

WRANGLERS

JUDGMENT



VIVIEN DEAN

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...Sam's succulent mouth was too much to resist anymore. Derek bent his head and crushed their lips together, forcing past Sam's nonexistent defenses to plunder in the hot depths.

They didn't do this at work. Derek had a very clean line he kept between his personal life and his private, though that had been noticeably blurred ever since they were both assigned to Gena's case. Still, he didn't indulge in his desire for Sam when they were on the clock, and any liberties he took with Sam's body within the confines of the office only took place after hours.

That didn't stop him from reaching for Sam's hip, though, and yanking their bodies closer. Or prevent Sam from grabbing the back of Derek's head and holding him down, lashing back as hungrily as Derek did. If anything, it made it better, knowing this was dangerous, knowing how close he was to his personal boundaries. He didn't test them nearly as often as Sam would like him to. For anyone else, he wouldn't.

Sam was different.

Sam had always been different.

They broke apart, panting. Sam's swollen mouth glistened, beckoning Derek back, but even more enticing was the swelling lower down. His erection pushed against Derek's upper thigh, nudging at his aching balls. It always amazed him how responsive Sam was. The man could get hard just from a kiss. Then again, so could Derek, though that was a reaction reserved only for Sam.

"Is this your idea of celebrating?" Sam asked.

"This is just the start." He tightened his grip, bending to graze his mouth over Sam's salty jaw...

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WRANGLERS: JUDGMENT

BY

VIVIEN DEAN

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CHAPTER 1

The brush whispered along his skin, tickling at the corners of his eyes, sweeping over his forehead in long, broad strokes. Already, heat wrapped around him, and the threat of more to come restarted his mental debate about his apparel. He needed to be taken seriously. A lot rode on the next half-hour, more than he would ever admit to almost anyone. Being unprepared, especially over something so much within his control, was not acceptable. The fight had been too hard to lose at this junction.

“Make sure you use the sparkly green eye shadow.” The Texas drawl came behind his left ear, slower and more pronounced than normal. Slow enough to make the hair on his body stand up to attention. “It brings out his eyes.”

Derek Rossi opened those same eyes and met a laughing set of

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blue ones in the mirror in front of him. Under other circumstances, the sight of Sam Kimball always sent adrenaline zipping and zapping through his system, but since his body was already in overdrive in anticipation of what was to come, Derek didn't notice anything but a familiar sense of annoyance.

"You're late," he said.

With a shrug, Sam hopped up in the chair next to him. "Considering the show hasn't even started yet, I'd say I'm right on time."

"Not if you don't want to shine like a greased pig under all those lights."

"Have you ever even seen a greased pig?" Sam rested his ankle on his knee, getting more comfortable. "Besides, you're the one with the beady eyes."

"I do not have—" He stopped at the sight of Sam's grin. Damn it, he'd walked right into that one. At his far side, Juanita the makeup girl dropped her powder brush onto her tray and moved behind Derek to better view her handiwork in the mirror, where Derek caught her eyes in the reflection. "Will you please explain to my colleague how this works?"

Sam laughed before she could speak. "I have done this before, you know."

This was the morning news show, broadcast throughout the entire Bay Area. The producers had been trying for weeks to get interviews with Derek and Sam, but it wasn't until the latest development on the case that was drawing them so much attention that they agreed it was advantageous to put it before the public eye. Now that the time had arrived, though, Derek couldn't shake the sudden nerves threatening his calm.

It didn't help that Sam didn't look bothered by it at all. In fact,

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he seemed just as relaxed sitting in a director's chair while Juanita started sponging foundation across his face as he did when he and Derek went out for dinner after a long day's work.

Derek scowled. Once upon a time, he would have hated the little jerk for such aplomb. Now, it just bugged the hell out of him that his lover of the past nine months was handling this so much more gracefully than Derek was.

He even looked good in the makeup.

Very good.

Discreetly, Derek crossed his legs to hide his rising erection.

"Did they ever give us an answer about whether or not they're going to use the footage we gave them of Gena?" Sam asked.

"See, now if you'd shown up on time, you'd already know the answer to that question."

"You're not even going to ask why I didn't get here until just now?"

The twinkle in Sam's eye was not helping Derek's arousal in the slightest. Those bright blue pools danced with his usual vitality, a lock of brown hair falling across his forehead before Juanita swept it out of the way of her sponge. Though he wasn't smiling now, as soon as he did, Sam's dimples would do half their work for them, charming the channel's audience into siding with them, and most importantly, with Gena.

Some of the knots winding through Derek eased against his will. He was going to have Sam right next to him. Together, they were unbeatable.

Pretending to be bored by the whole change in subject, Derek shifted in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. "Why were you late?"

Sam turned his head to the side to give Juanita room to run the

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sponge along his jaw. “I got a phone call from our favorite deadbeat doctor.”

Derek’s pulse quickened. “Bazan? Are you kidding me?”

“Would I kid about something this serious?”

Actually, Sam would, but Derek had known him too long now not to see the truth in his face. They had been trying to get to the doctor who had turned Gena in to her health insurance company ever since getting the case three months earlier. He’d avoided their initial attempts at deposition by being out of the country. His lawyers had managed to shield him more than either Sam or Derek liked. Even the first set of interrogatories from the insurance company pertaining to his services had required a second set, and then a third, just because they’d been so skimpy on their responses.

“So what did he say?”

Sam’s eyes glittered. “Oh, this and that.”

Derek waited for him to elaborate, but when it became obvious Sam was going to milk this for all it was worth, he growled in frustration. “Don’t do this to me. Not five minutes before we go on the air.”

“I could do it two minutes before instead.”

“Sam!”

His laughter was bold and clear. “You’re so easy. Fine. He’s ready to talk. And I mean talk. Who he dealt with, what the other side’s been saying to him.” Sam leaned across the arm of his chair, lowering his voice. “He claims he tried pulling the claims when it became obvious they were going after Gena. That he wasn’t interested in seeing her prosecuted for just trying to get the treatment she needed. *And* that they financed his trip out of the country because they were so sure they could make this quick.”

For a second, Derek couldn’t speak. He’d simply hoped to get a

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chance to corner the son of a bitch and get some real answers out of the man. The hints he dropped about what he might actually say surpassed anything he could have ever dreamed.

“Is he prepared to testify to any of that?”

Sam sat back in his chair, facing forward again to let Juanita put the finishing touches on. “You think I’d make you worry about whether or not I’d show up if I hadn’t gotten him to promise just that?”

Derek could have kissed him then, right in front of everybody, appearances be damned. Hell, as soon as he got two seconds alone with Sam, he was going to show him exactly how glad he was that Sam had pushed Bazan to the line. It didn’t matter that Bazan had called them, or why after all this time, for that matter. What mattered was that, once again, Sam was responsible for bringing an extra light to his day. Of course, he didn’t usually do that because of something work-related, not since this was their first, and only, case they’d ever shared the same side on. But that just made it all the better.

Pulling off the tissue that had been used to protect his shirt collar, Derek tossed it on the makeup table and rose to his feet. “Make sure you use extra powder on him,” he instructed Juanita. “With as big as his head is today, it already looks like a hot air balloon. He doesn’t need the extra ten pounds the camera puts on.”

“Don’t listen to him, darlin’. He’s just jealous because the camera’s going to love me.”

“Only because it finally makes you life-size,” he shot back with a smile.

“Two minutes!” The floor manager rushed by, pausing long enough behind Sam’s chair to repeat the time before scurrying off again.

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“Two? What happened to five?” Derek said.

“Time flies when you’re having fun.” Sam swept a discerning eye over both of them in the mirror, then hopped up with a broad smile. “Come on, Derek. This is supposed to be fun, and you look like someone just sat on your dog.”

He turned on his heel and headed for the stage area. “I do not.”

“All right, your cat,” Sam said, falling easily in step beside him.

“We can’t fuck this up, Sam.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I think you’re forgetting we haven’t actually won the case yet.”

“Ah, you said ‘yet.’ Which means you fully acknowledge we’re going to. Which also means you need to unclench, or the entire Bay Area is going to think you’re scared of losing.”

Derek halted, and Sam stopped with him. Derek tried glaring down at him, but after a moment, gave up and shook his head. “You’re impossible.”

“And you love it.” The hair Juanita had just carefully combed into place fell back across Sam’s forehead when he jerked his head toward the nearby lights. “Now let’s go show ‘em how the big boys do it.”

“Big boys, huh? Someone’s got delusions of grandeur today.”

“Nah, I’ve just got good company. Come on.”

With a smile, Derek followed him to the edge of the set. It was hard not to let Sam’s confidence rub off on him, so he stopped trying. If Bazan was coming over to their side, Gena’s case was in the bag.

* * *

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The playback of Gena's performance, a mere twenty-second snippet of her most recent show, went to black on the monitor, and Derek turned his attention back to the woman who was interviewing them without missing a beat. "That's why this kind of manipulation of the system isn't acceptable, Rhona," he said. "For as long as she has access to treatment that works, to the combination of drugs that has proven for the last four years that she can be as healthy as you or me, Gena Sweet can be the voice of a disease that doesn't have to be the death sentence it used to be. By denying her coverage, they're killing her. It's as simple as that."

He smiled as she thanked both of them for the interview, and held it for as long as the cameras were live on them. As soon as the floor manager gave them the signal, he sighed and rolled his neck.

Rhona unclipped the microphone from her jacket with a smile. "It's a shame this isn't going to jury. You two would have the public eating out of your hands by now."

Sam grinned. "The way our luck's holding, we won't see the inside of a courtroom anyway."

Her laughter was bright and real. "You two are confident, I'll give you that. You're not worried about jinxing it?"

"That would imply it's possible for us to lose."

With a snort, Derek stood and stretched. "Meanwhile, the one of us still back here on earth is going to work his ass off to make sure we won't."

"I work my ass off just fine up here in the clouds, thank you very much."

"Well, you're doing something up there in the clouds." He held his hand out to Rhona, ignoring Sam's amused smile. "Thank you for having us on."

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She shook it, her eyes twinkling. "You two were a treat. If you want to come back after the case is over, you're more than welcome."

Derek watched her walk away, then cocked a single brow at Sam. "We won't see the inside of a courtroom?"

"What? I didn't say it on air."

"No, you said it to the person who'd be more than willing to eviscerate us for a story if we lose."

Sam brushed him away with a scoff and a wave of his hand. "She won't eviscerate us. She liked us."

"We gave her a good sound bite."

"And we'll give her another one when we win." He gave Derek no choice but to follow him as he made his way back to the makeup tables. "What happened to all that confidence she liked so much during the interview? Where's that guy? He's the one who's going to win for Gena."

"He's still here," Derek grumbled. "I just wish you'd play it a little closer to the chest when it's not just us. This is exactly the kind of thing that's going to come back and bite us in the ass if something happens we don't expect."

"If something happens we don't anticipate, we're doing something wrong."

"We didn't expect Bazan to call."

Sam bent in front of the makeup mirror and grabbed a tissue. "And he's our ace in the hole. So stop expecting the worst, and let's get to the office and get Bazan on record." Their eyes met in the reflection, and though his still sparkled with adrenaline from the interview, concern shadowed them enough for Derek to notice. "He wouldn't have come to us if he didn't see us as the winning side. Focus on that if you don't want to think about how good we

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really are.”

Though Sam had a point, he wasn’t getting the whole picture. “It’s not that I don’t think we’re good.”

“Good.” Sam started scrubbing away the worst of the makeup. “Because we are.”

“It’s that.” Derek edged nearer, glancing around to ensure nobody was paying them any attention before leaning in and pinning Sam between his arms. “You get cocky, and you get sloppy. We are too close to the finish line to blow the race now. I just want you to take this a little more seriously, that’s all.”

Sam’s smile disappeared. “You think I’m not taking this seriously?”

“I think you get caught up in the show sometimes, and forget why it is we’re doing this, yeah.”

“I wouldn’t have almost blown our best shot at public favor by being late if I wasn’t serious.” It was the closest he would ever admit that he’d cut it close, and even that, Derek knew was a huge concession. “Give me a little credit here for not being a total idiot, Derek.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot.”

“No, you just treat me like one sometimes.” Tossing the used tissue onto the table, he straightened abruptly, forcing Derek to step back or risk getting headbutted. But Sam closed the distance again, lowering his voice to add, “You don’t want to have this fight here. Not that I wouldn’t love to go toe-to-toe with you on this, but when we’ve got an audience, this isn’t about what you think of me as a lawyer. This is about Gena’s lawyers making a spectacle of themselves, and I am not about to give up the ground we’ve won just because you think you’re superior to me.”

He turned on his heel and headed into the murk, away from any

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of the lights and toward the soundstage exit. Derek took one look at himself in the mirror, decided the makeup didn't look that bad, and took off after him.

He caught up at the elevator, but refrained from speaking when others joined them for the ride down to the parking garage. Sam's shoulders were stiff, his gaze locked ahead of him. If Derek needed any kind of sign that he was pissed off, that was it. Worse, he wasn't entirely sure Sam didn't have every right to be angry. From his perspective, it probably looked pretty bad.

But failure to consider other perspectives had always been Sam's weakness.

When they got out of the elevator, Derek followed Sam around the corner, away from his own car and toward Sam's truck. Their hard soles reverberated against the concrete walls, and the smell of exhaust reminded him all too well of their very first date, a dinner Derek hadn't really meant to invite Sam to, a night that had ended with Sam pinned to Derek's desk. Everything had changed that night. Damn if he was going to let anything change this time, though.

Sam unlocked the truck remotely, but as he approached the driver's side, he said without looking back at Derek, "Stalker chic doesn't suit you."

Derek slammed his hand against the edge of the door, preventing Sam from opening it. "I don't think I'm superior to you."

Calm blue eyes fixed up at him. A frisson of fear went through Derek's veins. When Sam went calm, everything went to hell. "We're still in public."

"And this isn't dissension. This is me, wound up because we're so damn close I can taste it." He leaned in, close enough to smell

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Sam over the parking garage, close enough to kiss if he thought Sam wouldn't bite him for trying at that moment. "I'm willing to admit I need to relax if you're willing to say maybe you shouldn't have been so flip with Rhona."

"That wasn't flip." A muscle twitched at the corner of his mouth. "That was charming."

Inwardly, Derek sighed with relief. A joking Sam was not an angry Sam. Right now, he couldn't risk losing his best ally and strongest support. He let go of the door and retreated a step, crossing his arms over his chest and pulling himself up to his full height in mock annoyance. "You were glib."

"She liked me."

"She liked *us*."

"Always gotta put yourself in the thick of things, don't you?"

"Someone's got to keep you out of trouble."

With a smile, Sam pulled his door open and paused, half in, half out. "I do have a tendency to run off at the mouth a little. I should probably be a little more careful with that when I'm around the press."

The last of Derek's fear vanished. "I'll just pull the stick out of my ass and beat you over the head with it until you shut up."

Sam grimaced. "Remind me we have to work on your imagery when we get back to the office. First the greased pig, and now this? You're slipping, Rossi."

"You'll have to keep me on the straight and narrow until after the case is over, then."

"Well, the narrow, anyway."

Shaking his head and chuckling, Derek pulled his keys out of his pocket and backed out of Sam's way. "I'll grab us some coffees on the way back to the office. You want anything else?"

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“Yeah, but we’ll have to wait for that until we don’t have any witnesses around.” He slid into the front seat and tipped a sly smile back at Derek. “It’s all about playing it close to the chest, right?”

That smile would be the death of him, and frankly, he would have it no other way. “Right.”

CHAPTER 2

“They’ll never let that through.”

“We won’t know if we don’t try.”

“They’re not stupid, Sam. That opens the door on negligence.”

“Which is why we have to ask.”

“We don’t need to ask. We can get that door opened another way.”

“How?”

A knock at the conference room door stopped Derek from answering. He frowned as he glanced up and saw his secretary Nadia’s hazy form through the frosted glass. He’d specifically asked not to be disturbed. “Come in!” As soon as she poked her blonde head inside, he added, “This better be important.”

“Oh, I think you’ll want this interruption.” The smile she

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couldn't hide played on her wide mouth. "Mr. Prather and Mr. Kaminski are asking to meet with you. Now."

The names made both Derek and Sam straighten, all annoyance forgotten. Prather and Kaminski represented the insurance company trying to sue Gena. They had been smug, arrogant assholes from the start, canceling half their appointments, scheduling depositions when it was inconvenient for Derek and Sam, going to the press long before Derek was comfortable exposing details of their case. They had been snide and deprecating toward Gena, and more than once, Derek had suppressed the urge to forget about the law and just deck the bastards.

They had never once sought an unscheduled meeting, especially on Derek and Sam's turf. This could only be because of Bazan.

Sam was on his feet first, rolling his sleeves back down and doing up the cuffs. "Tell them we'll be right there."

Nadia raised her brows and looked to Derek. He nodded in agreement.

"Offer them some coffee and put them in Conference Room D. Tell them I'll be with them as soon as I can."

When Nadia had gone, Sam said, "Conference Room D? There's not enough room in there to swing a dead cat."

Derek smiled as he started gathering up their deposition notes. "I know."

Sam stared at him for several seconds before understanding dawned in his eyes. "They're going to be sweating buckets by the time we get in there."

"Well, they did catch us in the middle of an important meeting. It's not our fault if they have to wait."

"You're not worried about them taking off?"

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“They came to us.” He squared the edges on the stack of papers and slid them into the case file. “That means something’s up.”

Sam was still too lost in his own ruminations to do much good with the clean-up. Derek finished the job and then frowned. “Roll your sleeves back up.”

“What? Why?”

“Strategy. If we look like we’re not concerned with impressing them, they’ll go on the defensive as soon as we walk in the door.”

Sam didn’t look like he believed that theory, but he obeyed Derek’s direction. Ten minutes had elapsed by the time they returned the case to Nadia’s desk for filing and headed for the tiny conference room tucked between the bathroom and the server.

Prather and Kaminski screamed privilege. The first time Derek had met them, he hadn’t been surprised to discover Kaminski knew his parents through charity events for Stanford, though when he’d asked his dad about him, even Steve Rossi had few nice things to say about the man. The most magnanimous comment had been, “He knows his money.” Derek could only hope Kaminski knew enough to do the smart thing on Gena’s case.

Neither lawyer was sitting when Derek pushed open the door, though both turned in his direction when he entered. “Gentlemen,” he said with a not quite apologetic smile. “Sorry to keep you waiting. It’s been one of those days, you know?”

Prather, a stout redhead with a full beard that did nothing but draw attention to his sagging jowls, stepped forward and held out his hand in greeting. “You had an early start, we saw.”

Their handshake was brief, and Derek held back from glancing across at Sam. “And it’s looking to be a late finish. What can we do for you gentlemen today?”

Kaminski turned to the table and opened the briefcase he’d set

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there. "It's come to our attention Dr. Bazan has contacted you."

"Don't you mean, *finally* contacted us?"

Now, Derek cut a frown at Sam, then braced his hands on the edge of the table and bent toward Kaminski. "You're not seriously going to try and keep us from deposing him again, are you? Because that would just be sad, even for you two."

Kaminski froze, a single piece of paper in his hand. "You don't want to depose him."

"Really? Considering we've been trying to get him to talk to us for months now, I'd take that as pretty good proof to the contrary."

"You're as aware as we are that he's been unavailable."

Derek's voice hardened. "Don't go there, Kaminski. Not if you don't want to piss me off."

"I'd say you won't like him when he's angry, but you already don't like us," Sam quipped. "So why don't we cut the shit here and you tell us what this is about?"

When the paper rattled slightly in Kaminski's hand, Derek smiled. The man was easy to shake, no matter what he charged an hour. They would wipe the floor with him, if they ever got him into a courtroom.

"Our clients have requested that we sit down and try to reach an amicable agreement," he said tightly. "They are concerned the case has been compromised after your little display this morning."

Derek straightened, retreating from the table to stand next to Sam. Together, they presented the same front they'd done from the start. "Did you hear that, Sam? We made a display this morning."

Sam made a curious noncommittal sound in the back of his throat. "And here I thought we'd just done an interview. Maybe I should give Rhona a call and clarify."

Prather stepped forward to join the discussion. Beads of

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perspiration already glistened on his brow. Derek and Sam choosing not to wear jackets had also been a calculated move not to start sweating in the tiny room.

"There is no way Ms. Sweet isn't in the wrong here," Prather said. "But considering the circumstances, our clients are willing to drop the suit against her. In the interest of her health, of course."

"They didn't give a flying fig about her health when they filed the suit in the first place," Sam argued. "If they're running scared now, it's because they know they're going to lose."

Derek held up a hand to stop Sam from continuing. "What happens then?"

He felt Sam's look of disbelief as well as he saw the flash of victory in Kaminski's face. He dismissed Sam's for now. His intentions would be clear enough very soon.

"Ms. Sweet goes her way, we go ours." Kaminski slid the paper he'd been holding across the table, though Derek didn't bother to glance down at it. "An amicable parting of ways."

"Meaning she no longer has coverage."

"Of course not."

"And that's it."

Kaminski frowned. "Well, yes."

Derek caught the edge of the agreement and slid it back. "Then, no deal. Because you know and I know that if she tries to get coverage someplace else, she'll be turned down for a pre-existing condition. And anyplace that *would* take her on is going to charge her an arm and a leg. She can't afford it. If that's the best your client has to offer, then tell them no, and we'll see you in court."

Kaminski bristled. "You're taking a big risk, aren't you? Just because you're playing for sympathy with the public doesn't mean you're going to get to the judge, too."

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"This morning's interview wasn't about gaining sympathy," Sam interjected. "Because if we were really interested in that, we would have fought harder to keep it a jury trial."

"Yeah," Derek said. "Didn't you guys wonder why we let that one slide without a fight? I would have. I would have been quaking in my boots at that point, because I would've been wondering what kind of ace we had up our sleeve to make it so we didn't care who saw this case."

Prather and Kaminski exchanged a look, one that made Derek want to crow in victory. They were on the ropes, and they knew it. It was only a matter of how much they could get from them before they had nowhere else to go.

Sam put the finishing touch on by brushing past Derek to head for the door. "You're not going to need me here for this kind of stonewalling. I'll just go call Gena to let her know that we've turned down their offer."

He made it all the way to opening it before Kaminski spoke up.

"Our clients will never agree to money."

Sam paused, while Derek said, "Who said anything about money?"

Kaminski didn't know who to look at, but eventually settled on Derek. "You did."

"No, I said it would be expensive for her to try and get coverage with another company. I never indicated she wouldn't be satisfied with full coverage from yours."

"That was never the policy she had!"

"Maybe not. But that's the one she needs."

Kaminski had gone red, the flush creeping beneath his shirt collar. Derek maintained his bored mask as Prather pushed past his partner, reaching into the briefcase to pull out a different piece of

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paper.

“Our client will expect certain concessions if they agree to this,” he said. “For instance, no more stunts like this morning.”

Sam eased the door shut again, giving Derek time to pretend to consider it. “I think that’s probably doable,” Derek said. More than doable, since going on afterward would look too much like the case had been about them instead of Gena.

“That means Ms. Sweet refrains from discussing the terms of the agreement, as well.”

“As long as she gets to make it clear her medical care is no longer a concern,” Sam said. “She is not just going to roll over and pretend this never happened.”

Silently, Derek thanked Sam for pushing it. He would have accepted a gag order if it meant Gena got her coverage, but a statement like the one Sam suggested would still make it clear that she’d won. The papers could extrapolate a lot from it.

Kaminski yanked a chair out and sat down, pulling a pen from an inside pocket at the same time. “Then let’s fine-tune this settlement, shall we, gentlemen?”

Derek didn’t care that Kaminski looked like he would rather be sitting in a dentist’s chair, getting a root canal without anesthesia. He pulled out the chair for Sam first and then took one himself, not bothering to hide his smile anymore.

They’d won. That was all that mattered.

* * *

Derek managed to keep his composure even when Nadia trailed after him with a barrage of questions. It didn’t help that Sam was grinning like the Cheshire cat, and every time she looked to him

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for confirmation, he winked at her, but Derek wasn't going to chastise him for being excited about this particular mark in their win column. In spite of all the good faith Gena and her half-brother Rudy—Derek's immediate boss, and the youngest partner in the history of the firm—had always had in them, Derek's doubts in the beginning that they'd actually be able to pull this off had kept him as distanced emotionally from the case as he could get. Sam had played along with it, especially since he was just glad Derek had agreed to the case in the first place.

Right now, Derek was glad, too. He hadn't wanted to risk getting pigeonholed when he took the case, but if he'd known then what he knew now, he wouldn't have hesitated. The win for Gena was worth it. Sam had been right about that from the start.

It took his office door shutting behind him to finally crack his veneer.

"We did it." Before Sam could venture farther in behind him, Derek turned on his heel and braced both palms on the door, effectively locking Sam in place. "We need to celebrate."

Sam tilted up his head, his brilliant gaze even more so in the heat of their victory. "If I'd known you got this hot and bothered over winning, I would've thrown that first case, just to have a better shot at getting in your pants."

"I wouldn't have respected you as much."

"You barely respected me then at all."

"And look where it's gotten us now."

Sam's succulent mouth was too much to resist anymore. Derek bent his head and crushed their lips together, forcing past Sam's nonexistent defenses to plunder in the hot depths.

They didn't do this at work. Derek had a very clean line he kept between his personal life and his private, though that had been

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noticeably blurred ever since they were both assigned to Gena's case. Still, he didn't indulge in his desire for Sam when they were on the clock, and any liberties he took with Sam's body within the confines of the office only took place after hours.

That didn't stop him from reaching for Sam's hip, though, and yanking their bodies closer. Or prevent Sam from grabbing the back of Derek's head and holding him down, lashing back as hungrily as Derek did. If anything, it made it better, knowing this was dangerous, knowing how close he was to his personal boundaries. He didn't test them nearly as often as Sam would like him to. For anyone else, he wouldn't.

Sam was different.

Sam had always been different.

They broke apart, panting. Sam's swollen mouth glistened, beckoning Derek back, but even more enticing was the swelling lower down. His erection pushed against Derek's upper thigh, nudging at his aching balls. It always amazed him how responsive Sam was. The man could get hard just from a kiss. Then again, so could Derek, though that was a reaction reserved only for Sam.

"Is this your idea of celebrating?" Sam asked.

"This is just the start." He tightened his grip, bending to graze his mouth over Sam's salty jaw. "Let's cancel the rest of the day and go back to my place. I've got a lot of adrenaline to work off."

Deep in his chest, Sam chuckled. "Considering you're about to pound me through your office door with Nadia on the other side, I'd have to agree with that assessment."

"So are we on?"

"We're—"

The buzzing of his phone made both of them jump, though Derek refused to let go of Sam just yet. He glared at the phone

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over his shoulder, waiting to see if it would come again, daring it not to.

He growled when another insistent buzz filled the room.

"I should've told Nadia to hold calls, too," he grumbled as he marched to his desk.

"Maybe we're about to get another surprise," Sam said. "Look at what happened when she interrupted us in the conference room."

Derek had no idea what it could possibly be, but he held back from snapping when he picked up the phone. It was a good thing, too. It wasn't Nadia.

"I knew you'd do it," Rudy said, his warm voice richer than usual. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." At Sam's curious glance, Derek silently mouthed, *Rudy*. "Did Nadia tell you the good news?"

"I caught opposing counsel walking out. You two had a lot of balls, setting up a meeting with them the same day as your interview."

"That wasn't us." Derek detailed the specifics of the afternoon, filling him in on everything that had been agreed upon. Normally, he would have waited until speaking with the client, but since Rudy was the reason they'd been given the case in the first place, he deserved more than Derek's usual.

"Gena's going to be pleased about this."

"I think a lot of people are going to be pleased about this. If it all works out, there should be some kind of precedence for others wanting the same kind of treatment."

"No 'ifs.' Positive thinking. And speaking of positive thinking, this requires a celebration. I'm going to talk to Belinda and the others about throwing a party this weekend. We haven't had this good of a reason for a bash in a while."

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“I’ll make sure and tell Sam.” He smiled across the room at the man in question. “I’ll bet he loves that idea.”

“Be ready to present to the partners in ten minutes. Whether they put a gag order on this or not, there’s going to be publicity. We need to be prepared for it.”

His momentary elation nose-dived. So much for a private celebration. “Sure. Ten minutes.”

Sam wasn’t smiling anymore, either, when Derek hung up. “What’s in ten minutes?”

“More work. Sorry. We’ll have to wait on canceling.”

“But we’ll make it up to each other later, right?”

Considering how hard they’d worked just to get to *this* point? “Absolutely.”

CHAPTER 3

When Sam's phone rang at the daily review meeting the next morning, Derek didn't think anything of it. Everyone took their phones in, but office policy dictated they be on silent. People were always walking in and out if something important came through, so when Sam pulled his out of his pocket, looked at the display, then slipped out of the conference room without uttering a word, all Derek did was watch him out of the corner of his eye. It was business hours. It was undoubtedly a client.

There was no reason for him to connect that call with Sam's unannounced appearance in his office an hour later.

"My parents found out about the settlement," Sam said as soon as the door shut behind him.

Derek frowned, waiting for the punchline that never came.

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“Yeah? So?”

“So when they asked what kind of bonuses I might get from this, I mentioned the party this weekend.”

And there was the glimmer of the path he suspected Sam was going to take.

“They’re coming,” Derek said, cutting straight to the chase.

“They’re coming.” Sam flopped into the chair opposite the desk, banging his head once against the back before staring up at the ceiling. “I should never have shown my mom how to set up Google alerts. Now she’s always calling me, even if it’s some other Sam Kimball who shows up online.”

Derek couldn’t say that he thought it was such a big deal, but then again, his relationship with his parents wasn’t quite the same as Sam’s. Sam’s didn’t even know he was gay. Even though Sam had been out of the closet in every other aspect of his life since he’d moved away to college, when it came to his family, mum was the word. Derek didn’t always like it when Sam had to come up with fake dates to placate his parents when they would call to check up on him, but he understood it. Not everybody accepted their lifestyle, and considering how conservative Sam’s family was, this way was better all around.

That didn’t mean Sam liked it. He’d commented more than once that he wished his parents were more like Derek’s. They supported Derek, and always had. But you didn’t get to pick your family, unfortunately. Sam was living proof of moving beyond your roots.

“It might not be so bad,” Derek said. “You’ve never had a chance to show off for them since you moved out here. This is your big opportunity.”

“Might not be so bad?” Sam sat up as definitively as he’d

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slumped down. “Are you kidding me? There isn’t a person in this office who doesn’t know I’m gay. All it takes is for one person to say the wrong thing.”

He’d never seen Sam so worked up before, not about something not related to a case, and even then, he rarely let anyone see him frazzled. That was part of his strength—and for Derek, part of his charm. He went with the flow, like that was the way it was always supposed to be.

“So we ask them not to. That’s not so hard.”

Sam snorted. “There’s going to be alcohol at this party. You don’t think that’s going to loosen their tongues just a bit?”

“Then only introduce them to people you can trust. This doesn’t have to be as bad as you think, Sam.”

His eyes narrowed. “That means they don’t find out about us.”

“I know.”

“And you’re okay with it?”

“I don’t really have a choice in the matter, now do I?”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Because it’s pointless to even try.” Derek rose and came around the corner of the desk, perching on the front edge to be closer to Sam. “Do I wish it didn’t have to be this way? Yes. You know I’d be lying if I said otherwise. But I know why you do it, and I know you don’t do it to try and hurt me. This is about you, and your relationship with your parents, not me. So I’ll do whatever’s necessary to help.”

Sam sighed. “You know I wish it didn’t have to be this way, don’t you?”

“I know.” Reaching down, he caught Sam’s hand and tugged him upward, until Sam stood between his legs, their mouths mostly level with Derek in his lower position. “Did they say how long

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they'd be staying?"

Sam slipped into place, his hips lightly against Derek's, like there was no other place he belonged. "No, but I can't imagine it'll be very long. Dad can't take that much time off work."

"I think I can manage one weekend without you in my back pocket." He brushed a simple, chaste kiss across Sam's unsuspecting mouth. Sam's eyes were shining when he pulled back, and Derek smiled. He liked surprising him with displays like that. They always took Sam off-guard, like they were the last things in the world he thought he'd ever get. "Just as long as I get to put you back in there as soon as they're gone."

"I think I'm going to need a vacation when they're gone."

"Even better. How about we fly to Vegas or LA next weekend and treat ourselves to some real recreation?"

"You hate Vegas."

"But you don't. And you're going to be the one who needs to relax, so you name it, we'll go there." He slid a hand around to give Sam's ass a quick squeeze. "If I hate it that much, I'll just find reasons to keep you in our hotel room."

Sam laughed at that, his dour mood finally dissipating. "I'll start clearing my calendar now. We'll make it a long weekend."

"Very long."

"And you're going to help me make sure the office is all on the right page."

"Done." He stood, straightening his tie. "I'll take care of my team, you take care of yours, and we'll split the rest. Deal?"

"Deal."

* * *

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The only person on his list he didn't speak with personally was Rudy, but of everyone in the office, Rudy was the one he worried least about. He knew how Sam and Derek felt about their relationship and orientation, and had only ever made comments regarding them when solely in their company. He had no fears that if he didn't manage to speak to Rudy before Friday night, Rudy would still be able to pick up on the clues and keep his mouth shut regarding Sam. As far as he was concerned, Sam was just an extremely talented attorney.

When he stopped by Sam's office to give him the update, his secretary told Derek he'd left for the day, an unexpected motion getting filed at the court that had driven him to opposing counsel's offices to get in someone's face. Derek smiled at the image and thanked her, then returned to his desk to shoot off an email instead. This was one thing he didn't want Sam worrying about. He would be a wreck to be around because of his parents as it was.

He was in the middle of sorting through the emails that had stacked up in his inbox while he'd been out when a knock came at the door.

Nadia smiled at him when she entered, but the way she slipped the door shut behind her had him sitting back and frowning.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"No, not wrong." Her hands were empty. No files, no messages. "Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure. Have a seat."

She took the chair opposite and relaxed into it. Though he and Nadia didn't socialize outside of the office, they had a friendly working relationship. She knew things about him that nobody else had until Sam came along, as well as knew when to keep her mouth shut and when to speak up. He liked to think he wasn't an

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ogre to work for, too, compensating her liberally, paying attention on those few occasions when she chatted about her personal life. Her demeanor now suggested this wasn't work-related. He wondered if this was about the accountant on the third floor of the building that she'd recently started dating.

"Sam emailed me, requesting a copy of your schedule," she said.

Derek glanced at his computer. No new messages he hadn't already seen. "Is he back already?" He would've expected Sam to let him know first. Disappointment that he'd contacted Nadia instead swelled before Derek tamped it down again.

"I'm guessing no. It came from his phone."

"Oh." The disappointment fled. "Did he tell you what it was about?"

"He mentioned he was trying to book some flights, but he didn't go into specifics. Are you taking some time off?"

"Yeah, but Rudy's not around so I hadn't bothered putting the request in yet. Not long. Just a few days. A little reward for getting what we wanted for Gena."

Nadia smiled and nodded, like he'd said exactly what she wanted to hear. "I was a little worried, actually. I wasn't sure what was going on after your request about the party."

He frowned again. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're asking everybody not to mention you two around Sam's parents when they get here."

She said it like it should mean something, but damned if Derek knew what it was. "Because Sam's not out to them. I told you that."

"I know. But my first thought was that if you two were as serious as you seem to have gotten, he'd want to tell them,

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wouldn't he? I mean, that's what I'd do. And you told your parents about Sam months ago." She shrugged as she stood again. Clearly, she'd accomplished what she'd set out to do, though it still felt unsettled to him. "I was just worried that you were having problems, that's all. I'd hate for you to get hurt after everything you two have been through."

After everything they'd been through? What the hell did that even mean? As far as Derek was concerned, anything that had gone on in their relationship was like any other relationship. Ups, downs, in between. They'd never come close to breaking up, even on that first weekend in Napa.

If the assessment had come from anyone but Nadia, he probably would have jumped down their throats for overstepping boundaries. He wasn't so sure Nadia didn't deserve that, too. He let her edge toward the door, though, since his response seemed to have resolved whatever fears she'd been harboring.

"We're fine," he assured one last time. "I appreciate the concern, but really, it's not necessary."

"Good." She hesitated at the open door. "Last spring, I never would have believed I'd hear myself saying I think you two are good for each other. But you are." She smiled. "I'll go send that schedule to him now."

The soft click of the door behind her should have made him feel better, but it didn't. He thought her perspective on Sam's decision to keep his parents in the dark was skewed, but he could see why she felt that way.

For as much as he didn't think Sam had even considered such an option, though, he wondered if he realized just how important their relationship was to Derek. Sam had told him he loved him when they'd first taken Gena's case, but Derek had never actually

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said the words back to him. He hadn't thought it was necessary, though he made sure Sam always knew he felt as strongly. The fact that Sam hadn't said it again, though, had him suddenly worrying maybe his actions hadn't been clear enough. He wasn't great in vocalizing his feelings. He never had been. But maybe Sam didn't fully realize how far they extended.

The more he thought about it, the more he decided it was entirely possible there might be some room for doubt. Perhaps one of the reasons Sam was so reluctant to come out to his parents was because he didn't think his relationship with Derek was strong enough to withstand whatever onslaught he imagined would come from it. It would hardly be the first time Sam had projected his own assumptions onto Derek's actions. Just because they didn't fight that often about it anymore didn't preclude it from ever happening again.

That didn't necessarily make him feel better about the possibility, though.

How did he go about fixing that, then? He could say the words, but he didn't think Sam would believe him, not with the events currently going on around them. The words, too, were ephemeral, not concrete enough to satisfy Derek. They made their livings twisting words around to their own benefit. He refused to give Sam the opportunity to misconstrue his in any form.

So something tangible. Something that showed Sam what he meant to Derek, how important he'd become over the past few months, what a vital part of his life he was. Because he was, and grew more so every day. They might still have their arguments, like the one at the TV station, but they knew how to bounce back from those. They'd learned what it took not to let those fester and become something more than they should be. Sam was the one

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thing Derek could guarantee bringing a smile to his face, an extra hop to his step.

Sam needed to know that as well as he knew his own name.

When the idea struck, he actually dismissed it at first. It was more extreme than the situation merited. He'd look like an idiot if he even suggested it.

But it refused to go away. It kept sneaking back, even when Derek gave up trying to find an answer and returned to his email.

It solves everything, it whispered in his ear. *You both get exactly what you want.*

It would also change everything, he wanted to argue back. And what if Sam hated it? Where would that leave them? He didn't want to ruin what they had just because his overprotective secretary had put a bug in his ear.

And what if he loves it?

That possibility scared the hell out of him.

Nadia buzzed him once, asking for a clarification on his schedule. Ten minutes later, his phone went off, indicating a text message.

Vegas booked. Chose Paris casino. Not a cowboy in sight, just for you.

Derek stared at Sam's text for five solid minutes. Just for him. Because Sam thought of those details. He always had. He'd been a surprise from the start, and Derek loved every second of it.

Just for you.

That made his decision easy, actually. He'd been ridiculous to ever doubt it.

Pocketing his phone, he logged off his computer and packed it away. When he emerged from his office with his case and coat, Nadia looked up at him in shock.

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“I’ve got some errands I have to run,” he said. “I won’t be back today, but you can go ahead and forward all my calls. I’ll have my phone on.”

She turned back to her computer, scrolling through his calendar. “Did I miss something?”

“No, no, this is just something that I’d forgotten about until now.” He hated lying to her, but he didn’t want her asking more questions. “Anything dire, just call.”

He felt oddly lighter as he headed for the elevator. If he needed any further proof that he was doing the right thing, that was it.

CHAPTER 4

Derek stood in the entranceway of the party, grateful not for the first time that it was in the building and not somewhere else that would require fighting with traffic. The short notice so close to the holidays meant everyplace was booked, so Rudy had finagled a deal with the graphics art company on the second floor to rent out the back half of their offices, a wide open space they used for employees to relax. Some of the equipment he left, including the massive projection screen TV and game systems, and the pool and foosball tables. The rest was decked out with a bar and buffet along one wall, a DJ and a tiny dance floor tucked into an opposite corner.

He looked longingly at the PlayStation, then grimaced and steered toward the bar instead. He'd be expected to socialize first.

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As soon as he had greetings out of the way, though, he was parking himself in front of that TV—and he had to remember to look around this weekend and see exactly how much they ran—and blowing shit up the rest of the night.

Rudy caught him halfway there. Today's tie was the Blues Brothers, though he'd changed out of his dress pants and into faded jeans. Derek wished that he'd thought of bringing something more casual to wear, but the day had been too insane to even think about the party until five o'clock came rolling around.

"Did Nadia tell you about Gena?" Rudy asked.

"No, what about her?"

"She's stopping in later to perform a set. You two are her favorite people right about now."

Derek smiled at the prospect of hearing Gena again, but mention of Sam had him scanning the sparse crowd. No sign of him yet, but that wasn't a surprise. He'd emailed Derek a couple hours earlier letting him know he was on his way to SFO to pick up his parents. Considering he'd be returning in Friday rush hour traffic, Derek figured he wouldn't see him for a while yet.

With a smile and a shake of his head, Rudy clapped Derek on the shoulder and steered him toward the bar. "Go enjoy yourself. You deserved this."

More people stopped him before he finally made it. He was more than ready for the whiskey he ordered by the time he got there, and he leaned his forearms against the bar while he waited.

"There's the man of the hour. Figured I'd find you here."

Sam's familiar drawl had him smiling before he straightened to face him, though he quickly schooled his features into simple friendship when he saw the older couple standing beside him. Derek had never seen pictures of Sam's parents, but there was no

mistaking the resemblance. His mother had the same bright blue eyes, her ash-blond hair blown into careful waves around her long, angular face. Sam's dark hair came from his father, as well as his muscular build, but there the resemblance ended. The hazel eyes that met Derek's were hard and shrewd, his thin mouth nearly completely hidden by his trim beard and moustache.

"Mom, Dad, this is Derek Rossi, my co-counsel on Gena's case." Sam edged sideways, clearing the space between the two men. "Derek, I'd like to introduce my parents, Pete and Bonnie Kimball."

Derek smiled and held his hand out to Pete. "It's a pleasure, sir."

The grip that met his was just shy of bruising. "Congratulations. You two made quite a splash."

Pete Kimball's accent was thicker than Sam's, and he held Derek's hand longer than Derek would have normally found comfortable. He stayed firm, though, keeping his eyes on the man in front of him rather than straying to Sam, only letting go when Pete released first. Sam had always claimed his father could scare a man's balls into the next state when he put his mind to it. Derek was starting to believe him.

"I watched the video of your TV interview on YouTube," Bonnie said. A dimple played in her cheek, a perfect replica of Sam's. "And I have to say, you're much better looking in person, Mr. Rossi."

Derek smiled, though it wasn't so much from the compliment as the sense of familiarity he got from it. So much of Sam in her. He liked her already. "Derek, please. And thank you. But weren't you supposed to be watching your son?"

"I can see him any ol' time." She leveled her gaze at Sam,

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cocking a single brow. "When he bothers to come home for a visit, that is."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Well, I can see how this night is going to go. You're supposed to be here extolling my virtues, Ma."

"You don't have enough people around here already to do that for you?" Pete commented. He looked past Derek's shoulder to the bar. "They got any decent beer?"

"I made sure they did, just for you, Dad."

Derek stepped out of the way, picking up his drink as Pete crowded closer. He met Sam's gaze, but Sam gave nothing away.

"You're in for a treat tonight, Mrs. Kimball," Derek said. "Gena's singing later on."

She frowned for a moment, then brightened. "Oh, the AIDS girl."

Sam cleared his throat and said in a low voice, "HIV, Ma."

"What's the difference?"

Derek tried not to cringe at her query, answering smoothly for Sam. "HIV is the virus that causes it. AIDS is the final stage of the disease. It's a common mistake."

"Did you watch any of Gena's shows on YouTube, too?" Sam asked. "She's amazing."

Bonnie shook her head. "You weren't in any of those, were you?"

"No, those are all about Gena."

Pete turned back with a longneck and something orange for his wife. "I watched one. She plays the piano, doesn't she?"

His query surprised both Sam and Derek, though Sam covered quickly. "Yeah, she does. What did you think?"

"I liked it. She's kind of bluesy." He nudged Bonnie. "You'll like her. She's got a Norah Jones feel. Except sexier."

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“Dad,” Sam complained. “She’s young enough to be *my* daughter.”

Derek snorted. “Yeah, if you had her when you were in junior high.”

“Ninth grade.”

“Close enough.”

“She’s still pretty hot,” Pete said. “You should ask her out if you haven’t.”

“Dad!”

Bonnie stepped in, laying her free hand on her husband’s arm. “She’s his client. That’s not ethical.”

“He won her case, which means the case is over. They’re free and clear.”

“Ethics is the least of it,” Sam said. “Did you not hear me say how young she is?”

“He’s right, Pete. Drop it.” But if Sam and Derek thought he was off the hook, Bonnie was quick to dispel that notion. “So who *are* you dating? And don’t give me this nonsense about you being too busy. You’re too social to lock yourself in an office all day.”

When Derek saw a familiar vein start to throb at the base of Sam’s throat, a wave of sympathy washed through him. This was going to be a very long weekend if they were starting in already. The least he could do was help tonight.

“I know you’ve only just arrived,” he said before Sam could struggle with a response, “but do you mind if I steal Sam for a few minutes before the party really gets underway? There’s some paperwork I need him to sign off on before we can call the case completely shut.”

“Here,” Sam said, latching onto the opportunity. He caught his mother’s elbow and guided her away from the bar and toward

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Rudy. “Rudy, I’d like to introduce my parents, Pete and Bonnie Kimball. Ma, Dad, this is Rudy Franklin, one of the partners at the firm.” He stood back as they exchanged greetings, then gave his mother an apologetic smile. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

Bonnie looked like she wanted to argue, but Rudy jumped into the conversation with ease, giving Sam and Derek the window they needed to escape. Sam’s steps were quick next to Derek’s longer strides, though he didn’t exhale until they’d reached the elevator.

“Thanks,” Sam said as Derek punched the button to take them upstairs. “I needed the break.”

Derek couldn’t suppress his grin. “I can’t believe your dad thinks you should go out with Gena.”

“I can’t believe he said she was hot. In front of Ma, even.”

“She didn’t seem to mind.”

“At least she’s got some sense.” Sam leaned against the wall and banged his head. “Can it be Monday, please? I cannot take this all weekend.”

“It won’t be that bad.” The doors whispered open onto their deserted floor. Derek stepped out first and held them open for Sam to have time to get off. “Do all the touristy stuff that keeps them too busy to ask questions, then wipes them out at the end of the day. You’ll be fine.”

“There is no fine. There’s hell, and I’m in it.”

Occasional lit sconces along the walls afforded the only real illumination, but Derek didn’t need much to lead the way to his office. “You’re such a drama queen.”

“I’m a drama queen? Which part of that little display downstairs wouldn’t have driven you around the bend, too? Inquiring minds would like to know.”

They reached his door. Derek held this one open for Sam, as

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well. “They’re not my parents. You want to see me lose it, I’ll invite you over to the next family dinner. You can watch me and my dad argue about how he thinks Al Gore is trying to brainwash Americans with all his environmental propaganda.”

Sam stopped in mid-stride and gaped at Derek. “You’re shitting me.”

Derek shook his head. “I only wish I was.”

When the door shut behind them, leaving them blessedly isolated, Sam glanced at Derek’s desk. “You didn’t really have any papers for me to sign, did you? Because I thought we were done with all that.”

“We are.” He gripped Sam’s shoulder and guided him over to the couch, gently pushing him to sit. “I brought you up here to help you relax for a few minutes before you go back into the lion’s den.”

“Just getting away will help me relax.”

Derek flashed a smile. “I can think of something else, too.”

Sam’s eyes tracked him as he pushed the coffee table out of his way and knelt on the floor between Sam’s legs. Sam widened his knees even more to give Derek room, only moving to open his jacket and expose his shirt and waistband.

“You’re seriously going to do this with my parents downstairs?”

Derek smoothed his hands up the top of Sam’s strong thighs. The expensive material did little to hide the muscles, made even harder by Sam’s frequent workouts. Derek didn’t say so often, but he absolutely loved Sam’s legs. There was no mistaking he used them hard. Between his biking and his horseback riding, there wasn’t an ounce of fat on them. Even better, his ass benefited, too.

“Don’t tell me that’s not turning you on,” Derek said. He took

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his time undoing Sam's belt, smiling at the rising bulge in his crotch. "Knowing what we're doing, right under their noses? Come on. I'm surprised you weren't the one to pull me aside, frankly."

"Only because you didn't give me time to think of it first." The muscles in his stomach twitched when Derek's fingers touched bare skin. "I guess I'm a little surprised you'd go for it."

"Because it's not my usual style."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. It's not." And the fact that Sam wasn't arguing didn't even bother him. They had different hot buttons, and Sam knew exactly where his were. But Derek liked being able to jolt him out of his complacency every once in a while. Hopefully, there'd be another jolt after his parents left on Sunday night.

Sam sighed when Derek fished inside his underwear for his cock, pulling it free. He was already half-hard and swelling fast, the skin stretching taut and pink behind the ridged crown. Derek shoved the elastic waistband beneath his balls, then held the shaft out of the way so he could lick across the tight sac.

Hairs tickled across his tongue, and the musky scent of sweat and skin filled his nose. Something else he'd rarely admit. Sam's smell, devoid of cologne, ripe from a day's work, made Derek want to eat him alive. He had to hold himself back from sucking Sam's balls behind his teeth. It was too soon for such aggressive tactics. Sam never lasted long when Derek played with his balls.

The weight of a hand on the back of his head drove him upward, along the now rigid length to the wet, flared head. He angled it away from Sam's stomach, making it easier to drag his tongue around its circumference. The taste of pre-come already dripping from the slit, however, was too much to resist, and he

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parted his lips, sucking several inches firmly into his mouth.

Sam groaned. “God, you’re so good at this,” he muttered. “Let’s ditch the party and just stay up here. You can fuck me into your desk, then.”

Sliding off, Derek shot him a quick smile. “You’d let me fuck you just about anywhere to get rid of your parents.”

The eyes Sam leveled at him were dark with desire. “I let you fuck me just about anywhere already. My parents have nothing to do with that.”

“But you have to admit”—he squeezed Sam’s cock for extra measure—“this is going to be better because they’re here.”

Sam’s mischievous grin lit him up. “Are you going to psychoanalyze me all night, or are you going to blow me?”

When Sam looked at him like that, Derek wondered how he could ever doubt his commitment to their relationship. Sam had been the one from the start to push things to the next level, though Derek accepting his spontaneous invitation to Napa for that wedding had certainly helped. His own need to convince Sam seemed a little silly in comparison, but he’d made his decision already, and damned if he wasn’t more than a little excited about it. He’d had a hard time keeping his mouth shut all week. Now, under Sam’s scrutiny, he wanted to give it to him even more.

The only way to hold off until Monday morning, when Sam was at ease again because his parents were back in Texas and their life was back to its normal routine, was to keep his mouth busy with other things.

He bent over Sam’s cock again, licking away the fresh liquid seeping from the slit. The tightening of Sam’s fingers guided him downward, and though he normally didn’t like to have his range of motion limited like that, he let Sam set the pace, pushing Derek

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down his thick shaft, stopping before the tip slid into his throat. Derek would have swallowed if that was what he wanted. The important thing was to blow the top of Sam's head off. If he wanted this slower, so be it.

His own cock ached. Sucking Sam had that effect on him, though that was likely because half the time, he fucked Sam straight afterward. Or maybe the fucking was because he'd been hard already. There was no telling which came first, the act or the erection. Well, the erection always came first or there was no act, but—

The grip in his hair became painful. Derek jerked himself back to the moment, ignoring the images of Sam bent over to focus on the cock sliding in and out of his mouth.

His lips were hot from the constant friction, his nose ticklish from how close he got to Sam's skin. Derek eased one hand beneath Sam's ass, encouraging him to move, while his other cupped Sam's balls. He squeezed them gently as he tightened the suction of his mouth, and got rewarded with a more forceful buck of Sam's hips.

"Can't wait for Vegas," Sam said, his voice rough from his shallow breathing. "You, me, a king-sized bed..."

Derek made a mental note to tease Sam about going to the trouble of booking them a vacation when all they needed was a flat surface to have fun. Hell, from the way Sam was pushing deeper into his mouth, they didn't even need that, just a chair for one of them to sit on. They were both vibrating with excitement, though likely for different reasons. The next time Sam pushed him down, Derek refused to come back up, instead dropping his jaw and swallowing Sam's cock to the root.

"Fuck..."

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Sam's incoherence devolved even further when the vein running along his length throbbed. In the next moment, the shaft jerked, and warm come spilled down Derek's throat. He swallowed it greedily, massaging Sam even more with each squeeze around the tip, and only let him go when the need for breath won.

But even then, he held Sam's softening length inside his mouth and gently cleaned away the lingering sticky fluid. The only reason he abandoned it was because Sam dug his fingertips into his shoulder and yanked him upward.

Their mouths crashed together in a kiss that revitalized his numb lips. Sam thrust his tongue inside, seeking out his own taste, while Derek wrapped his arms around his lover's back and let him devour to his heart's content. They were both shaking when the kiss ended, and beads of sweat glistened on Sam's forehead.

"Now how in hell am I supposed to walk down there and not look like I've just had the blow job of the century?" he complained.

Laughing, Derek sat back on his heels and dragged his hand across his swollen mouth. "How am I supposed to look like I wasn't the one giving it?"

Sam pulled his shirttail farther away from his wet cock, examining the fabric. "At least my clothes are clean. Coming back in different pants would've been a little bit harder to explain."

"You're spending too much time with me if you're worried about your clothes after sex," Derek said as he straightened. When his knee popped, he grimaced and shook it out. "I need a taller couch."

"Or you need to stay down there longer until you lose feeling altogether." Sam tucked away his cock and zipped up before standing and fixing his shirt. "I kind of like that plan better."

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“You would.”

He stayed out of the way, allowing Sam the distance he needed to pull himself together. Any nearer, and he'd follow through on his earlier desire, to bend Sam over and finish the job. The satiated look on his face, as well as the softer set of his jaw, were more than enough to give Derek a sense of satisfaction. It was a good feeling, knowing he knew how to take care of Sam. He only hoped Sam realized how hard he was trying.

A comfortable silence wrapped around them as they returned to the elevator. Their pace was slower, the contact closer. Every once in a while, Derek brushed his little finger along the side of Sam's hand, just to remind him he was there. On the ride down, Sam took his hand and squeezed, one quick grasp, a thank you that Derek didn't necessarily need but appreciated anyway.

“Back to being the good son,” Sam said as they stepped into the party room.

Derek scanned the thicker crowd in search of the Kimballs. “Maybe Rudy's talked them into...”

His voice faded away as he locked on to a familiar set of shoulders. They didn't belong to Pete Kimball, though Sam's father stood right next to the man in question. His mother was right there, too, and though the fourth person in the group wasn't immediately visible, Derek had known at the first sighting she would be there.

His parents. Steve and Sheryl Rossi. Talking to the Kimballs like they were old friends.

“Talked them into what?” Sam prompted. He followed Derek's gaze. His sharp intake of breath was all Derek needed to know he'd found his parents, too. “Shit. What are they doing here?”

“I don't know, but we better separate them before—”

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He'd started walking as he talked, but came to an abrupt halt when Bonnie jerked away from the conversation, her head swiveling as she looked desperately around the room. When she spotted Derek and Sam by the door, she froze.

Three more sets of eyes turned to find them.

Nobody was smiling.

"Shit," Derek muttered.

CHAPTER 5

Sam didn't move. "What're your parents doing here?"

"Hell if I know."

"You didn't invite them?"

"With your parents coming? Do I look stupid to you?"

Derek's mom was saying something to Bonnie now, though it didn't seem to be appeasing the woman's upset. Derek snapped out of his spell when he realized Sam was marching forward, weaving through the crowd with surefire determination. It only took a few quick steps to get to Sam's side, and they reached the quartet before more words could be exchanged between them.

Derek stepped into the fray first, catching his mother's elbow and turning her away from the Kimballs. "What're you two doing here?"

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Sheryl Rossi frowned at her son, her dark hazel eyes more than a little confused. "Rudy invited us. To celebrate your win."

Rudy. The one person Derek had never actually spoken to. A pulse started to ache behind his left eye.

"Is it true, Sam?" Bonnie's voice was high and thin, wavering even under her tight control. "Mrs. Rossi says you and..." She couldn't even say his name. One glance at Derek and her cheeks turned bright pink, her eyes sliding back to her son.

"Of course, it's true." Sheryl shook her arm away from Derek's grasp. "They've been dating since last spring."

Pete's hard gaze locked on Sam. "You never told us."

For all his usual bravado, Sam seemed to shrink under his father's stern attention. "I didn't think—"

"That we'd find out?" Bonnie finished. "How long have you been lying to us?"

"It's not—"

But she had no interest in letting Sam finish any of his sentences. With a wave of her slender hand, she cut him off and backed toward the doorway.

"I need some fresh air," she said.

Sam looked stricken, so upset that Derek was sick to his stomach just witnessing it. "Ma, wait!"

When Sam tried to go after her, Pete caught his shoulder in an implacable grip and yanked him to a stop. "I don't think she wants to talk to you right now."

"She has to let me explain."

"So you can fill her head with more lies?" Pete shook his head and set his beer down on a nearby table. "I'll get us a ride back to the hotel. You enjoy your little party."

Nobody moved as Pete walked out after his wife. Derek

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couldn't take his eyes off Sam, who practically vibrated to chase after them. When he attempted to rest a hand on Sam's arm, however, Sam flung him off hard enough to force Derek to take a step away.

"Just give them a minute," Derek tried instead.

Bright blue eyes stared at him in disbelief. "You think a minute's going to fix this?"

"I think you won't do anybody any favors if you don't honor their request."

"Oh, like you honored mine?" He jabbed a finger in Derek's direction. "I asked you to do one thing for me. One. But I guess you couldn't be bothered, right? You never did understand."

Though he understood why Sam was so angry, an answering fury rose up in Derek. "If you'd told them the truth in the first place instead of trying to be something you're not, we wouldn't have had to worry about it, now would we?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew he'd gone too far. Sam went completely still, and more than a few people looked in their direction. Derek snapped his jaw shut, as much to stop saying anything more to worsen the situation as it was to avoid a bigger scene than they'd already caused. This wasn't his fault, and he resented that he was the one now being blamed.

Without a word, Sam strode past Derek to head for the door. When Derek moved to follow him, it was his father's turn to stop him.

"What was that about honoring a request?" Steve said.

Derek stared at Sam's retreating back until he was gone. Then, he shifted the full force of his frustration onto his parents.

"What did you say to them?" he hissed. "Exactly. Word for

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word.”

Sheryl lifted her chin. “Rudy introduced us when we arrived. All we said was how proud we were of both of you. That Sam was practically a member of the family since you two started dating.”

Derek gritted his teeth. “I can count on one hand how many times you’ve even seen him, Mom. And you never even met him in person until after we took this case. That hardly makes him a member of the family.”

“I thought you two were serious. You’ve never dated anyone as long as you’ve dated Sam.”

True, but not the point.

“How were we supposed to know Sam’s parents didn’t know about you two?” Steve asked, sounding all too reasonable.

Derek glared at him. Steve didn’t even look ruffled. He wondered for a split second whether or not this was how Sam saw him and got angry on his behalf all over again.

Rudy stepped up before he could continue, resting a hand on Derek’s shoulder. Though his features were markedly neutral, his grip was tight enough to warn Derek they were still in a public place.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

Derek shrugged him off and straightened his coat. “I wish you’d told me you’d invited my parents. Now we have a situation on our hands.”

“Sam’s parents were coming to celebrate. Why shouldn’t yours?”

“See?” Sheryl said. “This isn’t our fault.”

“What’s not your fault?”

Derek sighed. “Sam’s parents didn’t know he’s gay. They...didn’t take it well.”

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To his credit, Rudy seemed appropriately dismayed at having played a part in the debacle. “Is Sam going to bring them back?”

“I don’t know.” Derek glanced at the door. “I guess we’ll have to wait and find out.”

* * *

An hour later, there was still no sign of Sam. Derek kept toying with his phone in his pocket, desperate to call and find out what was going on, but knowing he owed Sam an apology first made him wait. He didn’t grovel well under the best of circumstances. Now, he knew he had to, but it still irked him that Sam had put the blame of this on him. So he rationalized the wait by telling himself they both needed the time to cool off. They didn’t need more regrettable words to pass between them.

But when his parents finally left, he gave up the pretense. He sought Rudy out, and pulled him into the corner.

“I’m taking off,” he said. “I’m sorry about the scene earlier. If I could take it back...”

“You know that’s not necessary. I’m just sorry I contributed to it all.” Rudy smiled and nodded toward the door. “Go find him. You’ll work it out.”

Though Derek murmured his gratitude, he walked out wondering how exactly he was supposed to do that. If Sam was with his parents, trying to explain things, there was no place for Derek.

Or was there? Would it help if they saw them as a united front? Maybe if they knew how serious he was about Sam, it would help ease the transition.

The image of Bonnie Kimball’s shock flashed across his

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mind's eye. She wanted to know what nice woman her son was dating. She wasn't interested in knowing he spent half his nights with Derek, no matter how attractive she thought he was.

So maybe not.

At the elevator, he hesitated. He didn't know where to go. He didn't even know where Sam's parents were staying. Sam had complained about the fact that his father refused to stay at the Mark Hopkins and instead insisted he could find something cheaper. Derek hadn't been surprised—Sam's sometimes simple tastes had to come from somewhere—but Sam had been annoyed that his ploy in distracting his parents with a posh hotel had failed.

Derek had no choice but to call. He sighed as he pulled out his phone.

The line didn't even ring. Sam's voicemail kicked in right away, which meant his phone was off.

Derek swore as he shoved it back into his pocket. If that was the way Sam wanted to play it, so be it.

Sam's truck wasn't in its parking spot, though Derek wasn't surprised. He pulled into the heavy traffic and sat at the red light at the corner, propping his elbow on the door and his head against his fist as he waited.

He didn't like this. He wanted to think their relationship was stronger than this, even if it had started out as something purely physical. They'd come a long way in the past six months. Hell, Sam wouldn't bandy around words like "I love you" without meaning them, even if he hadn't said it since that first time. That meant something.

But perhaps this was too much for their young relationship to bear. Sam had hidden his orientation from his parents for twenty years. He smiled and teased Derek about his parents, but Derek

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knew some of it was a front. He had to be jealous, if only a little bit. Not that Derek had a model relationship, but at least he didn't have to pretend.

Where are you, Sam?

Three blocks later, his phone rang. Derek hit the button on his earpiece without even looking at the display.

"Mr. Rossi? This is Pete Kimball."

His hands tightened on the wheel. "Mr. Kimball." Like nothing was amiss. His heart was beating faster, though. "What can I do for you?"

"I hate to interrupt your party, but I wonder if you'd mind meeting me for a drink tonight."

"Just you?" What about Sam? Or his wife?

"I think we have some matters to discuss, don't you?"

No straight answer, then. Derek didn't know why he'd expected otherwise. "Where would you like to meet, sir?"

"We're staying at the Hyatt Regency near the airport. There's a sports bar downstairs. How soon can you get here?"

SFO was a good twenty minutes away with Friday night traffic. And why was he staying so close to the airport instead of in the city?

"Half an hour, to call it safe."

"Good. Half an hour, then." Pete paused. "Oh, and Mr. Rossi, don't tell Sam you're meeting me. Come up with some kind of excuse, could you?"

He thought Derek and Sam were together. Which begged the question, where had Sam gone after leaving the party?

"That won't be a problem, sir." At least, not tonight. Any other occasion and Derek would be more than a little miffed that he expected Derek to lie to Sam.

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He made it to the hotel in just under twenty minutes and parked as close to the front entrance as possible. He'd long ago learned that quick escape routes could be his best friend.

Knuckles wasn't located in the hotel's atrium, but rather on the second floor, a dimly lit space with TV screens everywhere he turned. The Friday night crowd was surprisingly heavy, with one particularly boisterous crowd in the corner shouting at some unseen game. Peanut shells crunched under his hard heels as he headed for the bar, then changed his direction when he spotted Pete Kimball already there.

He looked up from his pint glass when Derek stopped at his side, nodding as Derek got the bartender's attention and ordered. His beer was already half-gone, his eyes slightly glassy. This probably wasn't his first. Derek suspected it wouldn't be his last.

When Derek got his beer, Pete jerked his head toward an empty table off to the side, devoid of patrons at its neighbors. Derek followed in silence. He'd treat this like he would a meeting with any hostile opposing counsel. *Stay calm. Don't lose it.* Maintaining an even façade gave him power when his opponents were itching for a fight.

It occurred to him as he slid onto his chair that maybe he shouldn't be viewing Sam's father as the enemy. Except anybody who turned on Sam like that already qualified as such.

He refused to squirm under Pete's piercing gaze, even when the man bit out, "How long?"

Further clarification was unnecessary. "We met late last winter when we worked opposite sides on an environmental case. We didn't hook up until after it was over, though."

"So almost a year."

"That would be stretching it. I couldn't stand him at first."

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A gleam appeared in his eyes. "So Sam won."

"Yes. It pissed me off."

Pete grunted. "He's good at that."

"He's an excellent lawyer."

"I know. He was a smart kid, too. Could talk himself out of anything." Pete sipped at his beer, his attention unwavering. "You don't look like a fag."

Derek tightened his grip on his glass not to react to the term. He hated that word, especially coming from someone who wasn't gay. He wasn't so sure Pete hadn't used it specifically to provoke him. Sam's brains came from somewhere, and Derek would lay excellent odds that somewhere now sat in front of him.

"My rainbow suit's at the cleaners," he said, shaking his head. "Excuse me, but is this really what you wanted to talk to me about? Because if you're just curious about seeing a gay man up close and personal, I can guarantee you didn't have to call me down here to do that."

"You're the reason I finally know the truth about Sam. I think that deserves being a little curious about you, about what kind of man you are."

"Because you think I turned him gay?"

"How do I know you didn't?"

"Because that's not the way it works."

"Oh, right. The fact that he's gay is mine and Bonnie's fault."

"There is no fault. It's just part of who he is. Like the color of his eyes, or whether or not he's left-handed."

Pete hunched forward. "Except the difference there is being a southpaw won't get your brains bashed in, in our neck of the woods."

Derek lowered his tone to match Pete's. "Did you ever think

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that maybe that's the reason Sam never told you? He's smart enough to do anything, go anywhere he wants. And he didn't pick Texas. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to draw that line."

A waitress showed up and placed a fresh bowl of peanuts on their table, flashing both men a quick smile before moving on to the next set of customers. Pete picked one out and cracked it open, tossing the shell nonchalantly onto the floor with the rest.

"Sam always had big ideas," Pete said. "We weren't going to stifle his ambition."

"And he's better off for it. He's got a real life here."

Pete chewed slowly. "How real can it be if he's gotta lie to his family about it?"

"Because he knew this was how you'd react."

"He knew I'd take his boyfriend out for a beer?" Pete grimaced and grabbed another peanut. "That just doesn't sound right, no matter how many times I make myself say it."

"And yet another reason why Sam might have been a little reluctant to tell you the truth." Guilt was starting to creep behind Derek's annoyance. While he had been frustrated with Sam's passivity regarding his parents, he realized he'd not really thought through how coming out would have gone for him. When Derek had told his parents, they'd been calm and rational about the entire matter, sitting down with him to hear him out. Living in the Bay Area meant constant exposure to gay issues, and even if they didn't necessarily understand his orientation, they'd never judged him for it.

He'd forgotten not everybody would have had the same baseline to start with. Sam's parents might have shared political affiliations with Derek's, but their environment was totally different. Derek hadn't given Sam enough credit for understanding

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the dangers involved in coming out.

He wished he'd realized this sooner. Like when Sam had walked out of the party. He would have followed, regardless of what his father said.

"Is that what you two are, then?" Pete asked.

Derek blinked. "Boyfriends? Yeah, that's a good word for it."

"Monogamous?"

"That's what boyfriend means to me, yes."

Maybe he sounded a little defensive, because Pete shook his head. "How am I supposed to know? As far as I could know, you two might host orgies on the weekend and invite all your gay buddies over to join in." When Derek's mouth opened, he held up a hand to cut him off. "Not that I think you do. I don't think Sam's got it in him to mess around if he's in a relationship. I'm just saying, this is all new to me. I don't know how it works. Like, which one of you is the girl?"

Derek stared at him, not really surprised the man had actually had the balls to ask that question. "Neither one of us. Otherwise, then we'd be straight, and you and I wouldn't be having this extremely awkward conversation."

"But someone has to be. Two men together, that's not natural."

"To you, maybe not. To me, to Sam, this is what we know. It's who we are. Pretending to be interested in women is what feels unnatural to us."

"You're telling me you don't think Angelina Jolie is an attractive woman."

"No, I'm saying I don't want to have sex with her."

Pete sighed and sank back into his chair. "I just don't get it."

"And that right there is your problem, Mr. Kimball. Sam doesn't want you to get it. He just wants you to accept it." This

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was going nowhere. He stood and glanced at his watch. "It's not too late for you to call Sam and ask him to come down here. My suggestion is you do it. You need to hash this out with him, not try and dissect whether or not I've corrupted him."

Pete's mouth disappeared into a thin line behind his beard. He turned back to his beer, as done as Derek was.

Derek tried calling Sam again as he went back out to his car. It still went straight to voicemail. That left two options. Leave Sam alone until he was ready to talk, or go to his apartment and do it now.

Derek eased up to the toll booth to pay for his parking. He had until he hit the 280 to make up his mind.

CHAPTER 6

Sam lived in a two-bedroom condo in Nob Hill, and paid an arm and a leg for the privilege. Derek had been a little jealous at first when he'd seen how plush Sam's lifestyle was, but then he'd realized how hard Sam worked to be able to afford it, not to mention that it was one of the few luxuries Sam pampered himself with. Though it wasn't huge—very few places in the city were—it sported a master bedroom with a custom-built walk-in closet, granite countertops in the bathroom, and a Jacuzzi tub. Derek had teased him more than once that his kitchen was Sam-sized, but it had gourmet amenities, and was plenty big enough for them to cook on the rare occasions they had the time.

He only had one parking spot, though. Derek always had to park at a structure a couple blocks away and walk, since trying to

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find something on the street was a nightmare.

The night was colder, mist creeping in from the bay to curl around his ankles and drift up his pant legs. Derek quickened his steps, debating for a second whether or not to check and make sure Sam's truck was in its space. In the end, he decided against it. He'd know soon enough if Sam was home. It wasn't like he could do anything about it if he wasn't.

The secured entry stopped him from just going up. Derek pushed the button and waited, head bent as he felt the moments tick by in time with his pulse.

"Hello?"

He tried not to sigh in relief at the sound of Sam's voice. "It's me. Can I come up?"

"Me?" A high laugh. Unnatural for Sam. "But I'm already up."

"Are you drunk?" He didn't mean to blurt out the question. He was just too surprised to hear Sam so obviously inebriated.

"You know what? Come on up. This should be interesting."

The buzzer released the door. Derek grabbed it before Sam could change his mind again.

Sam's condo was on the third floor. Derek bypassed the elevator and took the stairs. He needed those few extra seconds to compose himself so he didn't snap at Sam for getting drunk off his ass.

The door was open when he emerged into the hallway, Sam leaning against the jamb as he watched the elevator farther past Derek. He still wore his suit from the party, though the tie was gone and the shirt unbuttoned and loose. A longneck dangled from his hands.

Looked like both Kimball men were trying to get shit-faced tonight.

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“Derek!” His arm swung in a wide arc toward his open door, the beer splashing over the rim. “What a surprise!”

Derek glanced at the closed door opposite Sam’s, lengthening his stride at the same time. An older couple lived across the hall, neither one of them keen on noise or interruptions. When he reached Sam’s side, he grabbed his arm and hauled him into the condo.

“It wouldn’t be such a surprise if you’d turn your phone on,” he said, shutting the door behind them.

“Oh, is it off? I hadn’t realized.” Derek caught Sam’s eye for a split second before he turned away and ambled into the living room. It didn’t have the same glassiness his father’s had, clear and sharp as always. “So how was the party? Any good gossip to share?”

“I didn’t stick around for long.” Derek followed him to the couch, choosing instead to sit in the black leather chair perpendicular to the end Sam flopped down in. “I was hoping you’d come back.”

“Nah, I would’ve just dragged the mood down. I wouldn’t have been able to drink the way I want to here, either.”

He was studiously keeping his gaze from Derek’s, which, added to what Derek had already seen, was more than enough to draw the conclusion, “You’re not drunk.”

His pronouncement wiped the playful smile from Sam’s face. “Like you’d know. This could be my sixth bottle.”

“It’s not.” It was too orchestrated, and Sam’s performance too broad. “I’ve seen you drunk. This is you, wishing you were.”

“Since when did you become Dr. Phil?”

“You’re the Texan here. I’m just calling it like I see it.”

“That’s another Dr. Phil line.”

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But Sam wasn't denying it, and he wasn't kicking Derek's ass out the door. It gave him courage to go on.

"Well, I'm glad you're not, because now I won't have to repeat myself because you don't remember this in the morning." He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his elbows. "I'm sorry about what happened tonight and the part I had in it. I should've respected the seriousness of your situation enough to follow up with Rudy, even if I was sure he wouldn't say anything."

His apology drew Sam's eyes back up, a look of astonishment sharp in their depths. "Who are you, and what did you do with Derek Rossi?"

"I mean it. And I shouldn't have said what I did about telling them. That's not my call, and never was."

Derek wanted to say more. Whenever they had a serious fight—which, thankfully, was less and less often—he instinctively went for Sam's vulnerable underbelly, his guilt about his parents. It was part of the instinct that made him so successful in court, but the longer he and Sam were together, the more he hated that it reared its head within their relationship. He wanted to apologize for every time he'd ever turned the tables on Sam by using it as a weapon, but if he did, he knew Sam would press as to why he'd be sorry about it now. Then, he'd have to explain about meeting Pete, and he didn't think either one of them was up for that particular confession just yet.

After several seconds, Sam sagged into the seat again, resting his head against the back of the couch. His eyes fluttered shut, and when he didn't speak, Derek had the urge to fill the silence. It was ironic, really. Talking for the sake of talking wasn't his style but Sam's. Sam of the silver tongue, the quick wit. Sam of the generous heart, the zest for life. What did it matter who he wanted

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to have sex with? His parents should have been proud of Sam, no matter what. They'd raised an amazing man, whether they liked his orientation or not.

So he held his tongue, waiting for Sam to take the initiative. This was about Sam's problems, not Derek's insecurities. Sam would never have invited him up and he certainly wouldn't have allowed him to stay, if there was any doubt at all about his feelings for Derek. In light of it all, the decision Derek had made before any of this had ever started felt increasingly right.

"Did you see the look on her face?" Sam asked without opening his eyes. "She hates me."

"She doesn't hate you," Derek said automatically. "It just took her off-guard."

"She hates me. She thinks I'm sick."

Though he already knew the answer, he asked, "Did you talk to her?"

Sam sighed. "No. I got downstairs, and they were waiting on the sidewalk, and I chickened out of going out and confronting them." At least his harsh bark of laughter came with his eyes opening again. "So much for being a shark. One bad word from my parents, and I cower in the corner with my thumb in my mouth. I guess it's a good thing we'd already settled Gena's case before they found out."

"You were blindsided. If I hadn't taken you upstairs, it never would have happened in the first place. So if you want to blame anybody, blame me." He smiled. "I've got broad shoulders. I can take it."

His attempt at humor fell flat. "I needed to get out of there, and you recognized that. This is my fault for not telling them sooner."

Derek wasn't touching that one with a ten-foot pole. "What are

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you going to do now? You can't avoid them all weekend."

"You mean, you're not going to take them to the airport for me Sunday night?"

"Something tells me I'm even lower on their acceptable chauffeur list than you might be."

Sam plucked at his shirttail and brushed imaginary lint from his pants. "What would you do if you were me?"

A small thrill coursed through him. Sam rarely asked for his opinion on personal matters. He liked to consider himself the more aware of the pair of them. "I'd get it from the horse's mouth. You're making it worse for yourself by imagining what they're thinking."

"And what if what they say is worse?"

"Then you'll know, and you can move on."

"Easy for you to say. Your parents don't give you hell about us."

"And until you know what they're going to say, you can't assume your parents will do the same. But you don't have to do it alone, you know. If you want me there, all you have to do is say the word."

The offer slipped out without him thinking about it, but once it was there, he wondered why he hadn't suggested it from the very start. They were a team, after all. A couple. It made the most sense for them to face it together.

Sam seemed wary of the suggestion, however. "You don't think that's inviting disaster? What if my dad throws a punch at you?"

Derek grinned. "I'm younger and bigger than he is. I think I'll manage." More seriously, he added, "Let me do this for you, Sam. If I can't help you with something like this, what's the whole point

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of us even having a relationship?”

“You don’t make this easy, you know.”

“What?”

Sam’s mouth tipped. “Staying mad at you.”

“Good.” He glanced toward the bedroom. “You have a problem if I spend the night?”

Straightening, Sam set his bottle on the coffee table and rose from the couch. “I’m not going to be very good company.”

It wasn’t an order to go. That was good enough for him.

“As long as you don’t steal all the blankets again, that’s all I need.”

Sam waited until Derek was standing as well before heading for the bedroom. “I need something to protect me from your cold feet.”

“My feet aren’t cold.”

“You’ve never had them planted between your thighs before, either.”

Derek made a grab for Sam, hauling him back against his chest and stopping both of their momentum for a moment. He wrapped his arms around him and held him still, bending his head to nuzzle at Sam’s ear.

“Whatever you want tonight, it’s yours. Just to prove to you we’re in this together.”

Sam leaned back against him, allowing Derek the room to tighten the embrace. He didn’t speak, but nothing more needed to be said. Everything necessary had already been shared. The rest could wait.

* * *

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It surprised him a little bit when Sam fell straight asleep. With all the events of the night, he would have expected him to toss and turn, his demons thwarting his every attempt at rest. But as soon as they had both stripped down and slipped beneath the heavy striped comforter, Sam rolled onto his side facing away from Derek, nestled back until Derek rolled to spoon behind him, and promptly drifted off.

Derek took longer, though not much. The heat of Sam's body and the numbing exhaustion of the night were more than sufficient sleeping pills. He buried his face in the back of Sam's neck and let the darkness win.

He dreamed of the bar where they'd first seen Gena perform, the night Sam had told him he'd loved him. This time, instead of Rudy sitting at their table, Pete Kimball claimed the chair, unsmiling as he stared at the way Sam sat on Derek's lap. When Gena started to sing, Sam squirmed against Derek's erection, oblivious to the dirty looks his father kept shooting at them. He even reached between their bodies to palm Derek's cock. Derek tried to stop Sam from the public display, but his hand was hot and Gena's voice too seductive.

Just when the dream was starting to get good, though, the stage vanished, large screen TVs in its place. Sam was gone, too, but when Pete tried to walk away, Derek grabbed his hand.

"Do you have any idea what you've done to him?" he told Pete. "Is it really any worse than what you've done?"

The cold finality of Pete's voice snapped Derek out of it, his eyes shooting open to stare into nothing. Sam's body draped over his, helping him orient in the present again, but Sam stirred almost immediately, as if wakened by the same dream.

Derek brushed a kiss across the top of Sam's head. "Go back to

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sleep.”

Soft breath fanned across his chest. “I was asleep.”

“So go back.”

“Stop talking, and I just might.”

In the dark, Derek smiled. He was starting to drift again when Sam spoke up.

“Do you know how many times I’ve been jealous of you? Too many to count.”

The low words pulled him back, but he kept as still as possible for fear of scattering the spell spurring Sam to speak. “Why?”

“Your family. The fact that you know who you are.” He paused. “The fact that *they* know who you are.”

“They know who you are, too.” Though he recognized that wasn’t entirely what Sam meant.

“It’s not enough. I wish it was. My life would be a hell of a lot easier.”

“Next time we visit my family, then, I’ll let you debate with Dad about universal healthcare. That’ll cure you. I promise.”

“He respects your opinion, though. Even if he doesn’t agree with it.” Sam’s hand slid down Derek’s side, almost ticklish in how lightly it grazed along his skin. “You heard my dad tonight. Unless it’s about women or sports, he’s not interested in anything I might have to say.”

“Have you tried?”

“Of course, I’ve tried.”

“On the ride from the airport?” Because he hadn’t seen it at the party.

Silence.

Derek turned his head so his senses were filled with Sam. He closed his eyes, though he didn’t need the added protection against

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the darkness to get lost in his lover. He could imagine what that drive from SFO had been like. The occasional comment about Sam's job, gossip about home. Nothing substantial. Nothing he could call genuine or meaningful. Nothing Sam actually needed or wanted.

"I'll call him in the morning," Sam said. "If I can talk them into doing some sightseeing, do you want to tag along?"

"Isn't that adding fuel to the fire?"

"They know now. What's the point of pretending anymore?"

Derek could think of lots of points, but held his tongue. Instead, "If that's what you want."

Another sigh. "I can't have what I want. I have to settle for what I have."

"It's not actually that bad, you know. You've got me."

Sam's arms tightened. "Thank God."

As Sam's weight settled more firmly into his side, all Derek could do was silently echo the sentiment.

CHAPTER 7

Derek woke up to an empty bed, though the blinds were still closed, and the bedroom door shut. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Eight-twenty. He must have been more tired than he thought. He didn't normally sleep in that late unless he'd worked all night.

Rising from bed, he stretched, cracked his back, and listened for signs of Sam. The walls were surprisingly well insulated. When the doors were closed, it was next to impossible to make out anything from the other rooms short of a party or explosions on the TV. He had to strain to hear the low tones of the other man's voice. Since he sincerely doubted someone else was in the apartment, he had to be on the phone.

With his dad?

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Just the possibility of it was enough to keep Derek from going out and interrupting.

He chose instead to grab the spare toiletries he kept for nights he slept over and head for the shower. The tub was appealing but not practical, and within minutes, he stood under the stinging spray, steam rising up and around him as he washed away the remnants of the previous day.

A knock came at the door as he was pouring shampoo into his hand. "Come on in!"

Sam's outline appeared on the other side of the foggy glass doors. Derek wiped a swathe away with the back of his knuckles to watch him go to the sink.

"I did it," Sam said. "And he didn't hang up on me."

"What did you say?"

Sam turned on the water and dampened his toothbrush. "Not much, actually. I invited them out for breakfast, but he and Ma have been up since six and ate at the hotel."

Derek waited for more, but Sam was busy with the toothpaste. Then, he was attacking his teeth, another distraction from the reality of what he'd done. Derek resumed washing his hair, and it wasn't until he was dipping his head under the spray that Sam spoke again.

"Mind if I join you?"

Derek turned toward the glass with a smile, meeting Sam's gaze on the other side. "Since when do I mind you naked and wet?"

The invitation drew Sam into the shower, though he stood at the far end of the double-wide stall while Derek finished. "We made plans to meet up at lunch. They're coming in on the BART to wander around Pier 39."

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Rinsing away the last of the soap, Derek straightened with a grimace. "I suppose that means eating at the pier, too."

"Yeah. They mentioned Bubba Gump's."

"We can't talk them into Scoma's?"

"It's not named after a movie, so that's highly doubtful." Sam reached for the sponge at the same time Derek did, beating him to it. "You don't have to come if you don't want to. You weren't up yet, so I didn't mention you."

Derek frowned. "I told you last night I'm in."

Sam busied himself with the body wash, and the scent of coconut began to fill the shower. "You were making me feel better. I know that."

"That doesn't mean the offer wasn't genuine."

Beads of water collected on Sam's lashes from where it splattered over Derek's shoulder. A hint of a smile played on his mouth, the first sign of a real one Derek had yet to see that morning. "Then I'd love it if you were there. Even if it is a cheesy chain restaurant."

The words he might have spoken were lost when Sam started lathering him up, running the sponge over his chest and down his stomach in long, sure strokes. The sponge raked over his skin, stippling him in goose bumps, though those were most likely caused by the proximity of Sam's hands. Derek watched, enraptured, as Sam bent to continue downward, bypassing Derek's groin to soap each of his thighs. His cock perked up, thickening with each touch, until it jutted hard and aching as Sam worked at his feet.

He touched the side of Sam's face, wondering if he could coax him into a blow job before they got out. He wouldn't ask for one. It felt a little crass to be thinking about sex when Sam was so

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wrapped up in his family drama. But the thought of Sam's luscious mouth tight around his prick sent tiny sparks down the back of his legs, especially when Sam finished and sat back on his heels to gaze up at him.

"We don't have to be down at the pier until noon," he said.

Intentions didn't get much more blatant than that. "It's a good thing we're here rather than my place then."

Sam's fingers were still slick with soap. He slid them up the inside of Derek's thighs, cupping his heavy balls. "If I was feeling really ornery, I'd wait until it was almost time to leave so that we both arrive for lunch thoroughly fucked."

Derek spread his legs wider to give Sam more room. "You won't do that. I'd have to kill you."

"It would serve my parents right, though."

As Sam pushed a finger behind his sac to trace along the crease of Derek's ass, Derek groaned. "Let me repeat. I'd have to kill you."

Sam's chuckle sounded richer in the confines of the tiled walls, and his touch became bolder. "We could have it both ways. I fuck you now, you fuck me right before we go. Everybody wins."

Everybody but his parents if they figured out what they'd done. But with Sam now probing at his entrance with the tip of a finger, and his hot breath fanning over Derek's cock, Derek wasn't so inclined to care much about Pete and Bonnie Kimball's so-called sensibilities.

"Let me rinse off."

"No." Abruptly, Sam straightened, flattening a hand against Derek's chest to push him against the wall. "Stay here. I'll go get a condom."

Sam didn't give him time to argue. He stepped out of the

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shower and disappeared into the bedroom, leaving Derek aching and anxious for his return.

He scrambled for the soap, squirting some into his hand and then reaching around to slick it up his crack. He deliberately avoided touching his cock. He wanted Sam's hand squeezing it, not his own. When the door opened again and Sam returned already wearing a condom, Derek had two fingers buried inside his ass.

Sam's mouth quirked. "Somebody's eager."

"Somebody's horny." He turned around and braced his hands, spreading his legs wider so that it lowered his hips. He could fuck Sam in the shower if he did it with Sam's back against the wall and his legs wrapped around Derek's body, but reversing their positions while they were both standing presented a different challenge. They'd figured out what worked best for them, though. Derek loved Sam's cock too much to forego getting fucked when they didn't have a flat surface.

Sam dragged the covered tip along the crease, skating over the opening to push between Derek's thighs and against his balls. With the water pelting between their bodies, it made it easier to slide along, skin to skin, but what Derek wanted was the penetration, the burn of being stretched by Sam's fat cock. Reaching behind, he grasped Sam's hip and held him still, glancing back over his shoulder.

"Did you miss the part where I'm horny?" he said. "Translate that to eager all you want. But that still means, fuck me before I change my mind and fuck you instead."

The angle of Sam's body changed, pressing closer. He nestled his length between Derek's cheeks, and rubbed it up and down, teasing him to even greater heights. That resolution not to touch

himself wavered. He didn't have to do it hard. Just a touch. Something. Anything, because if he didn't get more soon, he was going to start begging and then Sam would never let him live it down.

His fingers curled into the tile. Behind him, Sam chuckled again.

"I love seeing you like this." He smoothed one hand up Derek's spine, kneading at each knob to melt his muscles even more than they already were. "I like thinking you're mine."

Something rough lurked in Sam's voice, alerting Derek. He could call him on it, tease him mercilessly for turning a fuck into an Oprah moment. Then Sam would laugh, drive into his body to shatter the spell, and that would be it.

He chose not to. He wasn't going to take it away from Sam. Right now, he needed to know Derek treated their relationship seriously, too.

Sam toyed with the wet hair at his nape, then tickled the path in reverse. When his hand was back at Derek's waist, he gripped him lightly and shifted his hips to rest the blunt head at Derek's opening. Derek pushed back at the same time Sam pushed forward, easing the initial entry. There was still that flash of pain, though, the slight burn that came when the tight outer ring was first breached. He held his breath but didn't stop, riding out the momentary discomfort until the tip was firmly inside, the muscle stretched to allow the rest of it to slide in with less effort.

The second Sam was fully sheathed, Derek dropped his head and exhaled. "Jesus..." Dizziness threatened to overtake him, the exertion it took to remain balanced without losing an iota of pleasure walking a very thin line. He brought it back under control by grasping the base of his cock and squeezing. The shock jolted

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everything from his scalp to his toes.

Sam moved first, pulling out a few inches before slamming back in. Any semblance of command Derek might have had over his body disintegrated under the onslaught, especially when Sam didn't stop. His hunger eclipsed Derek's own, each thrust sharp, each harsh breath a tattoo between them. His fingers clawed into Derek's hips, and though Derek had to struggle for a minute to find Sam's tempo, soon enough they were moving in synch, back and forth, in and out as the steam clung to their skin.

His cock throbbed. Derek wanted to jerk off, needed it, but he couldn't bring himself to strip his shaft, not with Sam's need so ferocious, not with an even better climax there on the horizon, ready for him to grab. Sooner or later, Sam would reach around. The calluses no amount of desk work would ever erase would scrape over Derek's skin. The exquisite pressure below the crown would only be matched by the rub of Sam's palm over the tip. And Derek would hold back from coming as long as he could, just to explode when he least expected it.

Sam's grunts joined the thrum of the water, followed by Derek's gasps. It got harder to keep up with him. He wasn't even sure he needed to. Sam took the lead and pounded into his willing flesh, relentless, maddening. He fucked like it was the last time, or their first. With Sam, every time was like something new.

He jerked when he felt the first hard pull. He'd been too absorbed by the rhythm of Sam's thrusts to realize that Sam had moved, but now, with Sam's tight fist curled around his length, he wanted nothing but the bliss Sam offered. Sam caught the pre-come at the end of each stroke and smeared it with the water coating his cock, then used it to drive the heel of his hand into its root. By the third pull, Derek knew he wouldn't be able to

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withstand it, not with Sam pistoning into his ass at the same ruthless tempo.

He came with a shout that echoed against the wet walls, ringing in his ears. Sam didn't falter. If anything, Derek's release drove him harder, shifting until he scraped across Derek's prostate. Derek shuddered at the new sensations, unable to stop his continued blasts, the thick fluid catching on the tile and slowly rolling down to mingle with the water at their feet.

When Sam slammed into him one last time, he did so wordlessly, his fingers like iron, his cock pulsing inside Derek's body. Derek gasped for breath, as lost as Sam was, and when he felt Sam finally ease out of his ass, he caught his lover's arm and curled it around the front of his waist.

"Wait," he said. Bracing his arm against the wall, he leaned his head onto it, sighing with satisfaction when Sam, in turn, leaned into him. The mold of their bodies added more warmth to his already overheated flesh, warmth he wanted, warmth he was sure Sam needed as well.

Sam brushed a kiss across his shoulder blade. "We don't do this nearly often enough."

"No, we don't."

"Why is that?"

"I have no idea." He straightened, then winced at the soreness in his ass. "Though maybe it's the fact that you don't hold anything back when you fuck."

Sam's loose smile warmed him to the core. "If I ever held back, you'd never let me hear the end of it."

"If you ever held back, I'd have to start worrying I was finally boring you." He turned under the spray and rinsed away the residual fluid clinging to his cock, while Sam took care of the

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condom behind him. "It's a good thing we don't have to head out for a couple hours. I'm going to need that much time to get it up again."

"It's better than sitting next to my dad with a hard-on, though."

Derek grimaced. "Did you really just say that?"

"Yeah." Sam elbowed under the spray with a smile. "Don't let me do it again."

They washed off again, more relaxed than they'd been since the Kimballs had arrived the previous night. Sam didn't bring it up, and Derek let it rest, but he knew it was only a matter of time. Nothing was resolved, and no amount of sightseeing or plans for a tourist-trap lunch was going to make it so. Still, he liked knowing they were on the same side again, and that they could have a fight and bounce back. It made his long-term decisions even more right.

They talked about Gena and work as they got dressed. With all the drama, they'd missed her performance. They needed to remedy that. Sam was the one who mentioned how his parents would have loved her, which made both of them pause, realizing that door was open again.

"I wonder if talking to my parents would help them understand," Derek said.

"Your parents are the reason we're in this mess," Sam reminded.

The more Derek thought about it, the more he liked it. "But they could give a perspective we can't. They're the same generation, they share a lot of the same political affiliations."

"They're agnostic. My parents aren't."

"That doesn't mean they can't take that into consideration." He pulled a spare shirt out of the closet. "Besides, if religion was really the issue, I think your parents would have said something to

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that effect last night. And they didn't."

Sam's snort was lost as he yanked a sweater over his head. "They didn't really get much of a chance to say anything except how disappointed they were in me. Oh, and to call me a liar. Multiple times."

For a moment, he debated mentioning his meeting with Pete. Sam would resent finding out about it later, because Derek really couldn't see how that was something that could be kept secret. On the other hand, he didn't want to break the détente they'd found. Everything was good. Why would he spoil that by bringing up something irrelevant?

Because secrets were bad, and the longer they were kept, the worse their reveal got. The Kimballs were certainly proof of that.

He waited until he had his back to Sam, working at the buttons on his shirt. "Your dad had a few more words, actually. He called me after you left."

The explosion he expected didn't come. Nothing did. Derek finished with his shirt and turned around to see Sam staring at him in disbelief.

"You talked to him?"

"He asked me to meet him at the hotel for a drink. I didn't know you hadn't talked to him until after I got there."

"You didn't say anything about that last night."

"Because I wasn't about to make things worse between us before they got better." Derek slipped his hands into his pockets, hating he didn't know what to do with them. Or the fact that they started to shake a little at the prospect of another fight with Sam. "He didn't say much. Something about wanting to get to know me, but I think he's just confused by the whole thing."

"Confused." Sam finally moved, shaking his head as he went to

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the dresser and pulled out socks. “Yeah, I suppose that’s one word for it.”

“I didn’t stick around after I realized nothing good was going to come of it,” Derek went on. “And I came straight here afterward. I told him to call you, that you were the one he needed to have that conversation with, but I’m guessing he didn’t.”

“No, he didn’t.” Sam sounded weary again, the relief they’d found in coming together already used up. He sat heavily on the edge of the bed. “Now I’m back to wanting to avoid them again. Shit. I hate this. I hate how he makes me feel like I’m twelve and I’ve shot Nana Sue in the foot again.” At Derek’s upraised brows, Sam waved it off. “A BB gun. And it’s a long story.”

Forgetting the rest of his attire, Derek sat down next to him, their thighs touching. “The difference is, now you’ve got me on your side. And you haven’t done anything wrong. If they can’t accept it, that’s their problem, not yours.”

“Until I want to go home for Christmas, and they tell me they don’t want their fag son hanging around.”

“You think I was going to let you go home for Christmas, the first one we had together?” Derek jostled him with his elbow, trying to lighten the mood. “I had plans for us. Better than Vegas, even.”

This, at least, garnered a small smile. “You think anything is better than Vegas.”

“Well, true, but my intention stands. I was going to skip out on my parents’ big party and everything.”

The smile widened. “You hate your parents’ parties.”

“Are you trying to make this difficult?” he teased.

Sam chuckled. Some of the strength came back to his posture, and he bent over to pull on his socks. “Why don’t we hold off on

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inviting your parents until we see how it goes with mine? If we walk away without bloodshed, we can suggest dinner tomorrow or something.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

And he would do everything he could to make sure Sam got what we wanted, no matter what it took.

CHAPTER 8

The Kimballs looked less than pleased to see Derek, but they were far more polite than they'd been just before their exodus from the party. The twinkle in Bonnie's eye was gone, replaced with a guarded wariness that he automatically regretted. Pete's handshake was as firm as the night before, and though he didn't actually speak until they were already seated, he didn't look like he was ready to flatten Derek on the spot, either.

Conversation was stilted as they looked over the menu, limited to comments about what looked good and what would be too heavy for a midday meal. Derek settled for a shrimp salad that actually looked appetizing, then spent too long debating whether or not he risked getting a beer to go with it. Though it would help him relax, he opted for a coffee instead. He didn't want to give the

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Kimballs more fodder to look down on him, in case alcohol in the middle of the day was a no-no.

When Pete ordered a beer, he realized he was overthinking this. Considerably.

“So...” Bonnie toyed with the edge of her napkin, her eyes darting from Sam, to Derek, back to Sam again. “Is this why you don’t come home to visit as often as you used to?”

Straight to the point. Sam had inherited the tendency from both of his parents.

Sam sighed, already looking defeated. “Ma, I’ve told you how busy my caseload is. That’s got nothing to do with who I’m dating.”

“Harold Kruse is always traveling.” She ticked them off on her fingers. “New York, Chicago, Miami. Last summer, he even went to Amsterdam. And he’s a lawyer.”

“Hal’s a tax attorney. He doesn’t have the same responsibilities I do.”

Pete looked pointedly at Derek before addressing Sam. “Does that mean you would’ve brought him home if you could?”

“Not if it meant you reacting like you did last night.”

“I just...” A woman approached their table, stopping Bonnie in mid-sentence. When the woman passed by without even a glance at them, Bonnie leaned forward and lowered her voice. “I just don’t know what we did wrong.”

The sudden flush of color up the back of Sam’s neck was the only sign Derek needed to step in. “Why does this have to be about what you did wrong?” he shot back at her, unwilling to match her tone. He wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction in thinking this was a verboten topic. “There is absolutely no definitive proof to indicate sexual orientation has anything to do with environment. In

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fact, most people believe it's genetic, which means he can't do anything more about who he likes to have sex with than he can the fact that he's only five-seven." It was the same argument he'd had with Pete the night before, but he'd repeat it ad infinitum until it sunk in. "And have you ever blamed yourself for the fact that he's short?"

Sam gave him a half-smile. "I'm not that short."

"Did something happen?" Bonnie wasn't done trying to figure it out. "You seemed fine in high school. You were always going out with girls. Did something happen at college?"

"Actually, yeah." Sam leaned forward, mimicking his mother's pose, though it didn't seem accusatory like hers did. Derek got the impression that Sam was doing everything in his power to work on the same level as his mother. He would bet they had always been able to communicate, when he and his father came to a standstill. "It's called independence. I had the chance to admit to myself that maybe the fact I was never thrilled about making out with Cathy Kinney after the football games didn't make me abnormal. I was able to talk about who I was, instead of bottling it all up. That's what happened, Ma. I didn't catch some gay disease, and I didn't get seduced by one of my professors."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I didn't even think of that."

Derek hid his grin by sipping at his water.

"This doesn't have anything to do with you," Sam continued. "This is just who I am, and I've been terrified for almost twenty years that you'd react to finding out exactly like you did last night."

"Because you've been lying to us."

"I thought I had to."

"Why? We're your parents."

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“Exactly. And I needed you there. I needed to know I could always go back to you. I’ve been scared for twenty years you’d find out and cut me off. Can you really blame me for not telling you?”

Sam didn’t admit fear very often. He hated seeming weak. Seeing him like this drew Derek closer, draping his arm over the back of Sam’s chair in a show of solidarity. Though he normally wasn’t keen on public displays, there were always times to make exceptions. Like now.

Pete zeroed in on the action with a frown. “Do you have to do that in front of us?”

When Sam glanced back to see what exactly he was referring to, he cocked a brow at Derek in questioning surprise.

“I’m not even touching him,” Derek said. “But for the record, I have no intention of stopping. You wouldn’t hesitate to put your arm around your wife if she needed you, would you? The same logic applies.”

Bonnie blanched. “I thought that was illegal again.”

“He’s not saying we’re married.” Derek could practically hear Sam rolling his eyes.

“But we’re still in a committed relationship,” Derek finished. “Which is why I’m here today. Sam wanted support in dealing with this, so because I love him, I’m here to give it.”

Nobody reacted more strongly to his casual declaration than Sam. Sam sat up, his back pressing against Derek’s arm, and gaped at him in astonishment. His mouth opened to speak, then snapped shut again when the words failed to come.

Derek smiled. “If I’d known that was all it took to shut you up, I would’ve said that a long time ago.”

He didn’t pull away when Sam cupped the back of his neck and

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drew him in for a kiss. Like the arm around the chair, they didn't often kiss in front of other people, but Derek wanted this. He opened to Sam's warm mouth and invited him in, showing his parents, showing the world, just how deeply his feelings for this amazing man went.

He let Sam be the one to pull away. When he glanced across the table, Bonnie had gone completely red, while Pete simply watched them, his eyes and mouth hard.

Sam sighed. "Look, I'm not going to apologize for how we feel about each other. I've never been happier than I am now."

"This makes you happy?" Pete asked.

"Not hurting you like this, no. And for that, I am sorry. This was not how I wanted you to find out."

Bonnie shook her head. "You never wanted us to find out. You said yourself, you were too scared."

"I was scared, yeah, but part of me wished all along I had the guts to tell you. Do you think I like keeping secrets? Do you have any idea how hard that is for me?"

Pete and Bonnie exchanged a quick look. Derek wasn't entirely sure what was going through their heads, but something passed between them, something that had Bonnie reaching for her water glass while Pete settled back in his chair.

"You need to give us some time," he said. "This isn't...we didn't see any of this coming. It's going to take us a while to wrap our brains around it."

"Take all the time you want." Sam spoke a little too fast, a little too high, betraying his nerves. "You tell me what it'll take to help, and I'll do it."

Pete almost smiled. "Some things don't need you throwing two hundred percent into. This is something we'll have to do on our

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own. You've done your share by coming clean."

The insight surprised Derek, not about Sam's drive but Pete's willingness not to write Sam off. Bonnie still looked shaken, and it was entirely likely Pete was, too, and just better at hiding it, but for now, a *détente* had been called, and he was going to honor it as well he could. Sam needed his parents' approval, whether he admitted it or not. Derek wasn't going to walk away for him to get it, but that didn't mean there weren't other ways to help.

* * *

The rest of the meal passed without any further mention of their relationship. Once Sam had relaxed, Derek withdrew the physical contact, letting him guide the conversation through the details of Gena's case, his horse, and family gossip. Bonnie never fully committed to the discussion, often lapsing into silence as she watched either Derek or Sam, but Pete did well enough to make sure it never got awkward. He honestly seemed to be trying. Derek wondered more than once if he'd actually done some good by meeting him the night before.

After Sam paid the check, they rose from the table and ambled out to the pier. Nothing had been said about what came next. It felt like nobody was willing to suggest something and shatter the tentative truce.

So he did.

"Before you leave tomorrow night, I'd like to take you out to dinner." He smiled, ignoring Bonnie's glance at her husband to focus instead on Pete. "And I'd like to invite my parents to join us. I think you'd have a lot in common. And I don't mean me and Sam."

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Pete took his time in answering. "That'd be nice," he eventually said. "Thank you." But he wasn't quite done yet. He turned to Sam. "We're going to sightsee on our own, if that's okay. You don't need to stick around."

Hurt flashed in Sam's eyes, mingled with confusion. "You sure?"

Pete nodded. "I'm sure you've seen all this tourist claptrap a million times anyway. You don't want us boring you to death with all our dumb questions." He made a shooing gesture with his hand. "You two go on and enjoy your victory weekend. Call us at the hotel tomorrow morning with the details for dinner."

Sam mumbled some sort of agreement, but Pete and Bonnie were the first ones to move, their hands linking together as they strolled away from the restaurant. The bracing wind off the bay cut through Derek's jacket, reminding him it was time to go, but he remained still, waiting for Sam to make a decision about his own plans.

"I have no idea what just happened," Sam said, staring at his parents' backs.

"Your dad just asked for some alone time while they try and come to grips with everything."

"I already told him he could have as much time as he wanted. The whole point of them coming here was to spend time with me."

"We'll have tomorrow. They agreed to go out to dinner. If he wanted to be done with you, he would've told me no."

He settled his hand in the small of Sam's back and gently guided him down the street where they'd parked. Sam fell into place, like Derek's side was the only place he ever needed to be. It might have been shock. A lot had happened in the past twenty-four hours. A lot was still yet to come. But Derek wanted to believe that

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walking side by side felt as natural as breathing to Sam, just like it did for him.

He managed to restrain himself until they reached Sam's truck. When they were both inside the cab, though, he stopped Sam from shifting into reverse by resting a hand on his forearm.

Sam glanced at him with a frown. "We forget something?"

Derek's throat was tight, tighter than he could ever remember it being before, tighter than the moment he'd finally admitted to himself he needed Sam as more than a fuck buddy. He wet his lips, suddenly nervous, and pulled back to slide his hand into his pocket.

"I meant what I said back there. About us."

The frown eased into a relieved smile. A dimple came out to play. "I know. Took you long enough to say it, though."

"You are not about to turn this into another competition where you win."

"Don't have to. I already did."

But he knew Sam was just joking around. Slowly, he pulled his hand back out and rested the single key he'd had there on the seat between them. "Then I guess it's my turn to up the ante. Move in with me."

Seeing Sam in shock was quickly becoming one of his favorite things. Sam stared at the key for long seconds, not touching it, barely breathing by the looks of it. Since neither one of them had ever even hinted at the possibility, Derek had expected to surprise him, but this reaction exceeded anything he'd imagined.

"You want me to move in with you?" Sam said.

"I want us to live together," Derek amended. "I was going to do this next weekend in Vegas, but this seems like a better time. If it's easier for me to get rid of my place than it is for you to put your

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condo on the market, then I'll do that. Whatever it takes."

A slight tremor in his fingers betrayed Sam's excitement as he reached for the key. "My place is nicer than yours."

"Don't forget smaller."

"Better location."

"Did I mention the smaller?"

Sam glanced at him through his lashes, wickedness returning to his smile. "You seem to like smaller."

"If you think I really care about your height, then we have more serious problems than whose place we're going to live in."

Sam turned the key around and around in his hands, shards of light catching the silver and sending glints across the truck's roof. "We do this, and my Ma'll have a heart attack for sure."

His gut clenched. Sam wasn't trying to find a graceful way of saying no, was he? "We don't have to tell them, if you don't want to."

"No. I'm done with lying to them. They deserve the truth." He half-laughed. "You know, it sounds funny, but I'm actually relieved that they know. I know it can still go really wrong, and there's a lot we need to say yet, but..."

He didn't need to finish. Derek understood.

"That's a heavy load you've been carrying. Not to mention, you've been holding onto it for most of your life."

Sam closed his fist around the key and slid it into coat pocket. When he reached for the gear stick without saying a word, Derek grabbed his wrist again.

"Is that a yes?"

"I kept the key, didn't I?" He must have seen something in Derek's face, a trace of his mild annoyance at the flip and in no way definitive answer, and laughed outright. Shaking off Derek's

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hand, he turned back to the wheel and reversed out of his spot. “You’re so damn easy. Of course, it’s yes.”

The simple declaration was enough to finally let Derek relax. Things weren’t settled with Sam’s family, but steps had been taken, important ones. Pete seemed willing to at least talk rationally about the whole matter, and if they didn’t understand now, there was no saying they wouldn’t eventually. They clearly loved Sam, as much as Derek did. He had every faith they’d come to realize it didn’t matter who their son shared his life with, as long as he was happy.

Because Derek planned on being the primary source of it. Forever, if Sam would have him.

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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