couldn't hold back the groan as Jared's lips surrounded the sensitive, pebbled nub of his nipple.

The farther down Jared travelled, the hornier Seb became. He put his hands on Jared's shoulders, gently coaxing him towards his cock. His hips jerked upward when Jared's teeth scraped through his pubic hair.

"God, that's nice." Seb bent his legs at the knee and spread his thighs as Jared continued southward. "Turn around."

Jared sat up and looked at Seb. "Huh?"

"Let me suck your cock while you suck mine."

Further confusion seemed to settle in Jared's expression. "Why would you do that?"

"Suck you?"

"Yeah."

Seb shrugged. "Because I know it'll make you feel good."

"I've never..."

Seb sat up and pulled Jared into his arms. "No one's ever given you a blow job?"

Jared shook his head.

No longer concerned with his own needs, Seb lay Jared back on the bed. "Let me enlighten you."

Seb started at Jared's nipples, taking first one and then the other into his mouth. He sucked, licked and bit the pale brown discs until they were red and swollen. Seb sat back on his heels and admired the blissful expression on Jared's angelic face. "You like that?"

"Yes."

Satisfied, Seb turned his attention to the long, thin cock that bobbed against Jared's stomach. He repositioned himself until he was on his stomach. He braced his elbows on the mattress and held Jared's bent legs apart. Starting as close to the mattress as he could get, Seb slid his tongue up the crevice of Jared's ass, stopping to circle his lover's puckered hole.

"Oh!" Jared gasped.

Seb promised himself he'd make a feast out of Jared's ass later, but first he intended to give the younger man his first blow job. He knew his skills were rusty, but Jared didn't seem to notice as Seb took as much of the cock into his mouth as he could.

Jared's entire body began to move, writhing in apparent ecstasy as Seb lavished the head with attention. The taste of Jared's pre-cum exploded on Seb's tongue as he lapped up the leaking essence.

Seb felt Jared grab handfuls of his hair as he began a smooth rhythm up and down the length of his lover's erection. He blindly reached for the bottle of lube and slicked his fingers. With his mouth still wrapped around Jared's cock, he began massaging the tight pucker of the gorgeous man's ass.

"I can't. Oh, shit. I can't..."

The first splash of cum on the back of his throat prompted Seb to pull off Jared's length enough to taste the gift he was being given. Jared's body bucked as strings of cum filled Seb's mouth.

It was a first not only for Jared, but Seb as well. Sucking cock had never been all that pleasurable to him. He much preferred to see the eyes of his lovers staring up at him while they sucked his. Not only had he enjoyed giving Jared head, but he knew he'd quickly become addicted to the man's seed.

Above him on the bed, Jared panted, his fingers still wound around strands of Seb's hair.

"Am I dead?" Jared eventually asked.

Seb knew the feeling well. He chuckled as he worked his way up Jared's body to lie beside him. "Feels like it, doesn't it?"

"That was... Oh my God."

Seb cradled Jared against his chest. He felt Jared's hand brush against his cock before wrapping around it. Seb reached down and stilled Jared's hand. "Sleep, babe. There will be plenty of time to play later."

"But you didn't..."

"Shhh, I'm fine." Surprisingly, he was. Had he ever felt satisfied simply by giving a lover pleasure without expecting something in return?

Seb continued to think about it long after Jared had fallen asleep. He wasn't sure what it meant, but he had a sneaking suspicion.

* * * *

Seb sat naked on his bed, surrounded by the letters Rick had sent Jared. He tried to keep his anger aimed at Rick. Although he wished Jared would have shown them to him when he'd received them, he couldn't imagine how scared his lover had been.

"Is this all of them?" he finally asked.

"Yeah."

The letter describing in detail what Rick planned to do to Jared when he got out of jail still had Seb's skin crawling. They were definitely not the writings of a sane man. "We have to give these to Detective Long."

Jared nodded. "I know."

"We should also go down to Lubbock so you can file charges against Bill for rape and assault."

Jared nodded again. He hadn't looked up from petting a sleeping Jelly Bean since he'd handed Seb the letters. "Do you think they'll let me get into my house?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Because Rick had the landlord take my name off and put his on instead. After he showed up, he wouldn't let me out of the house. I hadn't been able to get a real job, but I was mowing lawns for people. Rick said I couldn't do that anymore because I might get stupid and tell someone he was living with me."

Seb set the most recent letter down and pulled Jared onto his lap. "Did you ever try to get away?"

Jared nodded. "Once. He found me though. He took me home and tied me up. I was like that for almost a week. He wouldn't feed Jelly Bean. She got so skinny. He said the next time I tried to get away, he'd kill her and make me eat her."

Jared nuzzled his face against Seb's neck. "I tried to get Jelly Bean to run away. I would put her outside after he left the house and pray that she'd run, but she never did. She'd sit at the screen door and meow for me."

"Jelly Bean loves you."

"Yeah. Sometimes I wished she didn't though."

Seb swallowed around the lump in his throat. He knew exactly what Jared was talking about. The tears in Alexander's eyes as he looked out the back window of the social worker's car still haunted him.

Knowing there was nothing he could say to make Jared feel better, Seb continued to hold him in silence. He knew the road ahead wouldn't be easy for either one of them. Not only would Jared have to sit in front of a courtroom and tell what had happened to him at

the hands of Rick and Bill, but Seb would have to hear it as well. How would he keep himself from going after the two men with intent to kill?

Seb knew he needed to tell everyone to keep their eyes open for Bill. Until the man was behind bars, Seb didn't plan to let Jared out of his sight. With a building full of trained bodyguards, he knew Three Partners was better equipped than the police at tracking Bill down.

He noticed how quiet Jared had become. He glanced down and realised his lover was asleep. With things to take care of, Seb gently laid Jared on the bed, before covering him up. Before starting on his to-do list, he took several moments to stare at the sleeping man. Even in sleep, Jared didn't look peaceful. The demons that continued to invade his dreams must be stopped.

Seb knew from experience it would take more than sending the two men to prison. Jared would need years of therapy and love to settle him into a peaceful existence. It was a good thing Seb was a patient man where Jared was concerned, because he had a strong feeling things would get worse before they could get better.

* * * *

After taking Jared to the police station to talk to Detective Long, Seb pulled in front of Three Partners. He squeezed Jared's hand. "You understand why we need to ask for their help, right?"

Jared lifted Seb's hand and kissed it. "I understand."

Seb smiled. He wasn't sure if Jared's constant affection was still due to the ordeal he'd suffered the previous evening or if his lover was like a kid with a new toy. It didn't matter to Seb anymore. He didn't plan on complaining a bit.

After years of closing himself off, Seb was enjoying his new-found feelings for the man. He tilted Jared's chin up for a deep kiss. There was something about the consuming way Jared kissed him that made Seb hard every time.

"You ready?"

"Do they know we're coming? What if they're busy?"

Seb laughed. "They know, but that doesn't always mean anything. At any given moment you can pretty much expect at least two of them to be having some form of sex."

"We should definitely call them then."

Seb shook his head and opened his door. "We'll be fine. Come on."

He led Jared up the steps and unlocked the front door. "Hello?"

"Back here," Amir called.

Seb noticed Jared's reluctance. "It'll be fine. Just tell them what you told the detective."

Jared planted his feet and pulled Seb back. "Will you tell them?"

As much as he wanted to make the situation easier for Jared, he knew it wasn't the best thing to do. "The more you tell your story, the easier it will become."

"Okay."

They entered the living room hand in hand. Mac, Nicco and Amir were all tangled together on the big sectional couch. Nicco, who was lying with his head in Mac's lap, reached for the remote and turned off the TV. "Holy Hell. What happened?"

Amir pushed Nicco's feet off his lap and Nicco got into a sitting position. "Have a seat."

Seb led Jared over to the small section of the L-shaped sectional and sat. "There was an incident at the gas station last night."

"What kind of incident?" Mac asked, his eyes narrowing.

Seb knew the look well. Mac was gearing up for a fight with whoever had hurt Jared. He put his hand on Jared's thigh. "Jared?"

Jared twined his fingers through Seb's. "Bill, Rick's brother, paid me a visit. He wore a ski mask, but I know it was him."

"You've met Rick's brother before last night?"

Jared nodded.

Seb could tell his lover was becoming embarrassed, but somehow, he needed to get it through Jared's head that it wasn't something he should be embarrassed by or feel guilty for. He kissed the side of Jared's head. "You can do it."

Jared cleared his throat. "He used to do stuff to me when he was in town to see Rick."

"Stuff? You mean like the stuff Rick did?" Mac questioned.

"Mmm hmm. Sometimes they did it to me together, but most of the time, Rick would go out and leave me alone with Bill. He's married and his wife wouldn't let him do certain things," Jared added.

Seb had been surprised by that nugget of information when Jared told Detective Long. Not only was Bill a rapist, but a cheater as well. For some reason, Seb felt sorry for the man's wife.

"Did the police catch him?" Nicco asked.

Seb decided to give Jared a break. "Not yet. We just left the police station." He glanced down at Jared. "It seems Rick's been sending Jared letters. He told him he'd asked Bill to pay him a visit. We gave the letters to the detective."

"How'd Rick get your address?" Mac sat up further on the couch, resting his forearms on his thighs.

"I don't know. Detective Long said his lawyer might have given it to him off the paperwork I had to fill out when I pressed charges."

"I think we need to check up on Sutcliff's attorney."

Seb nodded. "That's what the detective said as well. I'm taking Jared down to Lubbock to officially press charges down there as well."

"When?" Mac asked.

"This afternoon," Seb informed his boss.

"You need backup?" Amir asked, sitting up straighter.

Seb grinned. He knew Amir missed his days in the field. "Thanks, but I can handle it. We thought you guys might want to inform the men here at the agency and in the dorms to keep their eyes open though."

"You got a picture?"

Seb nodded at Mac and handed him the folded piece of paper from his pocket. "Long pulled that up for us."

"So Bill Sutcliff has a record?" Mac asked, taking the picture before Amir could get to it.

"Yeah, domestic dispute charges, but no convictions." Seb squeezed Jared's hand to make sure his lover was still with him.

Amir whistled when the mug shot was finally passed to him. "Creepy-looking dude."

Seb agreed one hundred percent. Jared had been right on the money when he'd talked about Bill's soulless eyes. With the greasy brown and grey hair and the scruffy beard, Bill looked like he'd be right at home on a street corner panhandling spare change.

Every time Seb thought about the man forcing himself on Jared it made him not only sick to his stomach but mad as hell. "Tell the guys there's no need to go easy on him if they find him lurking around the dorm."

Amir smiled. "I don't think you'll need to worry about that." Amir turned his attention to Jared. "You may have only been here for a short time, but we've all become incredibly fond of you."

"Not too fond, I hope," Seb warned with only a trace of mirth in his voice.

Amir winked. "Some more than others, but fond nonetheless."

Seb rolled his eyes. "Anyway, we're leaving for Lubbock from here. We'll probably spend the night at a hotel and be back sometime tomorrow."

Seb had one more thing he needed to discuss with his friends, but thought it best if he did it without Jared in the room. "Is there any of that turkey or ham left?"

All three men laughed.

"We've got it coming out our ears. Amir's been threatening to make ham salad, turkey salad, turkey soup... Hell, I could go on and on. The man's like that dude from Forest Gump with that shit," Nicco said.

"Would you mind if we fix a couple of sandwiches to eat on the way?" Seb asked.

"Not at all. Help yourself," Nicco told him.

Seb kissed the side of Jared's head. "Would you mind, babe?"

"No. Not at all." Jared stood. "Will you mind if I have to look around for stuff?"

Amir shook his head. "Turkey and ham are in the fridge, of course, bread's on the counter, sandwich bags in the middle drawer on the left side of the island."

After Jared left to fix their lunch, Seb addressed his friends. "I hate to ask, but I was wondering if the agency has any available jobs Jared could do? I don't like the idea of him working at that gas station anymore."

"Don't blame you," Mac said. "But I think the only thing we're advertising for is custodial help for the dorms. I don't know how Jared would feel about that."

"Nothing wrong with custodial work. I'm sure he'd be thrilled, plus it would solve our transportation issue."

Mac rubbed his jaw. "Tell you what. You tell Jared we'll pay him two hundred and fifty bucks a week plus rent. We'll even throw in cable television."

"What're his hours?" Seb asked.

"Days, Monday thru Friday, ten to five, an hour for lunch."

Seb grinned at Mac. "Pretty cushy hours."

Mac shrugged. "Can't vacuum too early in the morning or I'll have some pissed off guys. Those hours should be more than adequate to get the job done. I'll send a list of duties along with the employment paperwork out to the dorm with Amir on Monday morning."

"Sounds good. Thanks."

Mac waved his hand. "It's a job that needs doing, and I feel better about giving it to someone I already know."

Jared came back into the room carrying four sandwiches. "I hope this is okay."

Nicco chuckled. "Okay? You've just saved me a day's worth of turkey gumbo."

Amir gave the back of Nicco's head a playful slap. "You like my gumbo, so shut up."

"Yeah, for one meal. No one wants to eat leftovers for an entire week," Nicco argued.

"Fine. You figure out what to do with them," Amir countered.

Seb decided it was a good time to leave. The three men often argued just so they could make up, and he didn't think Jared was ready to witness either of them. "You ready?"

Jared's gaze went from Amir and Nicco to Seb. "Yeah."

Seb stood. "I'll see you Monday, Mac."

Mac smiled and nodded. He also knew what was coming and it didn't appear he minded one bit.

Seb led Jared out of the building and to the El Camino. "Don't pay them any mind. It's a game to them."

"A game?" Jared asked, getting in the car.

"Argue and then make up."

"Oh."

Jared still had a confused expression on his face. Seb continually forgot Jared hadn't been exposed to normal relationships. He pulled away from the kerb and headed out of town. "When two people, or in their case, three people are together all the time, it's normal to have occasional disagreements. The difference is that when you really care about the person you're arguing with, it's natural to then eventually make up."

Seb glanced at Jared and winked. "Usually the making up involves time in bed making love."

"Oh," Jared said like he understood. "So Nicco and Amir weren't really mad at each other?"

Seb shook his head. "Naw. They're all probably making up as we speak."

Jared grinned and rubbed his hand across Seb's thigh. "That making up thing sounds like fun."

Seb bit the inside of his cheek as Jared's hand roamed higher on his leg. He'd made the decision in the wee hours of the morning to hold off fucking Jared until the ordeal with Rick and Bill was over.

Once Jared knew he was no longer in danger from the two men, he would be better equipped to make the decision on whether or not to take their relationship to that next level. Seb just hoped he could hold off that long. There wasn't a minute of the day he didn't think about driving his cock deep into the younger man's ass.

When Jared's hand began groping Seb's cock through the tight material of his jeans, Seb knew he'd have to put a stop to it. He reached down and moved Jared's hand back to his leg. "It's hard enough to concentrate on the road with you sitting so close to me. Keep that up and I'll drive us into the ditch."

"Sorry." Even though Jared said the words, Seb caught the grin on his lover's lips.

* * * *

The closer they got to Lubbock, the more uneasy Jared started to feel. He knew he needed to get his mind off his old life with Rick and Bill, or he'd completely psych himself out. Since playing with Seb wasn't an option, he decided it might be the perfect time to get the bigger man to open up about his past.

"You still haven't told me about Alexander. Do you still keep in touch with him?"

The car swerved a little before Seb righted it again. "He's dead."

Jared held his breath, afraid he'd upset Seb. He should have never brought it up. He looked out the passenger window, but began rubbing his hand in soothing circles on Seb's thigh.

Seb didn't say anymore, but he did thread his fingers through Jared's. They rode in silence for several miles before Seb finally spoke. "Mac said to ask you if you'd be interested

in the custodial job at the dormitory? He said he'd pay you two hundred and fifty a week plus rent."

A thousand dollars a month, plus rent? Jared was immediately suspicious of the offer. "Did you ask him to give me a job?"

Seb shrugged. "I asked if he had anything available." Seb glanced at Jared. "Mac's a businessman. Believe me, he wouldn't hire you if he didn't have the work."

"But a thousand dollars? Why do I need that kind of money?" Jared had never in his life even seen that much money. No way would he ever have dreamt he could make that much in just one month, especially since he didn't have to pay rent.

"Don't forget the government will take a good chunk of it. You should save some of it. Maybe someday you'd like to buy a car or have new clothes," Seb suggested.

"Or a house!" Jared got so excited he clapped his hands together. "One that wasn't a rental, so I could paint the walls."

"You don't like the dorm?" Seb asked.

"Sure, I like it, but everyone has to have a dream, right?"

"And yours is to buy a house?"

Jared nodded. "It may sound silly to you, but I've always dreamed of living in a peaceful place. A space where I don't have to hear people yelling at me. A place where I can feel safe."

Seb reached for Jared's hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss. "That doesn't sound silly at all. I hope you get it."

"What about you? Have you ever wanted a house?"

Seb shook his head. "I've moved around a lot, so it's better not to get too attached to one place."

"Oh." Jared's stomach started churning. Did Seb's statement include getting attached to people, too? Maybe he was being naïve, but he thought he and Seb were really starting to connect. He'd even hoped that someday they might share a house. *Stupid*. That's what he got for thinking too much.

* * * *

By the time they finished at the police station, Jared was wrecked, but at least a few things had been cleared up. According to the police, Bill had visited his brother in jail on several occasions. The detective they spoke to guessed Bill took the letters from Rick and mailed them to Jared.

Although Seb hated that Jared had received them in the first place, at least there was something substantial to tie Bill's actions to Rick. Thankfully they'd given the letters and envelopes to Detective Long earlier that morning. The detective in Lubbock said he'd get with Long about fingerprinting the pieces of paper.

With Jared glued to his side, Seb stopped at a stop sign and kissed the top of his lover's head. "You sure you feel up to going by your old place? We can always call it a day and do it in the morning."

Jared shook his head. "I don't want to stay here tonight. If I had my way, I'd never come back, but I know that's not going to happen."

After what Jared had just gone through, Seb hated the idea of the younger man testifying in front of a roomful of people. Now he knew why Jackie and Bram were so worried about Brier testifying. Not only would Jared have to suffer through the two trials in Texas, but most likely they would then transfer Rick to Oklahoma where he'd stand trial for the rapes he committed at the psychiatric hospital where he'd met Brier and Jared.

"Do you have a key to the house?" Seb asked.

"No, but I know where Rick hid one for Bill to use."

Against his better judgement, Seb followed Jared's directions to the house. When he pulled into the drive, he wanted to break down in tears. He'd never seen a more depressing place in his life. Even his mother, the drug whore, had lived in a better place.

The entire paint-bare house leant towards the side like it could topple over at any minute. He glanced at Jared and noticed the man was looking straight at him, no doubt, to see his reaction to the place. "You ready to do this?"

Jared nodded. "The rent was cheap. When I got out of the hospital, no one wanted to hire me. I managed to get into this place by going to one of the local churches for help. It sucked, but it was mine, at least for a while."

Until Rick moved in. He turned and wrapped his arms around Jared. "If it gets to be too much, tell me."

"I will." Jared tilted his chin up, obviously in need of a kiss.

Seb had no problem fulfilling that need for his lover. He put all his compassion and feelings into each swipe of his tongue, hoping it would be enough to settle the younger man.

Pulling back, he rubbed his nose across Jared's. "Let's get this done and get the hell out of town."

"Good idea."

They exited the car and Jared gestured to the porch. "Have a seat. I'll go find the key. Last time I saw it, Rick hid it in the shed out back."

"Want me to help you look?" Seb asked.

"No. I'll get. You might make sure someone else hasn't already moved in though." Jared walked around the side of the house.

Seb stood on the decaying porch for several minutes before deciding to knock on the front door. With every wrap of his knuckles, he thought the fucking thing would fall off its hinges.

Satisfied the place was empty, he sat on one of the cement steps leading up to the porch. He heard clattering behind the house and then silence. He figured Jared must've finally found what he was looking for.

After several more minutes and still no sign of Jared, Seb stood and wandered around the side of the house. The shed door, if you could even call the dilapidated building a shed, stood wide open. "Jared?"

When he received no answer, Seb stepped foot inside the dank smelling building. His stomach sank when he realised the shed was empty. He turned and rushed back outside. "Jared!"

Seb studied his surroundings. He knew Jared wouldn't have left on his own. He raced to the alley behind the shed and looked both ways. Not a car in sight. He tried to think back. Had he heard a car start? *Fuck*. The neighbourhood was fairly typical with cars driving by, he probably wouldn't have even given a starting car a second thought.

Seb ran down the one-way alley to one of the paved streets. "Jared!"

Knowing the police could help him canvass more area that he could alone, Seb hurried back to the El Camino. He grabbed his phone out of the glove compartment and dialled 9-1-1.

Seb knew he'd never forgive himself for failing to protect the one person on earth he loved. He swallowed around the lump in his throat. Why had it taken his lover's disappearance to realise the full extent of his feelings for Jared?

Seb shook his head as the operator came on the line. There would be plenty of time to punish himself. His number one priority was to find Jared.

Chapter Six

Jared was searching the empty flowerpots for the key, when he felt a presence behind him. At first he thought it was Seb until a hand covered his mouth at the same time a knife blade was held against his throat.

"Make one sound, and I'll kill you right here," Bill growled in Jared's ear.

He had no doubt Bill would do it. Slipping back into his past, Jared allowed himself to be turned and pushed out of the shed. He felt the point of the knife dig into the skin of his back with every step.

In the alley, two houses down, sat Bill's old, rusted car. Jared wondered where Bill planned to take him.

"Stop," Bill ordered. He unlocked the trunk and gave Jared a shove. "Get in."

Like he always had, Jared did what he was told, afraid of the repercussions if he didn't follow orders. The trunk was completely empty, not even a blanket to cushion his body, as he was shut inside the cold, dark place.

Jared remembered the small space he used to squeeze into when he was a child. He wrapped his arms around his legs and pulled them to his chest. As the car pulled out, Jared's head smacked against the hard metal underneath, the smell of the exhaust slowly seeping into the confined space. Maybe he'd get lucky and die of carbon monoxide poisoning before Bill had a chance to hurt him again.

* * * *

Seb rubbed his eyes. He'd spent the last seven hours driving the streets of Lubbock and the surrounding communities, hoping to spot Bill's blue, 1978 Ford Fairmont. He was lucky the police had not only given him a description of the car but the licence plate number as well.

The phone beside him rang and he grabbed it up, hoping for word. The caller ID dashed his hopes. "Hey."

"Anything?" Mac asked.

"No. You?"

"Not yet. Why don't you come back to the hotel and we can organise the men."

"I can't. I can't stop until I find him." Commotion in the background got Seb's attention.

"What's going on?"

Mac didn't answer right away. Seb could hear snippets of conversation between Amir and Nicco, but not enough to know what the hell was going on. He definitely heard Bill's name mentioned.

"Mac! What the fuck's happening?" he asked, exasperated.

"They found Sutcliff's car at a truck stop outside of Santa Rosa, New Mexico. That puts him over the state line, straight into federal jurisdiction."

Why would he take Jared back to New Mexico? Seb knew there was something he was missing. "Do we have anyone investigating Bill's past? There's got to be a reason he'd transport Jared over state lines instead of just kill..."

Seb swerved to the side of the road. He opened his door and threw up what little he had in his stomach. For hours he'd fought himself to remain positive. He couldn't let thoughts of what Bill might do to Jared deter him from the task at hand. The important thing was to keep looking until he found the man he loved.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and sat up. "I'm on my way to Santa Rosa."

"Wait right where you are. There's no sense in all of us driving separately. I'll send someone by to pick you up. Maybe you can get a few hours of sleep on the drive. You're not going to be much good to us if you're asleep on your feet," Mac informed him.

Seb gave Mac directions to the nearest strip mall. "I'll wait ten minutes. If someone's not here, I'm leaving."

Seb shoved his phone into his jacket pocket. He reached across the seat and opened the glove box, grabbing his Glock before driving the short distance to the shopping centre. After parking under a security light, he got out and dug out his shoulder holster from behind the seat.

He tore off his jacket and fit the holster into place before slipping the black Glock into place. Seb shrugged back into the jacket, concealing his weapon. He locked up the El Camino and waited for his ride.

As he paced the area beside the car, he realised he hadn't received an answer to his question about Bill's past. Surely Mac had someone digging into it.

A non-descript sedan pulled up and Seb got in. He was only a little surprised to see Archer Adams behind the wheel. "Aren't you supposed to be on tour with Keifer?"

Archer shook his head. "Keifer decided to cancel his next few gigs. He felt he needed some time back with his family in Des Moines."

"And you didn't follow him?" Seb asked as Archer tore out of the parking lot.

"He didn't want me there. Besides, without those god-awful clothes, hair and makeup, he doesn't look like a rock star at all. He assured me most people from his hometown don't even know Jimmy Cook is Keifer Zane."

Seb put the seat back and the backrest down until he was in a comfortable position. He didn't know if he could sleep, but he knew Mac was right about him getting some rest. It was after midnight and he was hours away from Santa Rosa.

"So this kid means something to you?" Archer asked.

"His name's Jared. And yes, he means everything to me." There. He'd finally admitted his feelings out loud. Seb hated himself for telling Archer before he'd even had a chance to tell Jared. He'd been a stubborn sonofabitch, refusing to come to terms with how he felt. That would all change when he found his lover. Seb planned to spend the rest of his life making sure Jared was not only safe, but his number one priority.

"You know this isn't an easy line of work to be in and hold a relationship together," Archer commented.

Seb knew Archer was speaking from experience. Since Archer's break-up from fellow bodyguard Joe Rinehart, the man seemed to have sworn off men all together.

"I know, but Jared means more than a damn job. I'll quit if I have to."

Archer whistled. "Never thought I'd hear those words come out of your mouth, boss."

"Never thought I'd be in the position to say them."

Archer reached over and gave Seb's thigh a thump. "Get some sleep. I'll get you to Santa Rosa."

* * * *

By the time Jared felt the car stop, he'd already thrown up twice. He'd searched in vain for something, anything to defend himself with, but Bill had done a good job of cleaning out the space.

When the trunk opened, Jared wasn't surprised to find it had gotten dark outside. Staring up at the face of his kidnapper, Jared prayed Bill would kill him quick.

"Wake up, pussy boy," Bill cackled.

Bill grabbed the front of Jared's red coat and pulled him out of the trunk. Jared had to blink several times before he believed what he saw. He was surrounded by dilapidated trucks and trailers in what seemed to be some kind of junk yard.

Before he could ask, the knife was once again against his throat as Bill marched him towards one of the trailers, half sunk into the ground. Was that to be his grave? Where was Seb? Was anyone even searching for him?

"Here we go. Home sweet home," Bill said, opening the back door of the semi trailer.

Bill pulled a lighter out of his pocket and lit a kerosene lamp just inside the door. As soon as Jared saw the cage, he knew. It was the same cage Rick had used to train him when he'd first moved himself in with Jared.

"No!" Jared began swinging his arms, no longer caring if Bill slit his throat. He'd rather die than go back in there.

He felt the satisfying crunch of Bill's nose as his flailing fist connected.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Bill howled, grabbing Jared by the hair and slamming his head into the side of the trailer.

Jared's legs gave way and he slumped to the floor. In a fit of pure rage, Bill began kicking Jared across the trailer towards the cage. Jared tried to wipe the blood that ran into his eyes as he moved to get away from the punishing kicks.

"Goddamn my brother. I wanted to just fuck ya and kill ya but noooo, he insisted you be made to suffer like he's suffering."

In the end, Jared crawled into the cage to get away from the constant pain of Bill's steel-toed boots. Bill aimed one last kick at Jared's ass before slamming and padlocking the door. Jared curled himself into a protective ball as Bill continued to hurl obscenities at him.

Bill eventually seemed to calm down and the trailer quieted. Jared flinched as he heard Bill's zipper lowering. *No. Please. No.*

Jared squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the cage door to open once again. He swallowed the bile rising in his throat as he heard the all too familiar sound of Bill jacking off. Christ, the fucker was getting off on seeing Jared in the cage. He remembered Bill and Rick both standing over his cage doing the same thing on many occasions.

Bill let out a loud grunt as warmth splashed across the hand Jared was using to shield his head. More strings landed in his hair, and Jared lost the battle. He scooted as close to the back of the cage as he could and vomited.

"Oh, fuck. That's nasty," Bill growled, kicking the cage.

Jared didn't dare wipe his mouth or the blood from the fresh cut on his head, instead choosing to keep himself shielded as much as possible from Bill's wrath. He heard Bill's zipper slide back into place and breathed a sigh of relief.

"I gotta go ditch the car, but I'll be back, pussy boy. I'm not near done with you yet."

The light was extinguished and the trailer door shut, leaving Jared alone in the dark. He wiped his mouth on the front of his shirt and reached up to feel his forehead. The cut was only about an inch long. Jared was confident it wasn't life-threatening, although he was starting to wish it were.

The cage wasn't tall enough to allow him to sit up, so he remained where he was. *Think.* He reached out and ran his hand over the familiar grid-pattern of the dog crate. Frustrated, he kicked his feet against the wire mesh.

Jared stilled. Did he feel a little give in the wall or was it his imagination? He kicked out again, wishing the cage was big enough to use the full force of his legs. Yes.

Jared manoeuvred himself as far against the opposite side as he could get, giving his legs a little more room, and kicked again. He felt the contact rattle his bones and travel up to his aching head, but he was now positive he could eventually free himself.

If he was going to die, it wouldn't be in the fucking cage.

* * * *

Jared knew his time was running out. It had taken all his strength to kick his way out of the cage. In the end, he'd managed to open a large enough area to squeeze through. He was grateful for his jacket. Although the puffy down had made it a tight fit, the coat protected his skin from the sharp, broken wires.

He sat with his back against the wall, trying to figure out what to do next. He couldn't get the images of Seb finding his dead body out of his mind. Jared hadn't said it, but he thought he might be in love with Seb. He remembered how closed-off Seb was when they'd first met. Jared hadn't managed to completely break down the man's walls, but he would get there, even if it took him the rest of his life.

The thought reminded him that he may never see Seb again. What if he died? Besides Seb and Brier, would anyone else care? Although he'd managed to get out of the cage, the trailer door was locked, trapping him once again. It seemed to be the way of things for him. Every time he managed to escape one horrible situation another seemed to find him.

No. He may have laid down and took it in the past, but he had something to fight for now. He had Seb, and Jared knew he'd fight to the death for one more kiss from the man. There had to be something he could use as a weapon. He began crawling around the dark floor of the trailer, wincing as a sliver of wood pierced the skin of his palm.

He sat back down and blindly tried to remove the splinter, wishing he had some light. *Light! The lamp.* Jared felt along the wall until his hand bumped the lamp.

He could hear the fuel in the base of the lamp but he wasn't sure how to get at it. Jared began twisting and pulling the various pieces until he'd almost completely disassembled the thing. The smell of kerosene almost overwhelmed him in the enclosed space, but he knew he needed to be ready. If he was lucky, he'd get one chance at it.

As he sat in the dark, hoping Bill would return, Jared realised that for the first time in his life he wanted to live. He ran his fingers over the thin scars on his wrist. Twice he'd tried to end his pain and he'd failed. Maybe if he'd known someone like Seb, things would have been different. Maybe he wouldn't have let himself be tortured and kept prisoner by Rick when he'd caught up with him in Lubbock.

Jared knew hanging his hopes of a future on one man wasn't the smart thing to do, but just knowing there was more out there than what he'd grown up with was enough.

The time seemed to creep by until he heard it, the rumble of a semi pulling up next to the trailer. Jared got to his feet and stood against the wall. He poised the open lamp at approximately the right height and held his breath as the padlock was released on the door.

The door swung open and right on cue, Bill flicked the lighter to life. "I'm home..." That was as far as Bill got before Jared doused the front of his tormenter with kerosene. A ball of fire erupted as Bill screamed, trying to knock the fire from his face and chest.

Jared kicked out with all his strength and Bill toppled to the ground. Jared ran out of the trailer and aimed the rest of the fuel at Bill's rolling, burning body. He dropped the lamp to the ground and ran to Bill's truck. He struggled to breathe as he climbed into the cab and locked the doors.

With no keys, Jared knew he couldn't go anywhere, but at least he was safe. He reached for the CB radio and turned it on. "Hello? Please, can someone help me?"

* * * *

Seb's phone woke him about an hour after he'd drifted off. "Yeah."

"They've found Jared," informed him. "At a junk yard outside Plainview, Texas."

Seb swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Is he...?"

"They think he's okay. He called from Bill's semi. The police are on their way."

Seb looked at Archer. "Turn around. They've found Jared outside Plainview."

"We just passed it about twenty minutes ago," Archer said, checking traffic before cutting across the median to head in the opposite direction.

"Give me directions to the junk yard." Seb relayed them to Archer as Amir rattled them off. "We should be there in about ten minutes."

Archer got the hint and stomped on the gas.

Seb rocked back and forth in his seat, anxious to make sure for himself that Jared was okay.

"What about Sutcliff?" Archer asked.

"I don't know. Right now, I don't care. All I want is to see Jared."

Archer nodded, his eyes still on the road. "We'll get you there."

After several hair-raising turns, Archer pulled the car into the junk yard, the area illuminated by the headlights of around six police cars. Seb jumped out and ran towards the gathered policemen. "Where is he?"

One of the uniformed officers pointed to the semi. "He won't come out."

"Yeah he will." Seb ran to the truck and stepped up on the running board. Jared sat, staring straight ahead, dried blood covering the side of his face. Seb's chest squeezed at the blank expression on his lover's face.

"Jared?" he yelled through the glass. "Jared, baby? Are you okay?"

Jared blinked several times before turning to look out the window. It seemed to take a few moments before Seb's presence registered. He reached out and unlocked the truck door.

Seb stepped down, opened the door and pulled a dazed Jared into his arms. Neither of them spoke. Seb didn't know that he'd ever held anyone tighter or with more feeling. He knew he couldn't let another moment slip by without telling the man just what he meant to him.

"I love you," he whispered into Jared's ear.

Jared started to sag towards the ground. "I love you, too."

Seb easily lifted the man into his arms and looked around for somewhere warm to take his lover. Jared wrapped his arms around Seb's neck and held on.

Seb passed the cops, still gathered in a clump outside a trailer. "Have you called an ambulance?"

One of the policemen nodded. "This guy's obviously dead. How's he doing?" he asked, gesturing to Jared.

"I haven't had a chance to check yet. I'm going to take him to the car until the paramedics arrive." Seb noticed the charred body on the ground. He couldn't believe he hadn't recognised the smell in the air earlier.

"I did that," Jared said, gazing up at Seb.

"It's okay, babe."

Jared's focus went to Bill's body. "I did that. I can't believe I did that."

The policeman stepped towards them. "Is he ready to give his statement?"

Seb shook his head. "Let's wait until he's checked out. Looks like he's taken a pretty good hit to the head."

"I'm not crazy," Jared said.

"I know you're not. I just think you need a little time before you start answering questions." Seb turned away from the policeman and carried Jared towards the sedan.

Archer was waiting for them and opened the back passenger door as they neared. "How is he?"

Seb nodded. He still couldn't get the picture of the burned body out of his mind. Right or wrong, he wanted to know where Jared's courage had come from. Seb figured few people who'd been through the things Jared had, would be able to not only stand against their attacker but kill them in the process.

Seb laid Jared on the seat and ran around to the other side of the car. He got in and rested Jared's head on his lap. "What happened to your head, babe?"

The corner of Jared's mouth tilted up just a fraction. "I punched him in the nose and then he ran my head into the side of the trailer." Jared actually smiled. "It was worth it."

Seb shook his head. "You absolutely amaze me." He leant down and gave Jared a deep, but short, kiss.

The ambulance pulled into the junk yard followed by several more police cars and sedans Seb knew were carrying Three Partners employees. "We're gonna get you all checked out, okay?"

Jared nodded. "Then will you take me home?"

"I will as soon as I can, but you need to talk to the police first."

Jared averted his eyes and shook his head. "I don't want to go to jail." He looked up at Seb, tears filling his eyes. "He put me in a cage."

One of the paramedics started to open Seb's door, but he pulled it shut again and held his hand up to the man, silently asking for a moment. He pulled Jared into his lap. "Sweetheart, I don't know what went on today, but I do know none of it was your fault. There's no way in hell you're going to jail."

"When you told me you loved me, it was before you saw what I did to Bill. Do you..."

"Yes, I still love you." Seb hugged Jared, placing a kiss beside the fresh cut on his forehead. "I know this might not be the time to tell you this, but I'm so incredibly proud of the way you held yourself together during all this. I'm in awe of your strength and your heart."

Jared wiped at the tears rolling down his cheeks. "I just suddenly knew I wanted to live, because for the first time in my life, I have something to live *for*."

The paramedic knocked on the window, looking pissed.

"Let's get you looked at, take care of the police and then we can go home and love on Jelly Bean."

Jared nodded, his throat working as if he was trying to swallow his tears.

Seb opened the door and helped Jared from the car and into the care of the paramedics. He walked over to Amir, Mac, Nicco and Archer who were standing to the side, watching the crime scene techs take pictures.

"What's going on? Why all the pictures?" he asked the group.

"I think they're just trying to gather evidence to strengthen the case against Rick. If Bill did act on Rick's orders, they'll try to find the connection," Mac told him.

There were large spotlights set up in and around the trailer. Seb's gaze zeroed in on the broken and twisted cage. Jared's words came back to him. He tried to imagine his lover, scared, locked in the cage. Seb felt something he'd rarely experienced. He turned away from his friends and walked into the shadows, wiping the moisture from his eyes.

Seb wasn't sure how long he stood in the dark, wondering how he could ever be strong enough to help Jared through an ordeal like he'd just been through. Being kidnapped, stuffed into a dog crate and then actually setting a man on fire? How could an already emotionally damaged person crawl out of the depths Jared must've been taken to?

Memories of Alexander assaulted him. He'd been unable to save his baby brother, but he'd been a boy himself. Seb took a deep breath. He was no longer a child, and he knew he'd do everything in his power to pull Jared out of those depths and show him that he deserved to live a life of happiness and love.

A hand landed on his shoulder. Seb turned around and was surprised to see a bandaged Jared standing in front of him. "Did the paramedics get you all fixed up?"

"Yeah." Jared gestured to his forehead. "Another butterfly bandage, a couple of bruises and some pretty deep scratches on my lower legs, but nothing I can't take care of at home. Will you go with me to talk to the detective? I don't think I want to go through it more than once, and I know you deserve to know what happened."

Seb held out his hand and smiled. "From now on, wherever you go, I go."

Chapter Seven

Jared didn't even remember getting home, but when he woke, he was snuggled against Seb's chest with Jelly Bean curled around his feet. He opened his eyes and smiled at the small lamp across the room Seb had obviously left on for him.

He didn't know how long it would take to get the images of Bill's burned body out of his mind, but he didn't feel guilty about what he'd done. Even after talking to the police, he felt no remorse.

By the time they'd finished at the police station in Lubbock, he and Seb were both dead on their feet. Jared had suggested they find a hotel and sleep, but Seb had insisted he get Jared home to Jelly Bean.

In the end, they'd both slept in the back of Archer's rented sedan for the four hour drive home. Evidently, Seb had carried him into the building and put him to bed. Jared wasn't sure if it was the stress of the previous day or the pain pill Archer had given him to combat the almost-debilitating headache he'd had after the police interview.

Jared turned his head to kiss Seb's chest. It had taken several minutes of convincing before Seb had agreed that one pill wouldn't do him harm. Just like he'd promised, Seb had been by his side the entire time. Jared could tell how much it had cost Seb to keep his temper in check as Jared described in detail what had happened.

Jared managed to scoot back far enough to study Seb's gorgeous face. He still didn't understand why such a strong, handsome man had fallen in love with him. It was obvious Seb could have any guy he wanted, he hadn't missed the covert glances Archer aimed Seb's way. *So why me?*

Still asleep, Seb reached out and pulled Jared back into his arms.

Jared let the man have his way. He knew there would be plenty of time to ogle his lover in the future. The future? *Wow. I actually feel like I have a future now.* He couldn't help but smile.

Movement at his feet told him Jelly Bean was up. Jared didn't even have to look at the clock to know it was near noon. If there was one thing that had been a constant in his life with the sweet cat, it was her feeding routine and twelve was lunch.

When he didn't immediately get up, Jelly Bean walked up the length of his body and started kneading his side. Jared flinched as the cat managed to touch one of the fresh bruises left by Bill's boot.

Seb's arms tightened. "What's wrong?"

"Jelly Bean says it's time to eat." Jared leaned back on his elbow and stared up at his lover. "You keep the bed warm, and I'll pour her some food."

"I'll do it," Seb said as he slid his arm out from under Jared.

"No you won't. You go back to sleep." Jared leaned down and playfully bit Seb's nipple, following it up with a leisurely lick.

Seb moaned and pulled Jared into a kiss, thrusting his tongue deep. Jared let his hand wander down the length of Seb's chest to his lover's hardening cock.

Seb broke the kiss and smiled. "I'm definitely up now."

Jelly Bean chose that moment to pounce on Seb's stomach, eliciting a grunt from the big strong bodyguard.

Jared chuckled. "She won't be put off. Believe me."

He gave the heavily veined erection one last squeeze before releasing it and moving towards the side of the bed. "This won't take long. Promise."

Seb rolled over and propped his head up on his hand. "Would you please bring me a bottle of water out of the fridge when you come back?"

Jared nodded and replaced the covers, hoping it would keep his side of the bed warm until he returned. Naked, he walked across the room and poured Jelly Bean's dry food into a bowl. He could feel Seb's eyes on him as he moved about the small kitchenette.

Only a short time ago, the attention would have mortified him. With Seb it was different. Seb didn't appear to be disgusted with the bruises. Jared knew they bothered him, but not for the reason he used to think.

Jared grinned to himself and put an extra sway in his step on the way back to bed. After setting his own water on the table, he handed Seb's over. "Here ya go."

Seb, who'd continued to stare at Jared, grabbed his wrist and pulled him onto the bed.

Jared laughed. "Wait. I gotta pee."

He gave Seb a quick kiss before disappearing into the bathroom. Jared stepped up to the toilet and took care of his full bladder. As he stood there, he began to wonder when Seb would make love to him. Surely it would be soon, right? Jared's cock twitched in his hand, liking the idea very much.

When he was almost to the end of his stream, he flushed the stool, shook and stepped to the sink. Damn. No wonder Seb was staring at him earlier. His entire forehead was black and blue, and his hair? *Oh man I need a shower.*

Jared fingered the two butterfly bandages on his face, reminding himself to pick more up at the store. Until he had replacements, he hated to get them wet. He eyed the bathtub. Maybe he could wash his hair without getting his face in the water? Ooh, he thought of a better idea.

He stuck his head out of the bathroom. "I stink. Will you come in and help me wash my hair?"

Seb grinned. "Can I wash your body, too?"

Jared smiled back. "If you'd like."

"Oh, I like," Seb said as he jumped out of bed and grabbed a pair of flannel pyjama pants.

Jared was sad to see the disappearance of his lover's hard cock, but the tub was only big enough for one. He turned on the faucet until the water ran hot and set the plug.

Seb walked into the room and took his turn at the toilet. "I need to call Mac later. Are you sure you're going to feel like working Monday?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" Jared still couldn't believe he'd landed such a dream job. No way would he do something to jeopardise it. He stepped into the tub, hissing as the hot water touched the cuts on his ankles.

"You okay?" Seb asked.

"Yeah. I probably should have done this earlier." Jared slowly lowered himself into the steaming bath.

Seb knelt beside the tub, trailing his fingertips in the water before trickling the warm drops over Jared's arms. "I'm sure Mac would understand if you'd like to take a few days. What you went through..."

"Was a regular day in my old life," Jared finished for him. He reached out and ran his hand over the short bristles of Seb's goatee. "I've figured something out about myself.

Despite everything, I'm pretty resilient. Especially now that I know there's more to life than what I was shown in the past."

Seb leaned over the side of the tub and kissed him. "I love you."

It was the sixth time Seb had told him, and Jared knew he'd never tire of hearing it. He still questioned it though and probably would for a long time. On the ride to the police station in Lubbock, he'd even tried to mentally list the positive things about himself Seb could've fallen for. The list just didn't add up to him.

Jared started to lie back in the water, and was quickly supported by Seb with a hand against his back. The hot water against his scalp felt so good he groaned. "That's nice."

"Hmmm, I think I like you like this," Seb said as he soaped a washcloth and rubbed it over the bruises on Jared's chest.

"Bruised?" he asked, confused.

Seb's hand stopped as he stared Jared in the eyes. "No. God, no. I meant wet and naked."

Jared could tell he'd hurt Seb's feelings. He covered Seb's hand. "I'm sorry. I mean, part of me knew that, but..."

"Shhh," Seb soothed. "Let me go get a cup so I can wash your hair."

It was obvious Seb felt uncomfortable about something. Jared wondered if it was what he'd said, the bruises on display, or perhaps the entire situation. He closed his eyes. It was a totally new experience for him to care about someone else's feelings.

The door opened and Seb stepped back inside, cup in hand. One glance at Seb and Jared knew his lover was truly upset. He sat up and turned in the tub to face Seb. "What's wrong?"

"Huh? Nothing." Seb held up the cup. "I just needed this."

Jared leaned his arms on the side of the tub and rested his chin on his hands. "Please talk to me. If I've done something, I need to know what it was."

Seb shook his head. "You haven't. Guess the last twenty-four hours just caught up with me."

Jared knew there was more to it, but their relationship was too new to rock the boat. Although he didn't say anything, Jared gave Seb a knowing look before getting back into position to have his hair washed.

Seb squeezed a good amount of shampoo into his palm before rubbing them together.

Jared closed his eyes as his lover's strong fingers scrubbed and massaged his scalp. He was so into the shampooing, Seb surprised him when he cleared his throat.

"Alexander died of AIDS when he was eight-years-old."

Jared started to turn his head towards Seb, but his lover's hands kept him in place.

"My mom shot heroin her entire pregnancy. It was a wonder Alex survived at all because, like all drug addicts, she didn't care about going to the doctor for prenatal care. She was more concerned with where she'd get her next fix."

"How old were you?" Jared asked.

"I was six when he was born, but I didn't get to see him for almost four months. When my mom went into labour, I didn't know what to do, so I called the police. It was obvious to the paramedics she was using. After Alexander was born, the state made her enter a treatment facility and put me in a foster home. The hospital tried to keep my brother alive through the withdrawals, but he was already infected with the HIV virus."

Seb removed his hands and dunked them into the water. He grabbed the cup from the side of the tub. "Tilt your head back," he instructed.

Jared did as asked, hoping Seb would continue the story.

"When Mom was released she convinced the authorities she was a changed woman. They gave her back me and Alexander." Seb poured the warm water onto Jared's hair, rinsing away the shampoo.

"Of course as soon as the state stopped watching, she went right back to it. That left me to raise Alex. I thought I was doing a pretty good job until it was time for him to start school. I knew he was a lot slower than most kids, but he wanted to go so bad that I told him I'd make it happen. I took him to the free clinic in town because you had to have shots before you could go. That's when I found out the HIV virus had become full-blown AIDS."

Jared couldn't imagine a child trying to deal with a virus some adults couldn't handle. When he didn't feel anymore water being dumped over his head, he opened his eyes. Tears pooled in Seb's eyes as he stared off into space.

"Seb?"

Seb gave his head a slight shake. "Sorry. Lost in my own thoughts there for a second."

"You don't have to talk about this if it makes you sad."

The corner of Seb's mouth tilted upward. "This is the first time I've talked about it. Ever. The clinic called Social Services, they went to my house to talk to mom, found her high

as a kite and took me and Alexander away the same day. Because he was classified as special needs, they sent him to a different foster home."

Jared couldn't imagine the two brothers being separated, especially since it sounded like Seb was the one to raise his younger brother.

"They let me see him a couple times over the next three years, but he kept getting sicker and sicker. The last time I saw him was two days before he died." Seb rubbed the moisture from his eyes. "He was mad at me for letting them separate us."

"But you know it wasn't your fault, right? I mean, you were a kid."

Seb nodded. "Part of me knows that now, but at the time I felt I'd betrayed the one person I was put on the earth to protect."

Jared wondered if that was what led Seb into a job of protecting people. "Is that why you're a bodyguard?"

One of Seb's black eyebrows rose. "What?"

"You felt you let your brother down so you're trying to make up for it by protecting the people who hire you." Something suddenly dawned on him. "Is that why you're so protective of me?"

Seb didn't say anything for several moments. He dropped the cup in the water and bowed his head. "Maybe." He took a deep breath and lifted his head. "But that's not why I love you."

Jared stared into Seb's dark eyes. "Why do you love me?"

"Why does the wind blow?" Seb reached out and cupped Jared's cheek. "It's not possible to be around you and not fall in love. After Alexander died, I thought I'd never meet another truly pure soul again, but first I was introduced to Brier, and then he brought you to me."

Jared thought of all the things he'd been through and been made to do over the years. "I love you, but I don't think I deserve you. There's nothing pure about me."

"Bullshit. Men who haven't been through half of what you've endured have become nothing but a product of their environment. Hell, the prisons are full of them. But despite everything, you still have the capacity to see the good in people. That right there is all the proof I need that your past hasn't damaged your soul."

No one had ever made him feel more special than Seb did at that moment. Jared knew he'd die before he ever did anything to prove himself unworthy of Seb's love. "Can I ask you one last question?"

"Sure."

"Will you make love to me for real?"

Seb grinned. "Oh, babe, I make love to you every time I look at you."

"Don't get me wrong, I really like that, but I was hoping for something a little more...physical," he said with a grin.

* * * *

By the time Seb finished washing Jared's hair and carrying him to bed, his lover's stomach had started to growl. "We need to feed you."

Jared pushed the robe off Seb's shoulders. "But first you need to fuck me."

Yeah, he did. Seb had held back as long as he could. The kidnapping had solidified Jared's position in Seb's life.

Seb retrieved the lube and condoms from his bedside drawer and lay down on top of Jared, bracing himself on his forearms. "Promise me you really want this? Because you know I'll give you as long as it takes for you to be sure."

Jared swept the hair out of Seb's face and smoothed it behind Seb's ears. "I've wanted this since the first night we spent together. I thought you were the one who needed time."

Seb grinned. "We both need to work on our communication abilities."

"Agreed. Now, kiss me."

Seb kissed Jared's lower lip before sucking it into his mouth. He swiped the plump flesh with the tip of his tongue and moaned when Jared's legs wrapped around him. Seb had never met a man who got as turned on by kissing as his lover.

He released the swollen lip and sealed his mouth against Jared's. Seb wanted to make sure Jared felt the difference between the things Rick had forced him to do and what Seb was about to do to the man he loved.

As their tongues played an erotic game of charge and retreat, Seb allowed his hands to wander down Jared's bruised but oh-so-soft skin. He broke the kiss and rose up enough to

lick a path down Jared's chest. He stopped briefly at Jared's nipples, giving them each attention before moving further south.

Seb made a point to kiss each of the bruises smattered across Jared's torso, willing each of them to heal quickly. With Rick in jail and Bill dead, Seb hoped to never again see another purple and blue mark on the man he loved.

When he came to the long indentation leading from Jared's lower stomach to his groin, Seb couldn't resist running his tongue along the sensual trough. Jared moaned, letting Seb know his lover had a sensitive spot. He continued to torment the shallow channel until Jared's erection slapped Seb on the cheek.

Seb glanced up at the grinning man. Taking the hint, Seb enveloped the crown of Jared's cock in his mouth. With his eyes riveted on Jared's facial expressions, Seb set about learning what truly pleased the younger man.

He was thankful Jared didn't bother hiding his reactions to the blowjob. Like most men, it seemed his young lover was most sensitive directly under the head. Seb continued to lap at the long, thin cock as he reached for the lube.

"Do you want to come now or later?" Seb asked as he rubbed some slick around the outside of Jared's hole.

"Both." Jared moaned as Seb slowly inserted the first finger.

"Ambitious." Seb pumped the lone digit in and out of Jared's body, preparing it for a second.

"Young," Jared corrected as Seb introduced the second finger.

Seb's tongue travelled to the wrinkled, but firm sac. He rubbed his goatee gently over the skin between Jared's balls and ass while sucking one of the sensitive orbs into his mouth.

"Uhhh," Jared groaned. He hooked his arms under his knees and opened himself further.

A third finger was introduced, and Seb licked his way back to the head, engulfing as much of Jared's length as he could. The salty taste of his lover's pre-cum clung to his tongue as he allowed Jared to fuck his mouth.

"Oh, shit. It's coming. I'm coming..." Jared broke off on a strangled gasp as the first string of seed hit the back of Seb's throat.

Seb backed off enough to swallow as his mouth was awash with his lover's tangy cum. He licked and kissed Jared's cock clean and reached for the condom. It wasn't until he started

to sit up that Seb realised he'd been rubbing and grinding his own cock against the sheets as he'd pleased Jared.

The realisation that he'd been so focused on giving Jared pleasure that he hadn't noticed his own body's needs, further cemented the changes in himself since he'd met the younger man. In the past, sex had been about one thing. Him getting off.

Seb sat back on his heels and ripped open the foil package. He gazed at his still-recovering lover as he rolled the condom carefully down the length of his erection. Seb knew if he wasn't careful he'd come before even entering the man. How many times had he thought about being buried deep in Jared's ass?

Seb squeezed the base of his dick in an attempt to stave his climax. Jared seemed to notice Seb's predicament and chuckled. "Yeah, keep laughing and your fun will be over, too."

"I'll have to buy you a cock ring," Jared told him while trying to keep a straight face.

The light conversation helped cool his ardour enough to release the hold on his cock. He reached for the lube and applied a generous amount to the condom, using the lightest touch possible.

From the need clearly written on his lover's face, Seb no longer worried it was too soon or Jared was doing it for the wrong reason. He repositioned until the tip of his cock rested against Jared's stretched hole.

With a firm grip on his cock, Seb slowly pushed the thick length of meat through Jared's outer ring of muscles. He wasn't even inside yet and already he could feel the sweat popping out on his forehead as inch by inch Jared's body accepted his girth.

Seb released the hold on his cock and wiped his forehead with his arm. He wondered if fucking Jared would always be this intense. The angelic expression on Jared's face as Seb rocked his way in to the hilt, was something he'd never tire of seeing. There seemed to be such peace on the man's face. Peace, Seb knew, was a long time coming.

"Okay?" he asked.

Jared nodded and squeezed his eyes shut.

The angelic expression turned to something else as Seb withdrew and drove in again. "Am I hurting you?"

Jared opened his eyes. It was then Seb saw the moisture. Seb paused mid-stroke. "Jared? Am I hurting you?"

Jared shook his head. "No. It's wonderful. More than I ever dreamed possible."

Seb leant down and kissed his lover. "You deserve this and so much more. I'm going to spend the rest of my life pleasing you in every way possible."

Jared smiled. "The rest of your life?"

Seb nodded as he braced his weight on his arms, still moving in and out of Jared's passage. "I love you."

"I love you."

With the mushy stuff said, Seb turned his concentration to giving Jared the best orgasm of his life. He knew it was a challenge he'd issue himself every day he and Jared were together.

The squeeze and pull of Jared's velvety walls around his cock was becoming too much to overcome. He knew his climax was closing in on him, but Seb wanted to make sure his lover was fully satisfied first.

"Touch yourself."

Jared grinned and released his hold on one of his legs. Seb took over and positioned both of Jared's legs over his shoulders, giving the man two hands to play.

Jared immediately went to work, pulling and plucking at his light brown nipples. He smiled coyly up at Seb. "Like this?"

Seb's rhythm increased at the playful side of his lover. Although the tableau in front of him was sexy as hell, Seb wanted more. "Let me watch you jack off."

One of Jared's blond eyebrows rose with apparent amusement. He ran one hand down his chest to slap at his bobbing erection. "Like this?"

The sound of Jared's hand slapping against the red and leaking cock, fuelled Seb's ardour further.

He repositioned both of them until most of Jared's weight was resting on his upper back and shoulders. With his feet on the mattress, Seb bent his legs and drove almost straight down in and out of Jared's hole. The new position not only allowed Seb to plunge deeper, but it put Jared's cock almost directly over the younger man's mouth.

Seb alternated his gaze between the hand pumping Jared's cock and his lover's facial expressions. As much as he loved looking down at the vision of erotic play below him, he had to remind himself of Jared's bruised and no doubt sore body.

He'd almost decided it wasn't worth taking the chance of hurting Jared, when the younger man cried Seb's name. As predicted, the strands of opaque fluid shot towards Jared's mouth and face.

Watching Jared move his head to try and catch his own seed pushed Seb over the edge. He came with a ferocity he'd never known, howling Jared's name. Seb fell to his knees and lowered Jared's legs from his shoulders as his body continued to quake. He knew there was a very strong possibility he was about to collapse and hurting Jared wasn't an option.

Although he would have loved to linger inside his lover's body, Seb knew the condom was full to the point of bursting. He wrapped his fingers around the base of the rubber and pulled out.

After a quick knot and toss to the nearby trashcan, Seb fell to the mattress. Still breathing too heavily to speak, he pulled Jared into his arms. *Damn, I love this man.*

Jared was the first to recover. He propped his chin against Seb's chest and gazed up at him. "Is it always like that?"

Seb swallowed, trying to get enough moisture into his throat to speak. "With us? Yeah, I have a feeling it'll be that and more."

"So how many times a day can you do that?" Jared asked.

Seb grinned. "I'm not as young as you are, but I imagine I might be good for twice a day. Will that keep you satisfied? I'd hate to lose you to some other young thing."

Jared slid up Seb's sweaty body to his lips. After an incredibly deep kiss, in which Seb was almost sure he'd received a tonsillectomy, Jared smiled.

"Twice works just fine for me."

Epilogue

"Morning, Brier," Seb said as his friend came into his office.

"Morning." Brier gestured to the chair. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. Have a seat." Seb had expected Brier's visit after Rick's conviction the previous morning. Jared's tormenter had been given twenty-three years in the state penitentiary, but he would be eligible for parole in fifteen years.

"Jackie and I were talking about the charges in Oklahoma."

"Yeah?" The prosecutor in Oklahoma had left it up to the victims whether or not they wanted to testify against Rick in a new trial because without their testimony, Oklahoma didn't have a case. The state of Texas had already agreed to extradite Rick to stand trial for the rapes of Brier, Jared and Peter in the mental hospital.

"I still haven't been able to convince Peter to talk, but I want to testify. The thought that Rick could be on the streets in fifteen years scares me," Brier confessed.

It scared Seb as well. There was no doubt in his mind Rick would immediately go after Jared once again upon his release. It didn't matter what face he showed the parole board, Seb knew a monster like Rick would never change. Their best break in the Texas case had been the letters Rick had sent Jared. The fingerprints and handwriting analysis proved Rick had written them, which tied Bill into the case. The prosecutor had used the letters and the kidnapping by Bill to backup Jared's testimony of his time spent at Rick's hands. The jury had been absolutely mortified by the things Jared had been forced to live through at the hands of the two brothers.

"I think that's commendable. I know Jared wants to go through with the trial in Oklahoma. It'll be a lot easier on him this time if you're standing up with him."

Brier nodded. "I was proud of Jared. I know it wasn't easy telling all those people what Rick had done to him, but he did it."

"Yes he did. I think he's changed a lot over the last couple of months," Seb agreed.

Brier stood and stuck his hands in his front pockets. "I'll let you get back to work."

Although Seb really needed to do just that, he couldn't let the moment slip by without issuing an invitation to his friend. "We're having a dinner party at our new place next weekend if you and Jackie would like to come over."

Brier laughed and scratched the top of his head. "Hmmm, well, since it's right next door, I think we could manage that."

Right next door was a little misleading since ten acres separated the two homes, but Seb knew Brier was thrilled to have Jared so close. "Great. You still helping us move on Saturday?"

"You bet."

"Thanks."

Brier nodded and left the office.

Seb sat back in his chair. The home he'd purchased was a little bigger than what they needed, but Jared had been thrilled with the two fireplaces and huge outdoor patio. Seb was happy it was so close to Jackie and Brier. Although his job didn't take him out of town often, he felt better knowing help was close by.

His phone rang, interrupting his train of thought. "Seb James."

"It's Benny Franklin."

"Hi, Mr. Franklin," Seb greeted, rolling his eyes. Keifer Zane's manager had become a major pain in Seb's ass. He knew Benny wasn't happy about his number-one-client's postponement of the tour, but the manager seemed to take his anger out on Seb and he was damned tired of it.

"The tour's back on for next week," Benny told him.

"Yeah. I read about the death of Keifer's mom. I hope you'll please extend my condolences."

"Yeah, sure. Anyway, I was thinking..."

Uh oh.

"Since the whole tour is promoting Keifer's new album, *The Flip Side*, I was thinking maybe your guy, Archer, could dye his hair. He's already rocking the bleached white thing, how about tipping the ends with black? It would make him not only fit in with the theme, but it would make a nice contrast to the white-tipped black hair Keifer's sporting for the tour."

"No," Seb told Benny.

"It's just a little dye. You want your guy to fit in don't you? Isn't the whole point of hiring a gay bodyguard to fool the people into thinking they're really a couple?"

"Listen. Archer's been more than accommodating with this whole situation. He agreed to take only short-term assignments while he waited for Keifer to be with his mom in her final months. But you're crossing the line with this one."

"I can always get another company," Benny threatened.

"Try it. We both know Keifer insisted Archer wait for him to go back on tour. For some reason your client feels safe with my guy, and isn't that the point?"

"Despite what he thinks, Keifer doesn't always call the shots," Benny countered.

"Interesting. Maybe I'll call him and ask what he thinks."

"I've told you before, Keifer doesn't want to think about the business side of his life right now."

"Mmm hmm." Seb didn't buy it for a minute. He had no doubt Keifer would come unglued at the things his manager was spouting. "Look. I've got a million things going on right now. Call me when you have definite details on where and when Archer needs to report for duty."

Before Benny could say anything else, Seb hung up the phone. "Jackass."

* * * *

Seb finished hooking up the computer in his new home office. He looked around at the masculine space and smiled. Never had he imagined he'd own a house so incredibly perfect for him. The library, as it had been advertised, was fabulous. With floor to ceiling bookshelves covering one wall and a huge double window on another, it was as if the architect had had Seb in mind when he'd designed it.

He glanced at the boxes of books he'd ordered in the last month. Finally, he'd be able to buy his favourites instead of rechecking them out from the library constantly. Seb knew it was probably considered wasteful to buy books he'd already read, but for the first time in his entire life, he had a place to store the volumes he loved so much.

As he walked out of the office into the great room, he couldn't wipe the smile off his face. He'd always thought owning a home was a luxury he didn't need. It had always just

been him and with his job taking him on the road all the time, he'd never even considered putting down roots to the point of actually buying something.

Jared had changed all that. Seb knew the one thing that would help Jared was a safe, permanent environment. When the house next door to Brier's had gone up for sale, it seemed like it was meant to be. After looking at the house only once, Seb had snapped it up. He'd even paid full price so he wouldn't risk losing the property. He still wasn't sure what he and Jared were going to do with the twenty acres the house sat on though. Brier had suggested a couple of horses, but neither Seb nor Jared was big on horses.

Perhaps they'd get a dog to keep Jelly Bean company once the cat settled into her new surroundings. He entered the kitchen, expecting to find Jared and came up empty. "Jared?"

Seb wandered back through the great room, stopping at the laundry room, before continuing on towards the bedrooms. He found Jared sound asleep in one of the guest rooms. Apparently his lover had been putting sheets on the bed when he'd dropped to the mattress in exhaustion.

It was no wonder. Jared had been up since two that morning. When the alarm had gone off at the ungodly hour, Seb had been surprised when Jared jumped out of bed. Seb had questioned Jared and been informed the dormitory's common room needed to be stripped and waxed.

Seb shook his head and lay on the bed beside his lover. He brushed the blond hair out of Jared's face and grinned at the pouty lips he'd uncovered. Although he'd tried to argue with Jared the common room's floor could wait for another day, Jared wasn't having it.

Jared took his job as serious as any high-powered executive would. He'd informed Seb the floors were looking dull and it was the perfect time to shine them up.

"Baby?" Seb whispered. "Want me to help you to bed?"

Jared whimpered and turned his face away from Seb's voice.

Seb rolled off the bed, and retrieved a heavy down comforter from the bench under the window. He picked the pillows up from the same bench and made the bed around Jared's sleeping form.

Jared was so worn out he didn't even stir when Seb undressed him and tucked him under the covers. Seb gave Jared a kiss on the forehead and walked back into the great room.

He noticed his flashing cell phone when he walked past the coffee table and picked it up. He plopped down on the couch and began reading the text message from Archer.

On my way to Philli to meet up with Jimmy. What the hell is this shit about me colouring my hair. Fix this, Seb, or someone's going 2 die.

Seb hit speed dial and waited.

"Hey," Archer answered.

"Don't worry about the hair thing. I've already told Benny to go fuck himself over that," Seb tried to put Archer's mind at ease.

"So whose idea was it in the first place? Because Benny's trying to tell me Jimmy plans to fire me if I don't follow orders. And you and I both know I don't deal with shit like that. If Jimmy wants to play that way, he can damn-well find another sucker to play dress-up with him."

"Relax. It wasn't Jimmy, it was Benny. Let me call Jimmy directly and see if we can't work this out. I've had my fill of Benny as well."

"Thanks, boss."

"Yeah, just keep the wackos away from Jimmy and I'll be happy," Seb told him.

"I can do that as long as I don't have to deal with his asshole manager."

"You and me both. I'll call you back if I can get hold of Jimmy." Seb ended the call. He scrolled down in his list of contacts and brought up Jimmy Cook AKA Keifer Zane and punched it in.

The phone rang five times before a scratchy voice answered. "Zane."

"Jimmy, it's Seb James. Sorry to hear about your mom."

"Thanks, Mr. James."

"Call me Seb. Anyway, Archer's on his way to meet you in Philadelphia."

"That's good."

"Yeah, well, he's having a few issues with your manager," Seb informed the superstar.

"Fuck. What's Benny done now?"

"He wants Archer to dye his hair. And quite frankly, we're both tired of dealing with his shit. I know you need him and everything, but we don't. I'd like to deal directly with you instead of Benny."

"And Archer feels the same way?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah. Actually, I think Archer mentioned something about bodily harm if Benny tries to fuck with him again."

Jimmy chuckled. "Have you ever seen Benny? I might pay good money to see that battle."

Although Seb had never met Benny, he'd seen his picture in several magazine articles. Jimmy was no shorty, coming in at nearly five foot eleven, but Benny Franklin had to stand at least six-six and that was without the trademark black bowler hat he always wore. At close to three hundred pounds, Benny intimidated a lot of people. Fortunately Seb and Archer weren't among them.

"Don't let Archer's size fool you. He's more than capable of taking on anyone who stands in his way. I wouldn't have assigned him to you if I didn't think he was the perfect man for the job," Seb explained.

"Oh, I've no doubt Archer could kick Benny's ass which is why I would pay good money to see it," Jimmy said around a chuckle. "I know I wouldn't be half as successful without Benny, but he does have a tendency to try and push people around."

"Yeah, well, as long as Benny understands Archer won't be playing his games or answering to him everything should go smoothly."

"I'll talk to him," Jimmy agreed.

"Thanks, and good luck with the tour."

"Six months on the road isn't my idea of a good time, but it helps pay for the other six months of the year."

Seb ended the call and immediately got in touch with Archer. He told Archer about his conversation with Jimmy before hanging up. Seb turned off his phone and tossed it back onto the table. He systematically checked the doors and turned off the lights as he wound his way back towards the guest room.

Jared was still asleep. He'd even started the soft snore Seb thought was so damn cute.

Seb undressed and crawled under the covers. He spooned his body against Jared's and kissed the younger man's neck. All day he'd looked forward to sleeping in the big new bed he and Jared had picked out, but evidently it wasn't going to happen.

There was no way he wanted to wake his sleeping lover, and as he'd promised months ago, wherever Jared went, Seb would always be right there with him.

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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Cattle Valley: Bent-Not Broken
Cattle Valley: Arm Candy
Karaoke at the Tumbleweed
Legend Anthology: Healing Doctor Ryan

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