

WRANGLERS

THE DEFENSE RESTS



VIVIEN DEAN

WRANGLERS: THE DEFENSE RESTS

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Twisting in his seat, Derek looked at the front door, as if to check to make sure Rudy really had gone. The mask he’d worn for his boss had vanished by the time he turned back. Fury mingled with frustration, and now every ounce he’d held back was focused on Sam. “You do realize Rudy wants us on this case because we’re gay, right?”

Sam couldn’t help but gape at him. He’d said the words. Sam had suspected that Derek’s mood stemmed from something along those lines, but he hadn’t anticipated him actually saying it out loud.

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“And it’s an HIV case. For the firm, it’s all about appearances.”

“That theory might hold water if the client was, oh, say, a gay man. Which she’s not.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Because you think it’s a gay disease?” When Derek didn’t respond right away, Sam shook his head. “You know, I always knew you hated getting pegged—”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘pigeonholed.’”

“So what if it is? I can’t say I’m all that fond of labels myself, but face it, Derek. You’re gay. That’s part of who you are. People are going to slap that label on you whether you like it or not.”

“A *part* of who I am.” Derek stuck up his index finger in adamant indication. “Just one. But you know as well as I do that once people see that, the rest of what you are disappears...”

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Ruby Red Rebels
Still, Life
What We May Be
Wranglers: Discovery
Wranglers: Voir Dire

WRANGLERS: THE DEFENSE RESTS

BY

VIVIEN DEAN

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WRANGLERS: THE DEFENSE RESTS
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CHAPTER 1

Lunch meetings were always part of the job, but meetings with named partners outside of the office weren't. Sam Kimball stood in front of the Brickhouse Café, frowning up at its red brick façade and old-fashioned arrow signage with more than one question rolling through his thoughts. He was early. On purpose. He had no idea what this meeting was about, and until he did, he was going to play it smart and stay in total control of the situation. At least, as much control as he could maintain, considering he was at a total loss regarding the appointment's purpose.

The restaurant wasn't convenient to the law firm where he'd worked for the past six months, nor was it comparable to what he would have considered a partner's standard choice. He liked the Brickhouse well enough, but at heart, it was a burger joint, not the

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swanky meeting place of a well-to-do attorney. Then again, Rudy Franklin wasn't your average lawyer. The man wore rock band ties to court, and used his vacation time to fly to exotic locales and surf. Now that Sam thought about it, the Brickhouse seemed exactly his style.

Leaning to catch his reflection in the front window one last time, Sam ran his fingers through his hair to smooth out the wind-ruffled look before grabbing the door. Heat billowed from within, countering the chill in the September air. San Francisco would be cold this winter, if the predictions all came true. Sam wasn't looking forward to it. His Texan blood craved higher temperatures, though he settled for the moderation of the city when he had to. When he needed more, he escaped inland, to the horse he kept stabled on the other side of Oakland or bike rides on Mt. Diablo. Both kept him more than satisfied.

Besides, San Francisco had other perks. He could deal with the chill—though if it ever snowed, he'd have to reconsider—as long as he had to, just to keep them.

The smell of rich burgers and beer made his mouth water. The Brickhouse carried an aura of comfort it was hard not to sink into. Wood beams broke up the textured walls, while high ceilings worked with the skylights and abundant windows to give the illusion of more space. They didn't skimp on greenery, either. Plants were everywhere. There was even a large ficus growing through the center of a table, at which a couple currently dug into their lunches.

A pretty blonde hostess stopped Sam from venturing too far in. "Table for one?"

He flashed a dimpled smile. "I'm meeting someone, actually. Rudy Franklin?"

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“Oh, he’s not here yet, but the other member of his party’s already arrived. This way.”

Sam followed her through the restaurant, his thoughts racing. So the meeting wasn’t just with Rudy. Would Belinda be there? She was his team leader, so it would make sense for her to put in an appearance. Except she hadn’t said a word to him back at the office, and frankly, as frazzled as she’d appeared, he doubted she was going anywhere any time soon. Another partner? No, a client. That was the likeliest possibility.

He stopped short when he saw a familiar dark head bent over his iPhone. Sam knew without being able to discern what was on the small screen that he was checking email. Away from the office and his laptop, Derek Rossi would never let an email slip past him that might prove valuable.

“Here you go,” the hostess chirped, oblivious to Sam’s surprise. “I’ll send your server right over to take your drink order.”

Derek’s brows lifted as Sam slid into the cozy booth opposite him. “What’re you doing here?”

“That should be my question to you. I’m supposed to meet Rudy.”

“So am I.”

For a moment, they just stared at each other. They maintained a professional front at work, but for the past six months, they had been more than colleagues. Sam had wanted Derek from their first introduction. With his dark hair, darker eyes, and a sinful slash of a mouth, Derek had pushed every button Sam possessed, and a few he hadn’t known about until they shook hands. Sam had waited until they were done with the case they’d been working on before trying for more, but it had taken determination, charm, and one hell of a kiss to finally get Derek even looking at the same page.

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Then a couple more months of fantastic fucking to realize they actually wanted more.

Their relationship was public knowledge, but their paths rarely crossed at the office. Deliberately. Working on different teams helped.

Until now.

The server came by, a scrawny young man with sad brown eyes and a slow smile. Sam ordered a beer without wasting time on banter, and waited until they were alone again to speak to Derek.

“So what’s this all about? You haven’t been bragging about bagging me again, now have you?”

Derek scowled. “Don’t do that in front of Rudy.”

“Do what?”

“You know what. Don’t do it.”

“I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.” Sam deliberately stretched his arm across the back of the booth, smirking when Derek tracked the movement with his eyes. Time hadn’t lessened the desire between them. If anything, Derek seemed to focus on Sam even more with every passing day. “All I did was ask if you knew what Rudy wanted with me.”

“With us.”

“Okay. With us.” He could concede that point. It was valid, after all.

The small allowance relaxed Derek enough to smooth the lines out in his forehead. “I thought it was about a new client, but now I’m not so sure. There’s no reason for you to be here, if that’s the case.”

“Actually, that’s every reason for him to be here.”

Rudy’s sudden appearance at the side of the table startled Sam into dropping his arm, though he quickly smiled to cover his

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momentary fluster. Sometimes, when it was just him and Derek, he forgot about the outside world entirely. He'd have to be careful not to let Derek distract him too much during the meeting.

Giving Sam a brisk nod, Rudy slid into the booth next to Derek, smoothing his tie—a Rolling Stones tribute—over his flat stomach. “Did you two conspire together to beat me here, or am I really running that late?”

Sam felt Derek's quick glance in his direction, but ignored it. “I haven't been late for anything since my mama tanned me good for missing Sunday school once when I was eight. I don't know what Derek's excuse is.”

While Rudy smiled, Derek rolled his eyes. “You went to Sunday school? I find that hard to believe. You can't sit still for that long.”

“I can when it counts. And nothing beats Sunday school for learning about every vice under the sun.”

“Okay, now *that* I believe.”

“This.” Rudy gestured between the two of them. “This is what I was telling Belinda. I knew this would be an excellent idea.”

Sam tore his gaze away from Derek, as difficult as it was. “No offense, Rudy, but I still don't know what this whole meeting is about. What's such an excellent idea?”

The server arrived with Sam's beer, took Rudy's order, then vanished again.

“We have a new client,” Rudy said. “A young woman I know is being sued by her health insurance for fraud. I want you two to represent her.”

Sam blinked. “I'm not on your team.” Not forgetting the fact he and Derek had never worked on the same side of a case before. Derek wasn't his superior at the office, but neither one of them had

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ever wanted to compromise their professional relationship in any way.

“I know that. I already talked to Belinda. She’s a greedy bitch who doesn’t want to share, but I got her to agree to loan you out to me if I got you to agree to it.” Rudy cast a long, knowing glance at Derek. “She said you’d turn me down flat.”

“I don’t turn anything down flat without hearing the details,” Sam said. “What’s the big deal with this case?”

The way Rudy kept his features neutral told Sam even more than his next words. “Gena’s not completely in the clear on this. She withheld some information they’re not happy about, and now they’re denying all her claims, even the valid ones, on top of trying to get recompense for previous payments. It won’t be an easy one. That’s why I want you two on it. I think, with both of you, they’ll drop it before it ever gets to trial.”

The flattery made Derek smile. “Not that I don’t agree with you, but are the partners really all right with Sam and I on the same case now that we’re dating?”

Since he was the one on Rudy’s team, it had been up to Derek to pose the obvious question. Still, Sam thrilled at the ease Derek said that now. *We’re dating*. That would never get old.

Rudy nodded. “They might not have been thrilled about it in June, but you two have never let your relationship get in the way of work, and they’ve noticed that. If there’s anybody we know we can trust to handle this right, it’s you two.”

“What does your friend have?” Sam said. “Clearly, she’s been under treatment for something fairly serious.”

“HIV. She’s been positive for a few years, but the drug protocols have been highly successful for her. Any kind of interruption could be extremely detrimental. That’s why I want this

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done hard and fast.”

He didn’t even have to think about it anymore. “I’ll do it.”

“Do you really need both of us?”

Derek’s query surprised both of them.

“Need’s a strong word,” Rudy said carefully. “Do you not think you can work with Sam?”

“I just don’t think Sam needs me on this. He handled the PacificCare litigation without a problem.”

“Which is why I wanted him on the team.” Rudy had to pause when the server returned with his beer. He ignored it after he asked the server to come back in five minutes, now as focused on Derek as Sam was. “I checked your caseload. You don’t have anything really challenging you right now.”

“No, I know.” When Derek started turning his glass around on the table without lifting it, Sam knew something was bugging him, more than believing Sam could manage the case on his own. The longer it took Derek to expound on his request, however, the more Sam worried he knew exactly what this was about.

“I don’t mind taking it on my own,” Sam offered. He didn’t want Derek to get put on the spot, and if this helped—

“You’re both going to work it.” Rudy might have the appearance of a California surfer, but the façade covered steel Sam had witnessed often enough to know it was pointless fighting it. “Unless you can give me a valid reason why you shouldn’t, Derek. And don’t give me the ‘Sam’s qualified’ line. I already know he’s qualified. So are you.”

Derek’s mouth thinned into a hard line, but he shook his head. Any good mood he might have had was gone, and from the way he refused to meet Sam’s eyes, it would likely be hours before there was even a hint of a return. Longer, if they didn’t find a way to

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work this case amicably.

Rudy changed the subject then, chatting about the last trip he'd taken to Hawaii. Sam chimed in as best he could, but it was hard not to want to poke Derek and snap him out of this funk. His contributions to the conversation were terse at best. When their food arrived, Sam and Rudy dug in, the BBQ burger Sam had ordered the best he'd ever had outside of Texas. Derek only ate half of the chicken brie sandwich he'd selected. He stopped drinking, too.

Inwardly, Sam sighed. This was going to be a bitch of a mood to break.

Rudy took care of the check, and as he slid from the booth, said, "I'll email the notes I have on the case to both of you this afternoon, along with Gena's contact information. The sooner you call her, the happier I'll be."

Derek just nodded. It was up to Sam to actually vocalize their agreement.

Once they were alone, Sam whipped a furious gaze back to Derek. "Do you mind telling me what the hell that was all about?"

Derek snorted. "Like you don't already know."

"Let's pretend for a second I'm not as smart as you give me credit for. Enlighten me."

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those lines, but he hadn't anticipated him actually saying it out loud.

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"And it's an HIV case. For the firm, it's all about appearances."

"That theory might hold water if the client was, oh, say, a gay man. Which she's not."

"Doesn't matter."

"Because you think it's a gay disease?" When Derek didn't respond right away, Sam shook his head. "You know, I always knew you hated getting pegged—"

"The word you're looking for is 'pigeonholed.'"

"So what if it is? I can't say I'm all that fond of labels myself, but face it, Derek. You're gay. That's part of who you are. People are going to slap that label on you whether you like it or not."

"A *part* of who I am." Derek stuck up his index finger in adamant indication. "Just one. But you know as well as I do that once people see that, the rest of what you are disappears. I don't have to sit back and take it."

"Then you should've told Rudy no."

"Right. Rudy wasn't going to hear that, no matter what kind of argument I gave him."

"Did you even listen to what he said?" Sam couldn't believe he was having this discussion. "Obviously, this Gena means something to him, and he wants the best for her. He thinks we're her best shot at getting the case thrown out."

Before he'd finished speaking, Derek was shaking his head. "You don't get it. I guess it was too much to hope you'd be on my side for a change."

"What? I'm not on anybody's side."

"Except your own. Just like always."

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Derek tensed to slide out of the booth. Sam's hand shot out across the table and pinned his arm down, stopping him at least momentarily.

"Don't do this," he said. Damn it, he sounded like he was begging, but he hated when Derek stormed off in a huff. He hadn't done it in a while, but there had been more than one terrible exit like this in those first tumultuous months. "Look at it this way. Would you be reacting like this if she'd had cancer instead?"

Carefully, Derek covered Sam's hand with his and peeled away his fingers. His grim look made Sam's stomach sink. "Rudy wouldn't have asked us to take the case if she'd had cancer."

Nothing stopped him from getting up then. And as hard as it was to keep his butt on the bench, Sam sat there and watched him leave, not even able to appreciate Derek's spectacular rear view for the nausea now threatening his lunch.

CHAPTER 2

At eight-thirty at night, the office more closely resembled a mortuary than a law firm. People who stayed late worked behind closed doors, whispering when they emerged rather than have their voices echo against the walls. Most of the lights stayed off. A single dimmed sconce every few yards cast eerie shadows up the paneled walls.

When Sam had to work late, he preferred doing it in the conference room. Others tiptoed around, as if the evening hour demanded some kind of deference, but he needed the space if he was mostly alone. He lived in enough confinement as it was. He didn't need to add to it unnecessarily.

His notes on the Gena Sweet file took up a third of the table, carefully organized in piles by subject. Her interview was the next

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day, and while Sam looked forward to meeting her, he wasn't as happy with how the case was starting out. He hadn't spoken to Derek since the lunch meeting thirty-six hours earlier. There had been a terse email canceling their date last night, but Derek had cited work as an excuse rather than the events during the day.

Sam suspected it was a combination of both. Derek retreated when he got upset. It was one of the harder habits Sam had forced himself to accept in the time they'd known each other. He had to, or they would never have made it as far as they had.

He assumed Derek would be present at Gena's interview. Their secretaries had coordinated it, and it would be emblazoned on Derek's schedule, unable to be ignored. If he found a reason to skip out of it, Rudy was likely to rain hell upon his head. Sam would much rather talk with Derek before then, but he wasn't going to push it until the morning. Derek needed time to cool off.

A shadow passed outside the glass window, diverting him from his notes. When he glanced up, however, his eyes widened at the sight of Derek standing in the doorway.

"I didn't know you were still here," Sam said.

His black leather laptop bag was slung over his shoulder. "I was just heading out." He nodded toward the strewn papers. "You here for a while?"

"That depends. You interested in some company?"

Derek grimaced. "After the way I bailed on you last night, I'm surprised you want to be anywhere in my vicinity."

With a smile, Sam tossed his pen onto the table and leaned back. "I happen to like your vicinity."

"Sometimes, I really wonder why." In spite of his defeatist words, the weariness weighing down Derek's tone had vanished, and he ventured another step into the conference room. "As much

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as I'd like you to come, I don't want to put you further behind on whatever it is you're working on."

"You're not. It's the Gena Sweet case. I was just going over everything to prep for meeting her tomorrow."

He mentioned Gena specifically to see if it would get a reaction from Derek. It did. The corners of his mouth tightened, and his brows drew together a fraction of an inch. Not nearly the force of anger he'd displayed the day before, and frankly, a relief for Sam to witness.

Derek caught the conference room door and shut it, enclosing the two of them in privacy. Dropping his laptop case to the floor, he came around the table to stand behind Sam, bracing against the back of the chair as he leaned forward to examine what he was doing.

"How does it look so far?"

Sam didn't buy his neutral query for a second. "They've got a case," he said. "A good one, actually. The way it looks, Gena was playing the system to get prescriptions covered that wouldn't necessarily be covered."

Derek swore under his breath. "And Rudy expects us to work some kind of magic? Figures."

"It wouldn't be the first time we pulled a rabbit out of a hat." The scent of Derek's cologne was starting to distract him, the heat of his body warming Sam's. When he settled back farther in his seat, he felt Derek's hand between his shoulder blades, comforting, familiar, wanted. "I can't say it would be my first choice to defend her, but I've had worse. So have you."

"Yeah. And I lost that case to you, if memory serves."

"So now you've got me on your side. Piece of cake."

"Only if it's a five-year-old Christmas fruitcake," Derek

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muttered. His hot breath fanned down the inside of Sam's collar, electrifying nerve endings that had no right getting bothered here at the office, especially when they were both trying to concentrate on a case. The sensations only got worse when Derek reached across Sam's chest to rifle through a stack of insurance claims. "I have no idea how we're supposed to keep this from going to trial."

"Does that mean you're sticking with it?"

The arm at his back stiffened, though Derek didn't withdraw. "I never had a choice."

"You always have a choice."

"Can we not do this, please?"

"Do what?"

"Argue."

"I'm not arguing. I'm clarifying. Yesterday, you didn't want anything to do with Gena."

"And I still don't. But that doesn't mean I won't do as I'm told." His release of Sam's chair widened the space between them, especially when he turned around to prop against the edge of the table, his back now to all the paperwork. He did it to look down at Sam—a classic Derek Rossi move whenever he was feeling threatened—but it annoyed more than diminished Sam's confrontational nature. "Do you honestly not see this as a deliberate ploy on Rudy's part?"

Two could play this game. Sam refused to stand up and try to even up the difference. Instead, he slouched back and rested his ankle on his knee to make himself even lower. "No, I honestly don't."

Derek's nostrils flared. "He chose us on purpose."

"Because we're damn good at what we do."

"So are a lot of people in this office."

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“We’re better.”

“We’ve never worked a case together before. He has no idea how we’d function together.”

“The man has eyes, Derek.” This discussion was getting old. “It’s his job to read people. He sees us every day. He’s worked closely with you for how many years now? And he certainly did his homework on me before they offered me a job.”

Derek turned his head, staring out the window as he composed his thoughts. “I don’t understand how you don’t see this as a step back for us. Because no matter how this plays out, people aren’t going to forget we’re the ones who tackled the HIV case. Why don’t you care that you’re going to be known as a gay lawyer when this is all done?”

“Because I’m a gay lawyer *now*,” he joked. “Hell, why do you care so much that people might see that side of you? You act like you’re ashamed of who you are.”

The silence that came sent every hair on the back of his neck to attention. He hadn’t really meant what he’d said. The words had just come out, a natural extension to his frustrated question. But it was taking too long for Derek to respond. He especially didn’t like the way Derek wouldn’t look at him.

“Is that it?” Sam asked. Fear made him belligerent, and though he knew it was wrong to push Derek at this junction, he couldn’t stop. “I guess all that talk about being out of the closet was only meant to make yourself look good, then. You opened that door, but you sure as hell don’t want to walk through.”

Derek’s gaze snapped back, bright and furious. “You did not just say that.”

Sam shrugged, a nonchalant gesture that was all about the show and none of what he really felt. “Sounds like I did.”

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“You hypocritical little shit.” Papers went flying when Derek straightened and marched for the door. “I’d say I can’t believe you’d have the balls to say something like that to me, but we both know you have the balls to try just about anything.” He snatched up his case and glared back at Sam. “Except tell your old man, or anyone in your family actually, that you’re gay, of course. You had to fly to both sides of the country just to get out of your so-called closet.”

Heat rose in Sam’s face. “That’s different.”

“Is it?” Derek was on a roll now. Victory sparkled in his eyes. Sam had seen it when it had been directed at work, but never at him. “My parents have known I’m gay for over a decade. Every boss I’ve had has known, and every friend that’s worth a damn. You, on the other hand, lied to your mom the last time she called, because you didn’t want her to know the naked person lying next to you in bed was me and not some cute little blonde with tits the size the Texas. So don’t tell me I’m ashamed of who I am, cowboy. I know *exactly* who I am. But I’m starting to wonder if I ever had a clue about who you really are.” He yanked the door open and stood there, poised in the doorway. “I don’t like being marginalized into a convenient label. Until a minute ago, I thought we agreed on that. I guess that was my big mistake.”

The door didn’t slam after him when he walked out, though it might as well have for how Sam felt it. He’d gone too far. The hurt look on Derek’s face, the disappointed tone of his voice...Sam had crossed a line he’d never even known was there, and now, he had no idea if it was possible to go back over it.

Or even if Derek wanted him to.

He sat there in silence for long minutes, staring at the door. When his back started to ache from his slouching, he sat up and

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twisted, cracking the joint until it felt better. The file notes accused him from their scattered positions on the floor, blaming him for making a mess of everything, but he gathered them up without argument, collating them exactly as they had been, tucking them back inside the folder. Everything was pristine when he was done—the conference room, the case file—and still, his hands shook when he opened the door.

He wasn't entirely convinced Derek wasn't a little bit ashamed about being gay, but he'd been right about a lot of the other allegations he'd thrown at Sam. Based on that evidence, Sam looked like the coward, not Derek. He felt like one, too, because though he knew he should find Derek and apologize, he couldn't summon the nerve to do so. Part of him was terrified that if he looked Derek in the eye right now, Derek would sneer and say good riddance. He certainly had the right to do so.

His email box announced new messages as he locked away the file in his credenza. He could ignore them. He should. He needed to get out of this place and get rip-roaring drunk, just waste away the whole evening with something completely unnecessary and self-centered.

That would be quitting, though. Sam was a lot of things, but a quitter was not one of them.

He opened the inbox and scanned the list. Most of it was stuff that could wait, but when he saw Rudy's name, he took a deep breath and clicked on it.

It only contained one sentence.

Call me on my mobile if you get this before 9.

Since he had almost fifteen minutes to spare, Sam picked up his phone and made the call. Rudy answered on the second ring.

"Sorry, I only got your email just now," Sam said. "What can I

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do for you?”

The background noise was nearly deafening, lots of voices, throbbing music, not an atmosphere he would have chosen for the laidback Rudy. He had to strain to hear the other man.

“Is Derek with you?”

“No, I’m still at the office.”

“Do you know if he’s got plans tonight?”

Somehow, he didn’t think Rudy wanted to hear, *Calling me every name in the book*. “No, I don’t think so. He just left here a little while ago.”

“Good. Call him. I want you two to meet me in an hour.”

“Meet you? Where?”

“I’m in the Castro. A small bar called Sierra’s. If you can get here before ten, that’s even better. We’ll be able to get closer to the stage then.”

“The stage—”

But Rudy was gone, and Sam was left staring at a Google map of San Francisco, wondering what had got into the water this week to bring him so closely under Rudy’s radar.

Calling Derek was the last thing he wanted to do, but he was under strict orders now. He dialed it automatically and held the phone to his ear, typing one-handed to find the bar’s address.

“Derek Rossi.”

He answered like that when he was driving. Even with the phone mount Sam had gotten him for his car, Derek refused to take his eyes off the road to bother finding out who was calling. The road noise confirmed it.

“Hey, it’s me.”

The only reason he heard Derek’s exhalation was because he was listening for it. “What do you want?”

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"I just talked to Rudy. He wants us to meet him in the Castro before ten."

"What? Why?"

"He didn't say specifically. He's at some bar. It sounds like he wants us to join him to see some kind of show."

Derek swore under his breath. "Fine. I'm only a couple blocks away from the parking garage anyway. I'll swing back and pick you up."

His heart leapt. He hadn't been expecting an invitation for a ride. He sure as hell wasn't going to question it, though. "I'll meet you downstairs. I'm printing up directions now."

"What's the place called?"

"Sierra's."

"Don't bother with directions. I know where that is."

"Oh. Okay." He logged off and snapped his laptop shut, leaving it on the desk as he rose from his chair. "Any ideas on what he might want us there for, then?"

"With Rudy? That's hard to say. Sierra's does local bands, as far as I know. So it's probably some live music."

"Oh, God. Rudy's not in a band, is he?"

Derek laughed. "I hope for our ears' sake that he's not. He sang karaoke at an office party a couple years ago. We all took up a pot to bribe him never to do it again."

Sam chuckled, too, more because of the comfort he took in hearing Derek laugh than the image he'd actually presented. He would step as carefully as it took to keep from sparking another fight. Then, maybe while they were working on the case, they might be able to approach the topic again without going off on each other. "Is this the kind of place I can ditch my tie?"

"Ditch the tie, roll up your sleeves, drag out your accent.

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Sierra's is as unpretentious as you can get. You'll probably love it."

"As long as I've got a good beer and you along for the ride, I'll be fine."

This time, Derek's reply was longer in coming. "I'm almost at the office. Don't make me wait too long."

The line went dead. Sam didn't spend any time pondering pushing Derek too hard with his candor. He'd meant it. He'd say it over and over, as many times as it took, to get Derek to believe it again.

CHAPTER 3

Derek didn't say much during the short ride to Sierra's, though Sam wasn't surprised. The air between them still carried more than a little tension from their argument in the conference room. That wouldn't disappear just because they had to provide a solid front for Rudy.

When he parked the car, Derek took off his coat and tie, trading them for a beat-up aviator jacket he kept in the trunk. With the stiff collar of his blue and white striped dress shirt opened, he looked infinitely more casual, though no matter what Derek wore, he always came across as perfectly tailored. Sam had to tear his eyes away from the inviting shadow at the base of Derek's throat and concentrate on dressing down his own clothing. He removed his cufflinks and slid them into a pocket, then rolled up the sleeves on

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his plain white shirt. The cool air raised goose bumps where it slithered against his skin, but he figured it would be hot in the bar. He'd deal with the chill for the duration of the walk to be more comfortable for the rest of the night.

Derek's gaze was locked on his exposed forearms when he finally turned away from the car. Sam cocked a questioning brow, but Derek didn't say a word as he pivoted on his heel and headed for the stairwell.

Sam suppressed his grin as he double-timed to catch up. Derek might be angry, but that sure as hell didn't affect their physical attraction. If anything, it had actually helped it once or twice along the way. Maybe he could pull this relationship out of the fire after all.

His hope flared again when Derek held the bar's door open for him, an unconscious gesture, he was sure, but meaningful nonetheless. It meant, somewhere in Derek's mind, they were still a couple. One fight—even a bad one—did not have to spell the end.

Sierra's was only half-full, unsurprising for a weekday night even in the Castro. The bartender was grizzled and time-worn, with a droopy moustache left over from the seventies, and the patrons scattered along the bar's length looked transplanted from the same era. Derek led the way to the rear of the room, where a small stage was set up only a foot above the concrete floor. Sam's foot stuck once along the way, but he knew without looking down that it would be from a spilled beer rather than something more unsavory. Sierra's didn't seem the kind of place to promote anything other than hanging around and drinking.

Rudy sat at a wide table against the wall. He had changed from his office attire, and wore a baggy navy T-shirt for a band Sam

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didn't recognize and faded jeans. He would've easily passed for ten years younger to anyone who didn't know him, and Sam wondered if that was perhaps something else Rudy had seen in him all along. Sam had fought against his youthful appearance all his life. Even Derek had assumed he was younger than he was when they'd first met.

"You made it with five minutes to spare," Rudy said. He waved Derek away when he tried to sit in the chair that would put his back to the stage. "Come around. You'll never be able to watch that way."

While Derek took the seat next to Rudy, Sam pulled a chair closer to Derek's other side and straddled it. "What is it we're watching?"

"Gena's covering a last minute cancellation. I thought it'd be a good idea for you two to see her where she's not feeling self-conscious about being that HIV girl."

Derek's leg stiffened against Sam's, and his gaze darted to the stage. "We haven't even met her yet."

"That doesn't mean you don't already have an opinion. And honestly, Gena's nervous about your appointment tomorrow. You won't be meeting her on her best."

"Lawsuits are never anybody's best," Sam said.

Rudy shrugged. "Yeah, well, this is where Gena shines." He looked pointedly at Derek. "And if it helps you get over the stick you have up your ass about her case, all the better."

Inwardly, Sam winced at Rudy's blunt tone. Though the lighting in Sierra's was murky bar chic, Derek had visibly blanched, his spine straightening as if he was ready to run. Sam suspected the only reason he didn't was because Rudy was his direct superior. This looked like the last place he wanted to be.

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“Sam and I were just discussing her case tonight,” Derek said.

Rudy didn’t blink. “Sam was alone in the conference room when I left tonight.”

“Derek came in after,” Sam cut in. “We’d agreed I’d do the preliminary organization since I’m the one with the insurance experience.”

Rudy didn’t seem convinced, but he let it drop. “Well, since you came out here on your own time, the least I can do is buy the drinks.” Standing, he edged between theirs and the next table to head for the bar. “Beers all around?”

Both men agreed, giving him their orders. Once they were alone, though, Derek leaned toward him, his eyes flashing.

“You don’t have to cover me,” he hissed.

“Yeah, I do. Rudy’s no fool. He knows you don’t want to do this.”

“That’s my problem to deal with.”

Sam’s temper flared. “One fight does not mean I stop caring about what happens to you. You can’t expect me to just sit back and watch you sink your career.”

Rolling his eyes, Derek sat back in his seat, folding his arms over his chest as he stared up at the stage. “This one case isn’t going to hurt me.”

“Fuck it up, and it’s going to make Rudy think twice the next time something comes along the pipeline. Don’t tell me I’m wrong.”

Derek looked even unhappier than he’d seemed at the office. “I didn’t ask for you to help me.”

“No, I did that all on my lonesome. Because in spite of what my mouth ran off with before, you’re important to me, whether you want to be or not.”

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His mouth tightened, and he still refused to look at Sam. Sam had no choice but to sit there and take it until Rudy came back, balancing three bottles of Anchor Steam in his hands.

More people filtered closer to the stage. A beer-bellied man in his forties with a scraggly ponytail hanging down the middle of his back huffed as he carried an electronic keyboard and bench onto the narrow space. Sam pretended to be interested in the setting up, but with Derek's leg still pressing against his, it was difficult to do. Sometimes, he just didn't understand Derek's mixed signals. If he was still so upset about their fight—which he had every right to be—why continue the physical contact? Why be so polite about picking Sam up, or holding open the door?

Rudy didn't seem to have any qualms about pretending in front of Derek. "Have you ever known anyone with HIV?"

Since Sam wasn't focused on him, he assumed the question was meant for Derek, and kept his gaze away to give them the semblance of a private conversation. His ears picked up every word, though.

"Yes. A few."

"Was it just the virus or full-blown AIDS?"

"Both."

"So you know how hard they can have it."

"Only secondhand."

"That's an evasive answer, Derek."

"It's the only one I have."

Rudy sighed. "How close were they to you?"

"Jesus, what does it matter? It's not like I need direct experience in order to defend her. That would be like asking me if I'd ever killed someone in order to defend a murderer."

Score one for Derek.

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There wasn't time for Rudy to make his own jab. The lights dimmed even further—or that might have been an effect of a spotlight illuminating the center of the stage—and a petite blonde appeared from a door Sam hadn't noticed before.

She was tiny, small enough to make him feel like Shrek, with her long hair clipped at the nape with a tooled leather band. A layer of baby fat still clung to her jaw, softening the lines of a face that would become pinched in her old age—if she ever reached old age, that is—and the hands that adjusted the microphone after she sat down had short, blunt fingers he would never associate with a pianist.

When she tilted her eyes up to look out over the audience, recognition jolted through Sam. Gena Sweet wasn't a friend of Rudy's, like they'd presumed. The perk of her nose, the slight curve at the corner of her lips, her coloring...if Gena wasn't related to Rudy in some way, Sam would eat her keyboard.

Derek straightened beside him. He'd seen it, too. When Sam glanced at Rudy out of the corner of his eye, however, he saw no sign that anything was amiss. Rudy regarded Gena with a small, friendly smile, still relaxed in his seat. The warmth in his gaze was the same Sam had seen aimed at any associate.

"Evening, everyone." She had a soft alto, tinged with a northwestern accent. "If you're here to see Blast, I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. From what I was told, they had an incident with a pigeon, a newspaper, and a very irate police officer, and won't be making it tonight." The audience chuckled. "I'm not sure I'm quite as colorful as that, but I'm going to do my best to keep you entertained."

Her head bent until all Sam could see was the very straight part in her hair. She pressed a couple buttons along the top of the

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keyboard, turned a dial, then rested her hands over the keys.

The audience held its breath. Waiting.

Sam got the impression she wasn't quite as unwelcome as she'd introduced herself.

Several seconds passed, enough time for Sam to lean forward against the back of the chair pressing into his chest. She seemed to be waiting for something. The pale sweep of her lashes against her cheeks indicated her eyes were shut. There wasn't any sheet music. She could have been remembering her playlist, or silently counting down, or chastising herself for agreeing to a last minute gig. Nothing showed on her face.

Sam flashed on the realization her careful composure could work both for and against them in court.

The first note was something low, a throb in the bass line that reverberated through the floor. It was almost a drumbeat, slow, steady, more notes soon joining it to roll and fill the room. They pounded against Sam's flesh, willing his blood into submission even as it rebelled against the primal reminders. His cock hardened, and he was suddenly very glad he was straddling the chair instead of sprawled in it. Having a hard-on at that moment almost felt indecent.

Next, came the lazy caress from the melody line. These were as high as the others low, creating a song bathed in starlight and moonbeams, and it lingered along his skin like the aftereffects of a deep red wine.

This went on for a full two minutes. No hint of Gena needing the microphone. No lift of her head to acknowledge her audience.

Sam nearly jumped out of his seat when he felt a brush along the top of his thigh. He glanced down, but the table blocked his view. The contact was followed by a firm squeeze, Derek's strong

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hand seeking him out in the only way they could at the moment. It heightened the rush through his veins, burning and roiling until his palms grew damp. All he could do to respond to it, though, was to press his leg more heavily into Derek's, erasing more of the distance between them.

When Gena finally lifted her mouth to the microphone, the voice that came out stunned him. It was huskier than he thought it would be, a throaty tribute to the vocal stylings of an Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holliday, rather than the Joni Mitchell she more closely resembled. Smoky, reeking of sex, yet breaking every once in a while as if to admonish anyone listening about forgetting what the song was really about.

Effortlessly, Gena took command of her audience, leading them through the paths of her music with an invisible crook of her finger. Nobody moved. No chairs rustled. No coughs, no chatter, nothing but her voice, the haunting keyboard, and the pulse of the bass line.

As the last note trailed away, there was a moment of hesitation before the room erupted in applause, shrill whistles punctuating the air as Gena leaned away from the microphone and dropped her hands to her lap. Sam joined in, relishing the release of adrenaline as he was swept up with the rest of the audience. Rudy's clapping was just as vigorous, but it was Derek's wholehearted response that made him smile.

Rudy was a genius. There was no way Derek would turn his back on Gena now. Rudy had forced him to see her as a human being, an amazingly talented one at that, rather than a victim or spokesperson for the HIV cause. It only took one look at Derek's face to see how he'd appreciated her performance. Hell, Sam still felt the imprint of the proof on his thigh where Derek's grip had

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ventured higher.

The second song was a faster melody, liberating the crowd to get lost in the rush. Though he applauded between songs, Derek returned to touching Sam while she performed—weight on his thigh, a caress at the small of his back, a hold on his hip. Sam's focus was impossibly split. Gena's music forbade anyone to ignore her, but this was Derek, this was the man who routinely drove him crazy with need, the only person he knew or ever had known who made him willing to toss common sense about relationships out the window.

He settled for unobtrusively shifting his position during a longer break between songs. As soon as his chair was turned around, Derek's arm weighed along his shoulders, drawing him as close into his side as their seats allowed.

If Rudy cared, he didn't utter a word. He was just as rapt by Gena's performance as the rest of the audience.

During another anguished ballad, Derek bent his head to rest his mouth at Sam's ear. "Bathroom's behind us."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say he hadn't had that much beer yet, but then, Derek's true intent sank past the fog Gena had created and obliterated any notion of staying and listening to the rest of the set. Casually, he picked up his drink and drained it, though it did little to quench the thirst raging inside him. He tapped the table in front of Rudy to get his attention, then jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Be right back."

Derek moved out of his way to give him room to rise without being encumbered. Their eyes caught for a heated moment, and even in the dark, the fervent promise in Derek's stole Sam's breath. He nearly stumbled over a man at the next table,

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apologizing quietly as he skirted around them. He wasn't even sure he could find the bathroom in his current state of arousal.

And then there it was, no neon to light its way but instead the shadowy hollow of a narrow corridor off the main room. One step into the hallway, and the temperature dropped by fifteen degrees, the sweat that had beaded along Sam's nape now chilling his skin. Two doors flanked a pay phone left over from decades earlier. Sam knocked at the men's and let himself in when there was no immediate response.

He didn't lock it behind him. The hazy mirror over the sink bolted to the wall caught the shine in his eyes, brighter than usual. It might have been desire acting on its own, but Sam thought there was more to it, like the knowledge he hadn't irreparably fucked things up with Derek. He was more than a little scared at how shaken he'd been at the possibility things could be over, but he shoved that fear aside to question and dissect later.

There were better things to concentrate on now. Like Derek's arrival any second.

He splashed cold water over his hot cheeks, but that did little more than take the edge off. When the knob turned, his nerves leapt, excitement bursting through him as he turned in time to see Derek slip inside. He reached out before the door shut, grabbing Derek's hips, relishing the hard muscles, then grunted when Derek shoved him into the wall.

Pain shot through his shoulder blades, but that was instantly eclipsed by the crush of Derek's mouth to his. His head spun. It never occurred to him to fight Derek's rough manner, or deny him anything he wanted. He opened to Derek's assault and twisted their tongues together, unable to contain his constant moans.

Derek worked at Sam's pants, opening his belt and fly in record

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time before shoving them down. His underwear went next, and his freed erection slapped against the bottom of his shirt. He scrabbled along Derek's clothing, trying to find a way past the barriers, but Derek's hot touch distracted him at every turn.

"What do you—" The question choked in his throat when Derek hitched him upward. Their eyes were now level, his cock firmly trapped between their torsos, and he had no choice but to hook his legs around Derek's hips or risk sliding back down to the ground.

Derek claimed his lips again without answering. Keeping Sam braced with his upper body, he let one hand sneak behind Sam's balls, fingertips oddly gentle as he caressed the soft skin. Sam shuddered with each stroke, and tightened his hold around Derek's shoulders. He didn't trust himself not to fall. He trusted Derek not to let it happen, but his own flesh betrayed him at every turn. Already, his legs trembled. He whimpered as he ground against Derek's groin, and only sighed in relief when Derek finally let his fingers stray farther back to find Sam's waiting hole.

Two pushed their way in. The stretch burned and sent a relay of sparks up Sam's spine, but he inhaled between ravenous kisses to find the fortitude to relax for Derek. He willed his muscles to ease, and allowed the tension needing a place to flee to reside in his limbs instead.

"Guess you liked the music?" he rasped when Derek gave him a chance to breathe.

Black eyes bore into his. "You talk too much."

Sam smirked. "You like it when I talk."

Derek twisted his wrist, forcing four fingers inside without ever looking away. "Sometimes."

"You like it better when I do this?" Deliberately, he clenched

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around Derek's hand.

A shudder rippled through Derek. "Do it when I'm fucking you and I'll answer you then."

"I think you already did."

Their kisses resumed, just as fervent as before, just as needy. When Derek pulled his hand free, Sam felt empty, aching to be filled again. He groaned when Derek's knuckles scraped over his shaft en route to his pants, and refused to give him the room he needed to free his cock without continued contact.

"Get the condom out of my wallet," Derek ordered.

Sam smoothed his hand down the powerful back, molding over every muscle along the way. He found the leather in the rear pocket, but feigned clumsiness to longer fondle the firm flesh.

Derek dug into the bare muscle of his thigh. "Stop fucking around."

"Can't wait?" He knew he was playing with fire, but damn if Derek didn't make him want to push and push until the other man exploded. "I think I've been pretty darn obedient, considering."

Derek snorted. "The only way for you to be obedient is for someone to put a leash on you."

"I'd settle for a saddle." He plucked the wallet out and brought it around to waggle in front of Derek's face. "You're the one who wants to give me a ride, remember."

Humor glinted in his eyes. "At least you waited until we were alone to whip out that corny line."

Sam smiled. He fumbled a bit trying to get the condom out of Derek's wallet, both of them motionless until he had the packet between his teeth and the billfold on the sink beside them. Tearing it open, he spit out the foil as he reached between their bodies, sliding the rubber on in one smooth roll downward.

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He held his breath as Derek hitched him higher to better push his covered cock between Sam's legs. The blunt tip unerringly found his opening, but the stretching Derek had done wasn't quite enough to let him just slide on in. He kept Sam in place as he brought his hand back up to Sam's mouth, pushing two fingers past his lips to wet them. At the first hard suck, Derek groaned.

"If we weren't in a public bathroom, I would've fucked your mouth instead."

Sam sucked again before Derek pulled his hand free with a plop. "Later," Sam promised. "Come back to my place tonight, and we'll take all night and do this right."

Something shuttered behind Derek's eyes, but it didn't slow him down in reaching back around Sam's ass. "My place." He used his wet fingertips to swirl around Sam's hole, lubricating the entrance without ever dislodging his cock from where it rested. "My rules tonight."

Sam would agree to anything to get more of this, even if it took indulging each and every one of Derek's kinks. "Whatever you want. I'm all yours." *I've always been yours.*

His answer seemed to satisfy Derek, and he pushed harder into Sam's body. The head breached the outer ring, drawing a cry from Sam's throat. Nothing in this world felt better than that thick, throbbing shaft splitting his ass open, and he clutched at Derek's back as he eased in the rest of the way.

When he was fully sheathed, they both paused, gasping for air. Sweat dripped into Sam's eyes, but he didn't dare wipe it away. That would mean letting Derek go, and even if Derek had him pinned against the wall, he wasn't tearing his hands away for anything. He didn't have to, as it turned out, because as Derek started to pull out, his lips touched Sam's temple. They skimmed

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over the damp skin, collecting the salt and sending an array of gooseflesh stippling down Sam's back.

After only a few inches, Derek slammed back into his ass. Sam stiffened, especially when Derek took his time withdrawing again. He didn't recognize this pattern. Derek was a voracious lover, but usually fairly predictable. At least, Sam had always thought so. He'd prided himself on knowing Derek inside and out, but if he'd discovered anything in the past two days, it was that he still had a lot to learn.

The dichotomous rhythm Derek set—a harsh, nearly violent drive, followed by an excruciating tease out—was mirrored in the grip of his hands and the brush of his mouth. Sam would have bruises on his thighs in the morning, but his face prickled from the light kisses Derek kept bestowing on him. He never stayed in any one spot for more than a moment, exploring everywhere, whether it was the corner of his eye, the tip of his nose, the sweep of his jaw. Sam had to squeeze his eyes shut and brace for anything, drowning in the sensations of flesh joining to flesh, skin slapping against skin.

He couldn't even speak. That was a first. He could usually chatter almost all the way to climax. Derek loved his bedtalk.

Apparently, it wasn't necessary tonight to drive them both absolutely wild.

The tempo evened out when Derek finally found his mouth again, stealing his breaths with every thrust. Behind his back, Sam felt the music vibrating in the walls, and imagined Gena on the other side of the door, singing just to them, coaxing their blood to ignite with her sultry voice. He wondered briefly if Derek imagined the same thing, considering his response at the table, but then all rational thought fled when a vise-like grip encircled his

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cock.

Two strokes. That was all it took. Two hard pulls at his shaft, and Sam erupted, his body incinerating with each repeated stroke. Derek stopped pulling at that, engulfing the tip with the palm of his hand to stop the warm come from splattering over their shirts.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Sam laughed. That was his Derek, all right. Careful and thoughtful even on the verge of coming.

Derek only lasted a few moments after that. A low, guttural sound in the back of his throat warned of his impending orgasm. His body stiffened, his cock jerking inside Sam's passage. He didn't move for so long, Sam wished they hadn't needed to bother with the condom. He would have loved to feel Derek shooting deep inside his body, coating every inch of his walls so there would be no doubt just how hard he'd come.

He trailed his mouth along Derek's sweaty neck, absorbing every taste and scent while he waited for Derek to relax. Derek shocked him by turning his head and devouring his lips, holding him so tight that it became impossible to breathe. Dots danced behind his eyes by the time they parted, and he pulled back as far as he could to stare at Derek in surprise.

"You okay?"

Wordlessly, Derek nodded. His lashes ducked, and though it seemed to take a great deal of effort on his part, he gradually loosened his arms enough to allow Sam to slide down the wall. He turned his back to him to take care of the condom. On a whim, Sam ran his palm up Derek's spine.

"I shouldn't have said what I did at the office." Sam was almost glad he couldn't see Derek's face. This was easier if he didn't have to witness Derek's reaction. "If I could take it back, I

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would.”

Derek’s shoulders hunched. “I know.” He stepped in front of the sink and rinsed off his hands, only looking up when he was done. Their eyes met in the mirror, and the fierce determination in Derek’s nearly took Sam’s breath again. “I’m not ashamed. Tell me you know that.”

“I know.” In that moment, he did. He couldn’t think otherwise with that black gaze burning into him.

Some of the tension in Derek’s body dissipated. He straightened and tucked his softening cock back into his pants, glancing down at Sam’s naked legs with a half smile that wouldn’t have been there only half an hour earlier. “You should get dressed before Rudy comes knocking, wondering what we’re up to.”

With a grin, Sam scooped up his clothes from the floor and tried not to think about what might be on them before getting dressed again. “If Rudy hasn’t figured it out already, he’s not nearly as sharp as I thought he was.”

“No, he’s probably more so,” Derek conceded.

Sam had to agree.

CHAPTER 4

Rudy never said a word when they returned to their table, but as soon as Gena finished her set, he drained the rest of the beer and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

Sam and Derek followed him out into the cold night. The sex had helped ease some of the tension between them, but if he thought Derek was suddenly going to forget anything he ever was and hold his hand as they walked side by side, he would have been sorely disappointed. As affectionate as Sam could be in public, Derek was equally reserved. He saved his displays for more intimate environments, or milieus where it was more socially acceptable.

Public bathroom sex, notwithstanding.

Rudy didn’t give them an opportunity to question what they

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were doing. He led the way, walking briskly down the street as if he'd been here a thousand times. It dawned on Sam a block later that he had no idea what Rudy's orientation was. He'd always assumed he was straight, but the ease and comfort with which he navigated the heart of the Castro suggested at least a little bit of a bend. It would certainly explain his and Derek's professional relationship better.

They stopped at a coffee shop, even smaller than Sierra's had been. Inside was too hot and smelled of burnt beans, but Sam held his tongue until after Rudy paid for three cappuccinos to be served at a table in the back.

"Why didn't you want to stick around and talk to Gena?" he asked.

"For the same reason I sat us off to the side where we'd be in her blind spot. I didn't want her to know we were there."

"And how are you two related?" Derek said.

Rudy's wry smile hinted at the man Sam saw every day at the office. "She's my half sister. By my mother's third marriage. I didn't even meet her until after she graduated from high school two years ago, and moved down here from Seattle. She was already HIV positive then."

Sam had read the preliminary information. Gena had contracted the virus from a sex partner at the age of sixteen. Hormones had been too much to counter good common sense.

"Look, Derek," Rudy continued, "I know how you value your privacy. I understand you think I'm doing this because you're gay. You need to tell me what it's going to take to convince you otherwise."

This was one of the things Sam liked about Rudy, and had liked from the start. The man was a straight shooter. He'd climbed

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as quickly as he had because he knew communication was key. You couldn't solve problems if you didn't know what they were, and if you didn't have the balls to ask, then you didn't have the right to whine about them later.

Straight-shooting wasn't Derek's strong point. He played his cards close to the vest, only doling out whatever information was immediately necessary. He had an annoying tendency to expect people to be as smart as he was, and when they weren't, or they failed to read his mind, he got frustrated. How he and Rudy worked together as well as they did was a tribute to Rudy's perseverance and Derek's drive.

Derek didn't seem entirely pleased with the turn in the conversation now, but Sam knew him too well to think he would back out of it at this point.

He took a deep breath. "There are a lot of talented people in the office. I know I'm good, and I know Sam is great, but what I don't understand is why you would go to such lengths to a, have us work together, and b, give me a case you know is going to push my buttons."

"The lengths weren't that great."

"You had to wrangle with Belinda," Sam joked, hoping Derek would see it as a move for solidarity. "And she's as possessive as they come."

"Exactly." Derek nodded at Sam in relieved gratitude. "Thank you."

Rudy didn't seem bothered by Derek's words. "Well, part of that is I still wish he was on my team instead of hers. I mean, it's a good thing now that I didn't win that particular round, what with you two dating, but at the time, I was pretty annoyed Belinda got Sam and I didn't."

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That was the first Sam had heard of it. He flushed in proud embarrassment. “Really?”

“Derek said it. You’re great. We all saw that when you two went head-to-head.”

“All right, I’ll buy why you wanted Sam on it,” Derek conceded. “And I’ll guess teaming him with someone under you kept things kosher with the other partners.”

Rudy grinned. “Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“That still doesn’t answer the second part, though.”

“Because I didn’t care if it pushed your buttons. I wanted you on the case, and I figured since I’d protected you from all the other gay cases that came into the office, it was time you paid me back.”

The look on Derek’s face was sheer confusion, but he was held back from interrogating Rudy when the barista arrived with their cappuccinos. Derek cradled the wide cup between his hands as he stared at Rudy. Sam would bet anything he started twisting it around before he ever took a sip.

“You’ve done what?” Derek demanded once the barista left.

Rudy blew across the top of his coffee to cool it down. “You heard me. Do you know how many requests we get for a gay lawyer to be assigned to a case? At least a couple a month. And I have never assigned you one of those, because I respect your feelings on the matter.”

Derek blinked once, twice, a third time, as if he couldn’t quite comprehend what Rudy was saying to him. Sam was a little floored by it, too, to be honest. He’d not heard of such a practice within the office in the short time he had been there, though he’d been given two different cases where his client had seemed inordinately relieved to discover he was gay. Those made a different kind of sense now.

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"I never knew," Derek finally managed to get out.

"I know you didn't." There was nothing mean about Rudy's tone, more of a calm acceptance of the state of the matter. "That was the way I wanted it. You tend to get a little crazy when the world doesn't behave the way you expect it to."

Sam laughed, brushing off Derek's frown when he glanced in his direction. "Don't even try and deny it."

"I think you're worrying over this for nothing," Rudy said. "You're never going to see a courtroom if you handle it right, and if you play it the way I think you'll play it, there won't be a whiff of gay attached to the case. So relax, treat it like the challenge I think it is, and get these bastards off Gena's back."

Sam didn't know how Derek could argue with Rudy when he stated it like that. From the way Derek started toying with his mug, he didn't know, either.

"I'm sorry I wasn't as gracious accepting it as you would've wanted." Derek was having problems meeting Rudy's gaze, seemingly absorbed by his coffee. Sam tried not to squirm in his seat. He hated seeing Derek with his back to the wall like this. Defeat was not a good look for him. "All I can promise is that Gena won't know my feelings on the matter."

With a sigh, Rudy picked up his cup and sat back. "I guess that's all I can ask for."

Even Sam felt his disappointment. His feelings were torn. On the one hand, he understood more about where Derek was coming from and how much of a concession it had been for him to even apologize to Rudy. On the other, he knew Rudy expected more from Derek, but years of expectations couldn't be erased with a single conversation. He didn't know what to do, and in that moment, all he wanted was to fix it all.

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He couldn't do anything about Rudy. Rudy wasn't his business. Derek was.

They finished their coffees in muted chat, the topic shifting from Derek's problems with the case to the case itself. Derek remained quiet for a good part of it, while Rudy and Sam talked about other insurance cases that had come out in favor of the insured. For all appearances, Derek looked like he was listening and absorbing, since his occasional erudite comment slipped into the conversation's flow without needing to be shoehorned.

Sam knew otherwise. Derek was only half there. Sam could only hope he wasn't thinking too much about their fight earlier.

When the barista came over to announce they would be closing in fifteen minutes, Rudy glanced at his watch. "Damn. I didn't realize it was so late. I hate to bail on you guys, but I need to get home for a phone call."

Derek's brows shot up. "It's almost one in the morning. Who are you calling? Japan?"

Rudy gave them an enigmatic smile and rose to his feet. "Something like that." He shrugged into his jacket and tipped a couple fingers at them. "See you tomorrow at the office."

Derek stood as soon as Rudy was at the door. He didn't speak as he waited for Sam, and Sam didn't push it, even when they left. He yearned to grab Derek's hand and hold on for dear life while they walked to the car, but that couldn't happen, not here, not now, not with too much and not enough said between them.

When they reached the privacy of the parking lot, Derek broke the silence. "What time is our meeting with Gena tomorrow?"

"Eleven. We've both got wiggle room for it to go long if we need to, too."

Derek grunted in acknowledgement and retreated back into his

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thoughts. Sam kept hoping more would come, but they reached the car, climbed in, and were out onto the street without any more exchanges.

He frowned when Derek turned left at the corner instead of right. "We're not heading back to the office?"

"Do you need something?"

"Uh, my truck, maybe?"

"I'll drive us in tomorrow."

He stared at Derek's strong profile for several seconds before he remembered what they'd said in the Sierra's bathroom. "Oh. We're going back to your place."

"Yeah." It was Derek's turn to frown. "That was what we agreed on, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I just...a lot of stuff has happened today. Tonight. I wasn't sure what you'd want to stick, and what was said because we got wrapped up in the moment."

"This is why we end up having problems. You're always looking past what I say and putting your own spin on it. If I'm wasting breath saying it, you can be pretty damn sure I mean it."

"Most of the time."

"All of the time."

"If that were true, we wouldn't even be together right now, Derek. You blew me off in the beginning, and if I'd taken you at face value, we'd both be in very different points in our lives."

They coasted to a stop at a red light. "All right," Derek said. "I'll grant you that. But that was different. I didn't like you. The only relationship we had in my eyes was adversarial. I've treated you differently since then, haven't I?"

He had. Sam nodded in agreement.

"I honestly thought we'd worked through this in Napa."

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Derek referred to the commitment ceremony Sam had asked him to attend as Sam's date, the weekend where they had finally decided to slap a label on what was going on between them and call themselves boyfriends. Funny how Derek had wanted to do that then, and now was so upset by the risk of getting a different kind of label placed upon him. When he commented on that aloud, though, Derek shook his head.

"It's not the same thing. I accepted that label, because, for me, you were more than worth it. Before I heard her sing tonight, Gena wasn't."

His heart thudded erratically against his ribs. Sam knew this was his opening to press about Derek's feelings on their current case, but he was too locked up in the admission about how Derek viewed him. He glanced away before Derek could see the emotion reflected in his eyes, then realized too late that his face was mirrored all too clearly in his window. And that Derek watched him intently.

"Your light's turned green," Sam said.

Derek's reflection glanced away. Sam heard his sigh like a whisper at the back of his neck before the car started to roll forward again.

"If you'd rather not go back to my place—"

"No." He cut that thought off as soon as he realized Derek might go there. Spending the night together during the week was uncommon enough for them. Their work schedules often prevented them from that kind of contact until freer weekends. "I don't want to go home."

They weren't the words he wanted to say. What he felt was something larger, something that threatened to choke him if he gave it the consideration it demanded. It wasn't even so much as

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he didn't want to go, as he knew he had to stay with Derek, no matter where that might be.

The night bled past them, too few shapes to discern, too many lights to pick apart. Silence between them wasn't unusual, especially at this hour, but Sam wished one of them had the balls to talk. About anything. He'd even listen to Derek go on about his high score on one of his video games if it meant he wasn't sitting there, stewing in his thoughts.

Maybe Derek had been right all along. Maybe he was a coward. He lived a life of his own design, redefining himself according to his circumstances to best escape those who would try and hold him back. He'd never given it much conscious thought. He'd simply acted. When his accent had him labeled a hick at college, he'd worked on it until nobody could pigeonhole him as Texan without knowing him personally.

Derek's mania about labels meant he lived the life he wanted, not the one others dictated for him. In the beginning, Sam had been amused by his refusal to announce his sexual orientation for the world to see, but he understood it now. Thanks to the media, too many people had preconceptions on what it meant to be a gay man these days. Derek was as far removed from the guys in *Queer Eye* as it was possible to be. As long as he maintained such strict control over appearances, he could do anything he wanted, be anyone he wanted, without fear of misinterpretation.

Sam's whole life had been one big misinterpretation. He might be out now, proclaiming his happiness with every smile, every date, every joke, but Derek had been right about his family. He was terrified of them finding out the truth. There was no room for homosexuality in the conservative Kimball household. He'd run away to try and find a measure of independence, but he needed

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their approval more than anything else. The world had been full of people ready to tear him down for any number of reasons. His family was the only haven he'd ever had.

A streetlight illuminated Derek's face as he pulled into his driveway. Sudden realization slammed through Sam.

Derek was a haven, too.

Now, as Derek closed the garage door behind them, Sam's silence stemmed from something else. His tongue was thick, and his eyes burned as the knowledge sank in. It seemed so easy in retrospect, even during those first months when all they'd really been were fuck buddies. But understanding the depths of his feelings for this man shook everything Sam was.

He loved Derek. End of story.

He'd had crushes before, and certainly Derek had started out as one. Once, he'd even thought he'd been in love, with a caustic, funny younger guy named Strauss. They'd met when Sam was finishing up law school, and their two-month affair had nearly made him fail his first class. But those feelings were nothing compared to what Derek elicited.

Derek guaranteed generating a smile, whether Sam saw him or just thought of him.

Derek was the first person Sam thought of to share good news with, and the only person he was willing to tell the bad news to.

Derek made his palms sweat, his blood race, and his body refuse to behave itself. Sex had never been as good with anyone as it was with him. Sam didn't know if that was because Derek understood how exactly to play him, or because they just had some indefinable chemistry that combusted whenever they touched. He'd never much cared about dissecting the why of it, when there were better things they could be doing.

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Derek made him nervous, in ways nobody else ever had. Because he wanted to please Derek. Because he wanted Derek to be proud of him. Because Derek's opinion mattered.

He didn't realize he was still sitting in the car until he heard a hard metallic rap. He looked up through the windshield to see a frowning Derek at the front of the car, his hand still folded from where he'd knocked against the hood.

"Are you coming in or not?"

In. Most definitely, in.

Hopping out, Sam's feet felt lighter when they hit the cement floor. His initial reaction might have been shock, but now that he'd recognized and identified the emotion, the liberty it gave him was astounding. He jogged up to Derek's side, ignoring the bemused quirk of Derek's brow. He would have kissed him right then if Derek hadn't turned on his heel to open the door into the house.

"I might stay up a little while and play some Xbox." Derek hooked his keys onto the rack he had mounted inside the door and continued on down the darkened hallway. "I'm not sure I can sleep just yet."

Sam caught him before he emerged into the dim light of his gourmet kitchen. "We can think of something more interesting to do than play video games."

The hard muscles of Derek's arm relaxed beneath his grip. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I don't think I'm up to it. Rudy's in my head too much right now."

"So let me take his place instead." Sam pressed him back against the edge of the island. Derek was right. He wasn't aroused. But his hands settled at Sam's waist anyway, locking their bodies together. "What were those rules you were so interested in at Sierra's?"

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His nostrils flared. Derek was interested, but the wariness of his eyes never vanished. "That was before all the talking."

"Maybe there's more that needs to be said."

"God, I don't even want to think about what that could be."

Now that he'd realized it for himself, Sam wanted to tell Derek. More than anything. "What if I promise it has nothing to do with the case?"

"What else is there?"

"Our fight at the office." He held up a hand to cut Derek off when his mouth opened to argue. "It's not about the case," he reiterated. "It's about us. About the things you said to me. Because you were right. I *am* a hypocritical little shit. You're the only one I'd tolerate hearing that from."

Derek didn't smile. "You already apologized."

"This isn't an apology. This is me saying to you, you're more than important to me." He wished he was just a couple inches taller, so he could look Derek straight in the eye for this. "I love you, Derek."

CHAPTER 5

Derek's hands jolted along Sam's waist, the shock of the announcement manifesting in his suddenly tense muscles. He didn't try to pull away, though. Sam took that as a good sign.

"I'm not saying this to expect to hear it back," he continued. "Just to clear the air some, and make sure you know I'm serious. Because you do know who I am, whether I sound like an asshole or not. You know me better than anyone. And you deserve to know I'm going to do my damndest not to let you down again." He grinned, hoping to lighten the mood. "Though we both know I've got a way of putting my foot smack dab in the biggest pile of shit in the room."

His coarse words did the trick. Derek snorted softly in an almost laugh.

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“Sometimes, I think you do that on purpose.” Derek smoothed his hold again, trailing one hand to the front of the waistband. “Just to see what’ll happen.”

His cock jerked at the close proximity, though he kept his hopes tethered, in case Derek stuck true to his word and he really didn’t want sex that night. “Keeps things interesting, don’t you think?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“You have a problem with that way?”

“Actually, no.” His gaze dropped away from Sam’s eyes, first lower to his mouth, then lower still to the rising bulge in his crotch. A smile started to take root, half-formed and fragile, and he took a deep breath when he lifted his head again. “For the record, I don’t really think you’re a hypocrite. I understand why you can’t tell your family, and I only ever felt sidelined because you haven’t told them about me that one time. It’s not like you’ve met my folks yet, either.”

It was a small gesture, but a profound one, just the same. Sam took it in, held it tight, and refused to forget it. “At least they know I exist.”

The smile blossomed. “Yeah, as the constant thorn in my side.”

“I have that effect on people.”

“It’s not a bad one.”

“I’ll remind you of that the next time I piss you off.”

“You mean, tomorrow?” When Sam chuckled, Derek flipped open the button on his pants, relieving some of the pressure against his erection. “Well, you did it. I wasn’t sure it was possible, but leave it to you to find a way.”

He remained utterly still, though his muscles strained from the effort. He was almost afraid to breathe for fear of doing something

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to make Derek stop. “What did I do this time?”

The sound of his zipper being pulled down filled the room. “Banished Rudy from my head.” Desire-darkened eyes bored into his as Derek molded his hand over Sam’s cock. His underwear still kept them apart, but it was only one more layer to tear away until Sam got Derek back where he wanted him, skin to skin. “Once you get in there, there’s no room for anybody else.”

Derek had told him things like that before, though usually in the dark of night, when they both balanced precariously on the verge between wakefulness and sleep. Sam adored how he could consume Derek’s thoughts like that, because it meant he affected the other man the same way Derek got to him. But hearing it now, under these circumstances, with his declaration still somewhere in the space between them, they sounded different. They sounded...more. Like a declaration all on their own, the only kind someone as reserved as Derek could venture in the wake of a new emotional storm.

Sam took the danger in Derek’s self-exposure away by stretching and taking his mouth in a deep, slow kiss. He felt a tremor against his lips, and realized in astonishment it was Derek quivering, not him. It firmed within moments, but not so quickly that the memory of it wasn’t branded on Sam’s consciousness, there to treasure forever to come.

Derek tightened his arm around Sam’s waist, his muscles steeling as he hoisted Sam upward. The flash of vertigo added to the dizziness already swirling through Sam’s head, but he went with Derek’s intentions, allowing himself to be lifted the few inches off the tiled floor as Derek reversed their positions. His ass hit the granite, and his heels knocked against the island’s cherry side. It leveled their faces, just as Sam had wanted earlier, and he

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tore away from their kisses to swipe his tongue over his swollen lower lip.

“We used the condom in your wallet at Sierra’s,” he reminded.

Derek’s eyes glittered. “Don’t even try and tell me you don’t have one in yours.”

“What if I didn’t?”

“I’d have to do this, instead.”

He shoved Sam farther back onto the island. Sam caught himself with the brace of his palms behind him, but his lower body was still moving, jerked upward by the rough yank of his pants down his legs. His bare skin met the cool granite, and he hissed at the chilly contact.

“Shit,” he muttered. But when he tried to slither forward, Derek flat-handed him in the chest, stopping any forward momentum at all.

“My rules, remember?” He tossed Sam’s pants aside and pushed his knees apart. “You agreed.”

“That was before I knew you had an unresolved kitchen fetish. Do you have any idea how cold this is?”

Derek grinned. “My rules,” he repeated. “But I’ll warm you up.”

Broad hands slid beneath Sam’s thighs and tugged him as close to the edge as he could get without falling off. Without letting go, Derek bent down, his dark head obstructing Sam’s view. He didn’t need to see to feel, though, and the wet heat of Derek’s mouth enveloped his aching cock.

“Okay,” Sam said on a rush of breath. “That just might work.”

Derek’s response was to slide down his shaft. The tip nudged at the back of his throat, and for a split second, Sam thought he was going to swallow him down on the first pass. Though it wouldn’t

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necessarily be unusual, considering Derek's bossy mood, it would be surprising.

Derek didn't. He stopped there with his lips tight around the length and slid his fingers behind Sam's balls.

He was still loose from fucking in the bathroom, allowing Derek to easily push two fingers in without hurting him. Sam gulped for air when Derek started to move, both head and hand in tandem, and rebalanced himself on one arm to have his other free to touch Derek.

He threaded through the dark hair first, marveling not for the first time at how soft it was. Then, it was down to his jaw, bristly from the need to shave. At the first flutter of his fingertips, Derek pulled off Sam's cock and held it still, turning his head enough to run his coarse cheek down its sensitive length.

Sam bucked at the unexpected scrape, gritting his teeth as he fought to regain control again. Chills alternated with licks of fire along his legs. He was actually grateful for the cooler temperature of the countertop as he settled back down again. It helped to ground his reactions and concentrate on how amazing everything felt.

"All right. Your rules are pretty damn good," he managed to say. He grinned when he caught Derek's eye. "That doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to follow them whenever you want, though."

A twinkle appeared in those warm brown depths. Derek ducked his lashes and sank back down the shaft, his tongue swirling along the ridge and then down the thick vein on the underside. With the stretch of fingers tossed into the mix, too, Sam had to dig his heels into the island to keep from falling apart.

No more exploring if it was going to make Derek stop. Sam

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cradled the back of his head instead, momentarily awed by the man between his legs, by the fact that there was still a future there for them and it even looked bright. He hadn't scared Derek away by confessing the depth of his feelings. He didn't fool himself into thinking Derek reciprocated, not until he heard the words, but from what Derek *had* said, and how he was treating Sam now, he was damn sure it wouldn't take long.

The anticipation of Derek taking him into his throat was slowly killing him. His willingness to acquiesce to Derek's control eroded with each passing second, impatience swelling in proportion to the fire building beneath his skin. How was he supposed to endure this? This was more devastating than Derek's usual blow jobs. This was torment flaying him raw.

It only grew worse when Derek changed the angle of his hand to make it easier for his thumb to caress along Sam's balls. Each touch barely skimmed over the sensitive skin, but it might as well have been a lit flame for as much as it seared through him. Unable to stop himself, he dug into Derek's skull, earning a soft grunt. The puff of breath across the base of his cock was too much to take, and his hips jerked, driving more of his shaft deeper into Derek's mouth.

Whether Derek wanted it to happen, or he'd been powerless to stop it, the tip of Sam's cock pushed into his throat. Muscles squeezed, the most exquisite constriction Sam could imagine. His eyes rolled back into his head, and he shivered uncontrollably. The tremors worsened when Derek took him in the rest of the way, his nose burying in the dark hair curling at the root.

He'd been wrong. *This* would kill him. It would be the sweetest way to go, though. Death by blow job.

Just when he thought he wouldn't be able to take it anymore,

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Derek slid up, his free hand circling at the base to keep it steady while he panted for breath. The wash of heat across Sam's wet skin stoked the coils in his gut tighter, but he barely had the opportunity to gulp down air himself before Derek swallowed him down again. Three fingers went into his ass this time. Three fingers hooked to rub along his prostate.

Three seconds was all it took for everything to surge beyond any rein he might still have.

Derek sucked hard, pulling up so that Sam unloaded on the back of his tongue instead of straight down his throat. It loosened the tightness, but not much, not nearly enough to diminish his orgasm, not when his scorching lips created even more suction. There wasn't anything for Sam to grab onto except Derek's head and shoulders, but not even that seemed enough.

Derek saved him from toppling off and making a fool of himself by suddenly straightening and curling his arm possessively around Sam's waist. He yanked Sam flush against his chest. Sam could barely catch his breath yet, but Derek didn't seem to care. He sealed their mouths together, forcing his tongue past Sam's slower to respond lips.

The moment their tongues touched, Sam knew why.

The salty taste of his come filled his mouth, alerting his senses all over again. He swallowed more than once to get it all, knowing Derek wouldn't stop kissing him until every drop was gone. He did this occasionally, usually when Sam least expected it, so it always took Sam by surprise like this. He'd never bothered to figure out why, but it drove him crazy with lust to have Derek share with him. He clung to Derek even harder, trying to will away the shaking overwhelming his body.

Derek's mouth was wet and shiny when he let Sam go. Sam

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wanted to taste him all over again.

“Still cold?” Derek’s hoarse voice was the sexiest thing he had ever heard.

Sam wriggled a little against the countertop, pretending to test it out. “Nah, it’s good. But remind me never to eat in this kitchen again.”

Derek laughed and swooped in for another kiss, this one slower and far too short. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“You think everything I say is a challenge.”

“It usually is.”

“Then I challenge you to beat me to the bedroom.”

Though he tensed to slide off the island, Derek’s rigid embrace stopped him. “Not the bedroom.” Derek lifted his hand. The spare Trojan Sam kept in his wallet saluted him from between Derek’s index and middle fingers. “Right here.”

Laughing, Sam tried to pluck it away, but Derek held it easily beyond his reach. “When did you get that?”

“I have my ways.” The devilish smirk reappeared. “If I give it to you, it’s to put it on me, not to try and bolt for the bed. Got it?”

“Not yet, but apparently, I will.”

With a surprise stretch, he grabbed it out of Derek’s hand, scooting as far back onto the counter as he could get. While he ripped open the foil, Derek worked hastily at his fly, his belt clanking quietly as he pulled it open and shoved his pants down his hips. His thick cock sprang free, the tip glistening with pre-come. Sam itched to feel the hot skin pulsing against his palm.

Derek braced his hands on the edge of the granite, giving Sam only the room he needed to work the rubber over his shaft. It tilted his body forward, put his lips in kissing distance, but when he made a move, Sam ducked his head to the side and out of his way.

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"I can't see when you do that," Sam complained good-naturedly.

"Okay." His path veered, teeth raking down Sam's neck. "I'll do this instead."

This proved to be biting at Sam's shoulder through his shirt, hard enough to leave a wet stain on the fabric. The condom slipped once when Sam's hands jerked, but when he grabbed Derek's cock at the base to hold it still, Derek responded with a muffled groan.

"Hey, you deserve everything you get." Sam rolled the condom in place, twisting his wrist to give Derek's balls a quick squeeze when he was done. "But it'll all be worth it. I promise."

Derek stopped him from promising anything else by fusing their mouths together again, pulling him forward until he was balanced dangerously on the edge. Instinct told him to scoot back, but Derek's solid body kept him steady, hands cupping his ass, tilting his hips, pulling him apart to allow the blunt head of Derek's cock to nudge against his opening.

His molten muscles made it infinitely easier to take him in without more prep than they'd done. Sam clung to Derek, his legs wrapped around his lean hips, and rode out the burn with welcome shivers. He was almost disappointed when Derek was fully sheathed. The stretch had been almost as good as the blow job.

Derek didn't waste any time setting up a long, smooth rhythm. He scooped his arms beneath Sam's to hold his shoulders from behind. The position let him drive into Sam's ass with equally strong strokes, without losing the friction between them or the delicate balance they maintained. Sam didn't think for a second he was going to come again, not so soon, but that didn't stop him from drowning in the hunger Derek didn't bother restraining, or join in on the constant moans coming from their throats.

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The echo of his declaration never disappeared. It punctuated every thrust of Derek's body, every moment of joining, every gasp for air. Sam didn't regret it. He'd tell anyone who wanted to know. He'd probably tell people who didn't give a rat's ass, too, if he didn't think Derek might not appreciate the breach in their privacy. Most importantly, he had plans to make sure Derek didn't forget. This was more than simple dating. This was together as long as he could convince Derek to stick it out. Sacrificing whatever he had to, to ensure that it happened.

Derek didn't last. His tempo became erratic, harsh and desperate. So did his kisses. Sam thought he heard Derek say something, but then he slammed into his ass with new strength, his body going rigid. His cock jerked as he shot, over and over, and he muffled any further sound by resting his forehead on Sam's shoulder.

Sam just held him.

The counter was growing cold against his numb ass when Derek shifted. "I really wish we didn't have to go into the office tomorrow," Derek said. "I am not looking forward to being up in five hours."

"And here I thought you just wanted to keep me in bed." Reluctantly, Sam let him go, watching with heavy-lidded eyes as Derek stepped back and peeled off the condom. He hopped off when he had room, and his legs wobbled for a moment until he found his equilibrium again. "If it helps, I'll take the lead on Gena's interview. All you have to do is sit there and look smart."

"I thought I did that anyway."

"Then, see? It'll be a breeze."

Derek padded around the kitchen, grabbing two glasses from the cupboard and taking them to the refrigerator to fill them with

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water. “You don’t have to do that. I told Rudy I’d pull my weight on this case, and I meant it.”

“And I don’t doubt that. I’m counting on you to play hardball with the insurance guys.” He knew he had to tread carefully. He was still unsure what Derek might consider hotspots. “We both know that given both of us walking into a room of them, they’ll take you more seriously without batting an eyelash in my direction.”

For several seconds, the only sound in the room was the rush of water. Derek met Sam’s waiting gaze with a half-smile when he passed over the full glass.

“And that’ll be their biggest mistake,” he said. “Because that makes you the dangerous one. They’ll never see you coming then.”

His heart pounded. “So do we have a deal?”

“There’s no reason to deal. We’re a team.” Derek held up his glass in a mock toast. “A great team, actually. No matter where we are.”

Any lingering fears Sam had about the reception of his feelings disintegrated, leaving him elated and grinning like he’d just won the lottery. He lifted his glass and clinked it against Derek’s.

“No matter where we are.”

VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

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* * *

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