



HEALTHY OBSESSION

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Chapter 1

“I CAN’T believe you’re not joining us tomorrow morning. That’s totally fucked!” Steve’s eyes narrowed as he glared at his friend across the table.

“Look, I have no control over my employer’s edicts. If this is what he wants, I have no intention of making a damn stink about it. It’s no big deal, just a gym. I just won’t have my usual workout buddies.” Jack sighed. “Besides, I’ll still see you and your hubby after work.” Jack patted Steve on the shoulder as he stood up from their table. “I’m going to get another Guinness; you want one?”

Steve nodded, still frustrated. Every morning for years they’d met at the same gym. It was their way of staying connected despite their different lifestyles.

Having met his partner five years earlier, Steve was in a loving relationship with Tom—married. Jack had poked fun at their marriage, but it was clear he was behind them one hundred percent.

Jack sat down, slamming the two pints of stout on the table. “Maybe this is just what I need. Who knows, I may finally find my Mr. Right.”

Steve huffed. "I'm still not convinced you're really looking. You've slept with practically every man in the Greater Boston area."

Jack snorted. "If I had, then my dick would have fallen off by now." He took a sip of his beer, hiding his grin. "Besides, I don't sleep with them: I fuck them. Let's get our facts straight."

Steve held up his glass. "Sorry, didn't mean to screw up the semantics."

Jack smirked. "In any case, it's probably been only two-thirds of the gay men in Boston."

"Asshole."

"Thank you. Should I have that new name monogrammed on my briefcase?"

Jack was trying to keep the conversation light, but Steve wasn't going to let him off the hook so easily. Taking a sip of his brew, he put the glass down.

"I know you've been lonely. Shit! You've even mentioned you want to find someone who could become more than a one-night stand. How do you plan to do it?"

Jack grimaced. "Maybe I should do what you did."

"Hey, we both know I had no plans to get stuck on a stalled T-line between two stations. It was freezing outside and I'd left my heavy jacket at home."

"So one of the hottest men anyone has ever seen turns out to be in your car, *and* is a gallant homo. No one has that kind of luck but you." Jack raised his glass to Steve.

“I have to admit, if I had to get warmed up by someone, I picked the best.”

“He picked you... how soon they forget.” Jack chuckled.

“You just want to get my mind on something other than your nonexistent love life.” Steve sat back in his chair with a grin on his face, remembering the day he’d met his husband. Their first touch, when Tom had noticed Steve shivering, was all it took to make an immediate and lasting connection. Since then, neither had missed a day together. Three years later to the day, he and Tom were married.

Jack ran his finger over the rim of the glass before bringing it up to his lips again. “I’m fucking envious. You know that, don’t you?” he whispered, the sincerity of his admission clearly evident.

Steve nodded and sighed, wishing he could steer Jack in the right direction. The bars and clubs hadn’t worked. His friend only found one nameless trick after another. Hoping it would elicit more prospects, the two friends had joined a gym. Jack had hooked up with a couple of possibilities, but nothing had lasted more than a day. It seemed, even at the gym, the men Jack met had no interest in anything more than a satisfying fuck. Steve knew Jack was lonely, but there didn’t seem to be anyone out there for him.

“Hey, maybe one day I’ll get on the Green Line and meet the man of my dreams.”

The two clinked their glasses together in a toast to Jack’s fantasy.

“But I doubt it. It seems I’m doomed to live alone.”

“And fuck everyone who breathes.” The two chuckled, but Steve could see the hollow look in his friend’s eyes and wished there was something he could do.

Jack viewed the bar, pausing as his eyes met those of a good-looking brunet at the end.

“I see you found your date for the night.”

“It’s a warm body.”

“Is that enough?” Steve patted Jack’s shoulder.

“At least it’s something.” Jack stood up to make his move. “I’ll see you tomorrow night. Can we meet here, or do you need to be home?”

“It’ll be fine. See you then.” Steve left the remainder of his beer on the table as he prepared to head home, reminded again how lucky he was to have a loving husband waiting for him.

Looking back just before exiting the bar, he saw Jack down the remainder of his drink in one gulp and head for his target. Steve shook his head. His friend may seem to be the perfect predator, the envy of all the single gay men in the neighborhood, but Steve knew better.

Chapter 2

JACK viewed his surroundings. The equipment was all state of the art and the men—some were definitely worth a second look. Others *needed* to be in the new rooftop health club: spare tire and receding hairlines were at a premium.

The biggest irritants were the women. He hated watching all the breeders gathering at the new watering hole to flirt and tease in the nauseating way heteros tried to attract one another. He recognized some of the women from his office's secretarial pool sidling up to the older executive types.

The new facility overlooked Boston Harbor. While the view wasn't bad, Jack still preferred the gym he went to nearer his home in Cambridge. But when the boss strongly suggests anything, it's worth listening, especially if the goal is to move from "Associate Editor" to "Editor" within the next year.

Jack remembered closing the final manuscript he had been reviewing the previous evening when he had heard a knock on his office door.

His first reaction had been to tell the intruder to "fuck off," but instead he had looked up and seen Bruce Sutcliff walking in uninvited.

“Good evening, Jack, how was your day?” Bruce always started with ridiculous small talk, postponing any question or issue on his mind.

“My day was fine. I read four new submissions: barfed over two pieces of unsolicited trash and found two fairly workable.”

“I gather the workable ones were backed by agents.” Bruce had taken a seat opposite Jack.

“One was unsolicited and surprisingly captivating. The other was not only backed by an agent, but we’ve published some of her work already. While the second wasn’t a shock, it’s always refreshing to discover untapped talent. It’s a pleasure to reward quality writing.” Jack had stared pointedly at his employer, and Bruce had nodded his understanding.

“People think just because a children’s book is short and filled with pictures, anyone can write one. It takes more than a third-grade vocabulary to write good literature for the same age group.”

Jack had leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. “Sometimes their vocabulary is far beneath that of our readers.”

Bruce had chuckled and sat back, folding his hands in his lap.

“Look, Bruce, we both know you didn’t come in here to find out how my day was, or talk about the weather, or any other bullshit. What’s up?”

“*Up* is exactly where it is.”

Jack had remained silent, waiting for more information, although he had been tempted to make a cutting remark about wanting to get out so he could get it up.

“To be specific, the new health club the building added.”

Jack had sat back in his chair and gripped the arms. “The eyesore the building managers added in place of the rooftop restaurant. I’ve heard it’s fairly decent and has some quality equipment, although they should have asked us to name it. Healthy Obsession—what a cheesy title.”

Bruce had grinned, clasping his hands and resting them on the edge of Jack’s desk. “Maybe they *should* have asked us. After all, we’re the professionals who deal with words and titles.”

Jack had smirked. “It sure as hell couldn’t have hurt.”

“I’m glad you’re aware of the new club, because, you see, the building management put a special deal on the table.”

Here it comes; spit it out, Bruce. Jack had tilted his head.

“Any business in the building that can get their executive officers to sign on in entirety gets a huge break on rent.” Jack had sat still, detecting there was more. “They hope the health club will attract more than just the tenants and executives....” The editor’s voice had trailed off, and he lowered his head.

“They want top paid employees to act as gym-bunny magnets.” Jack had begun to stack some manuscripts in neat piles. “Nice idea, but I already belong to a gym. Have for a long time and I don’t intend to—”

Bruce's voice had taken on a stern edge. "I know all about the types of places you go and the people—the men—you associate with. That's on your own time." He had stood up and held the doorknob. "But this is business. We can save a bundle if you join the damn club and make an appearance every morning. You don't even have to break a sweat: just join and show."

Jack had bitten his lip, seeing his boss' determination and knowing this was an order, not a request. "Fine, Bruce, I'll be there first thing in the morning to check out the place. If it's an adequate facility I'll join and make regular appearances."

"Thank you, Jack. That's what I like to hear. Teamwork: that's what good business is all about."

"And I always thought good business was about doing your job better than anyone else and getting the rewards that follow."

Not responding to Jack's final remark, Bruce had left the office, closing the door behind him.

Jack grimaced. *Teamwork, my ass. You just want a goddamn break on the monthly rent.* Not that he could blame his boss; the economy had affected everyone, including readers. Selling books was much harder. More and more parents were encouraging their kids to take books out of the library and weren't even addressing purchases unless it was Christmas or birthday time... or so the market researchers reported.

JACK approached the bench press and the weights. He had to hand it to the designers; the club was decked out with all the right equipment. There were just two problems: it was a haven for heteros, and it took time away from his other gym, which had a much more enticing clientele.

Settling on the weightlifting bar, Jack aligned some of the larger free weights and lay down underneath it, preparing to lift.

As he was about to attempt his first lift, he heard someone run over to halt his actions. “Hey, buddy, don’t attempt that kind of weight without a spotter.”

Jack sat up, annoyed by the intrusion as well as the assumption he couldn’t manage on his own. “Don’t ‘hey buddy’ me. I can do this—”

Looking up, he was mesmerized by the hottest, hardest six-pack he’d ever seen off the Internet.

“I don’t want to be a pest, but it’s not a good idea to....” The hard body stopped talking and rolled his lips inward, never taking his eyes off Jack. He swallowed and coughed. “You can strain a muscle if you’re not careful, and I’d hate to see the bar fall on you.”

Jack nodded, looking up and down the body standing over him, and licked his lips. “Thanks.” This guy was the poster boy for men who were cut. Every damn part of his body looked like it was chiseled by a sculptor. He had more ripples than the ocean. “You look like you’ve been to a gym once or twice. I might be willing to take your advice.”

The man raised an eyebrow and smirked. “I do like to work out. I already belonged to a gym near my home, but I was strongly encouraged to join this one when it opened.”

“Hmm, I got the same strong encouragement from my boss. I gather you work in this building.” Jack tried to get a line on this stranger. He saw the wedding band on his finger, but in Boston that could mean anything: married breeder, married homo, or putting off anyone searching for a permanent relationship. Anything was possible.

“I guess if I want to keep my job, it’s worth changing gyms for part of the week. I still try to hit my old place on the way home each day,” the hunk continued.

Jack huffed. “I’ll probably do the same. I have some friends and others who would like to be friends at my regular place. Wouldn’t want to disappoint anyone.”

The hottie laughed. “We seem to be in a similar boat.” He offered his hand and Jack shook it, feeling heat, wanting to sustain the contact. “I’m Rick, Rick Monroe.”

“You certainly are.”

Rick laughed and continued to shake hands vigorously. “And you?”

Jack snorted, feeling a bit off his game. “I’m Jack. Jack Randall. I work for Sutcliff and Simon Publishers on the thirtieth floor.”

“I work for M. J. Trust and Associates.”

Jack dropped his hand, trying to keep from sounding too shocked. “You work for an accounting firm?”

“Yep. I’m a CPA with a pretty good client list.”

Jack began to question his initial reaction. Sure, some guys were straight but had a willingness to play. The accounting type, though... his gay radar never went off for them. Hell, if he’d ever had an accountant who looked like Rick, he sure as shit wouldn’t get any financial business accomplished when they met.

“Lay down. I didn’t mean to get your routine off track.” Rick stood behind Jack, prepared to spot the bar as he lifted.

“You definitely did not get me off track.” Jack reclined on the bench, and despite his desire to focus on the bar, all he could see were Rick’s sapphire-blue eyes gazing down at him, his sweaty mop of light brown hair sticking to his forehead.

Blinking, Jack began to raise the bar, not wanting to embarrass himself. He was able to complete ten lifts safely with Rick hovering and egging him on.

“Nice job. You do that really well.”

Jack smirked. “I’ve been working out at my other gym for as long as I can remember.”

“Can you spot me?”

“Nothing would make me happier.” Jack was hoping Rick was following his underlying meaning. Maybe this new health club wouldn’t be as dull as he had first thought. Not only did he meet a hottie on the first day, but the guy was nice.

“Thanks.” Rick added another twenty-five pounds to each side of the bar and lay on the bench below. “Ready.”

“Absolutely.” Jack drew out the word, hoping to get a sign from his new exercise buddy indicating a much closer body connection would be part of the plan after their workouts.

Rick immediately started his lifts. He lowered and raised the heavily weighted bar twenty times, and with Jack’s help rested it safely back on the stand above the bench.

“Pretty damn impressive,” Jack drawled. It was time to get what he’d wanted ever since he first caught sight of Rick. “I like your style. Care to further this discussion in the steam room?”

“I’ve been working out for years.” Rick smiled and Jack felt his cock react. “Sure, I could use a little steam to ease the pull before I shower.”

Bingo! This was his chance. It was obvious that the hot accountant was just as interested in him, and he wasn’t going to fuck it up. Jack furthered his teasing enticements, enjoying the play on words. “I can tell you work out regularly. You have *very* well-defined muscles.”

Rick shrugged as he started to walk toward the locker room. “Yeah, I guess. My wife seems to like them.”

Chapter 3

“YOU hit on a straight guy!”

“A hetero with a wife and kids—and no, I didn’t actually hit on him, but I got fucking close.” Jack took a sip of the beer he was nursing.

“See, now you know why it would be better to hang out with us at our gym.”

“Steve, I didn’t get to choose.” Hidden below the table, Jack balled his hands in frustration. He hated feeling trapped and now he could add feeling foolish, something he’d never experienced before. “If I hadn’t joined this health club, my boss would be after my ass—and not in a satisfying way.” He hoped the pun would lighten the mood, but it fell flat.

Steve rolled his eyes. He and Jack had been friends since grade school. As teens, when they admitted their sexual orientation to each other, the two also admitted a mutual lack of interest in pursuing a physical relationship. Their friendship was too strong to lose it in the heat of sex. Instead, each found a comrade he could trust with his most private thoughts.

“So, go to the health club in the morning, make your required appearance, then come with us after work to get your real workout and enjoy the view.” Taking a long pull on

his beer, he waved at the waiter, indicating they wanted two more. “At least you’ll be in a safe place to hit on practically anyone you come across.” Jack raised an eyebrow. “We both know you have a one-track mind.”

“You’re just realizing that now?” Jack huffed and then stared at the table, his voice barely above a whisper. “It’s not just about the exercise. I haven’t made a mistake like that in years. I spent half the morning staring at that guy and for the life of me....” Jack trailed off.

“Sounds like your gaydar needs an adjustment.” Steve chuckled.

“This has nothing to do with gay or straight.” Jack started picking at the label on his bottle.

“It doesn’t? I must be missing something.”

Jack huffed. “I think Rick was looking my way too. Damn, I’m sure of it. He approached me first.”

Steve snorted. “You have one hell of a huge ego. It’s not like thirty years ago. Gays don’t get married to cover who they are. Besides, from what you’ve told me, he was just being a nice guy. You know, there *are* nice straight men out there.”

“What planet are you living on? Of course homos still tie the goddamn knot. The power of being in a state of denial hasn’t gone out of style, even in glorious, liberal Massachusetts.”

“And you think this guy, this Rick, is hiding behind a wedding band and a wife?”

Jack shrugged, unwilling to give Steve a direct answer. Finishing his first beer, he placed the bottle at the far end of the table and started the second as soon as the waiter brought it over. “He has two kids.”

Steve choked. “What!” He stared at his friend. “Stop thinking about this asshole. If he is in the closet, he’s made sure he won’t get out. Kids are the nails sealing the door nice and tight.”

“Nice analogy.”

“Look, you know I’m right. Whatever the hell you were imagining you wanted to do to, or with, this guy—it’s impossible.” Steve pleaded, clearly trying to force Jack to face reality.

Jack slammed the bottle on the table, a splash of liquid flying out the top. “You’re right, but I can’t stop thinking about him. Christ!”

Steve placed his hand on Jack’s arm, giving it a squeeze. “Look, why don’t you pick up one of these horny assholes, fuck his brains out, and send him on his way. Maybe that’ll help. Let’s face it: this bar is full of guys who’d be happy to service you and walk away satisfied and grateful.”

Jack shook his head. “Thanks for the advice, Steve, but I’m going home, taking a shower, and making it an early night.” He knew taking one of the men at the bar home would satisfy him temporarily, but the last thing he wanted to do was fantasize about fucking Rick as he plowed into some random, nameless trick.

Steve nodded, still concerned about his friend. “Suit yourself.”

WATCHING Jack leave, Steve imagined all the guys who would be happy to bend over anything, anywhere, for his friend. At six-two, he stood taller than most, and his subtly toned muscles and nine-inch cock had them all drooling at the gym showers. Yet, despite Jack’s appeal, Steve knew how lucky he was to have a partner to go home to every night while Jack was going home alone.

As the door of their local gay bar closed behind Jack, Steve picked up his beer, took a long pull, and pointed it toward the exit. “I hope you can get Rick out of your mind once you jerk off to his memory in the shower. You need someone who can give you what you need, *and* who’s available.”

Shaking his head, Steve finished his beer. *He finally finds someone who interests him as more than just a fuck, and he’s straight.* Leaving a big tip on the table, Steve found the waiter, paid the tab, then left, unable to stop worrying about his friend.

THE next morning, having made it an earlier night than usual, Jack arrived an hour before he had the previous day at the rooftop facility, hoping to finish most of his workout

routine before Rick arrived. He had no intention of paying top dollar for a gym membership and letting it go to waste. There was no fucking way he was going to be intimidated by some straight man with a hot body.

After work, he planned to take Steve's advice and find someone to pound. Obsessing over some closeted family man was not his style.

Going from the bench press to the free weights and finally the treadmill, Jack could feel drops of perspiration dripping down the sides of his face. He didn't bother wiping them away; it felt good to work off his stress.

He could tell some of the men and most of the women were staring at him as he worked up a sweat. Although amused, he gave none of them a second glance. All he wanted was to get through and get out.

Having completed his workout faster than expected, Jack grabbed a towel and entered the steam room as a reward for his morning's achievement. The room was empty and he couldn't have been happier. He found a space on the tiled bench, leaned back, and closed his eyes, letting the steam work its way into his pores.

"Hey, I didn't see you this morning." Rick sat down closer than necessary, considering the whole room was theirs.

Jack opened one eye, trying to remain cool despite the instant reaction of his cock. *Shit!* He remained silent.

"You must have gotten here pretty damn early."

“Now I know why you’re an accountant. You have an excellent grasp of the obvious.” Jack knew he was being overly sarcastic, bordering rude. Rick hadn’t done anything to lead him on, but he was angry at this guy’s unwelcome invasion—this married, straight guy.

“You seem pissed off about something. Couldn’t you find someone else to spot you this morning?”

Rick’s clueless concern was beginning to get on Jack’s nerves. “Look, we didn’t have an appointment and I can always find someone willing to help me out.” Jack opened his eyes to check that no one else had entered the steam room. Brushing his hand over his towel-covered dick, he continued. “I’m more than capable of getting my needs met anywhere.”

He smirked when he saw Rick lower his head. “I think I understand what you mean.”

“Now I’m sure you’re smart enough to be a CPA.” Jack sat back and closed his eyes again, enjoying the thrill of taking charge.

Rick’s voice rose. “I damn well know exactly what you mean. Fuck, I thought you’d give me a break, but I guess I was wrong.”

Jack sat up straight, his eyes shooting open. Rick scrubbed his hand over his face, the hand featuring his goddamn wedding ring. He sat back and shook his head.

Glaring at Rick, Jack snapped, “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Rick didn't move or open his eyes. "I thought you could tell yesterday. It seemed you got the message; I guess I made a mistake."

Jack's cock was beginning to tent his towel. "Are you telling me you're...?"

"I'm telling you I got married when I was twenty because it got me out of a house with an overbearing, drunken asshole of a father. I was still in college and had no intention of ever going home. Being attached was the perfect excuse... and, at the time, didn't seem to hurt anyone."

Jack's eyes widened. "Except you and your wife. Shit!"

"Shit is right."

"This has to be a joke! Does your wife know?" Jack couldn't believe he was engaging in conversation with this hopeless case, but he couldn't let go. He knew he should go to the showers; unfortunately, his legs weren't following orders.

"Yeah, she knows." Rick spoke in a dull, robotic voice.

Jack was beginning to feel sorry for this guy, even though his predicament was of his own making. "And your kids?"

Rick snorted. "They know their dad and mom are separating. That's it for now."

"Separating?"

"Now that everything's gone to hell, it's only fair to her."

Jack's curiosity got the better of him. "How has everything gone to hell?" He knew the eager tone of his voice revealed too much but he didn't care.

"It's totally screwed up at home and I...."

"You what?"

"I want a real life." Rick took a deep breath. "And I think I'm still young enough to have one."

Jack brushed his hand through his sweat-matted hair. "I wasn't sure yesterday. The ring and the mention of your wife threw me off."

"I know. I'm still not out at work."

Remembering how long it took him to finally tell his boss to stop looking at him as a possible son-in-law, Jack understood the fine line he'd walked for so long. "Then why risk anything with me?"

"I don't know. Something about you... I couldn't resist."

Jack chuckled. "I've heard that before. Usually, the guy sucks me off and I never see him again."

Rick shrugged. "Sorry I bothered you. I just thought maybe we could talk... or something... after work one day."

Jack began unconsciously rubbing his cock through his towel as he watched Rick's forlorn face. He was beautiful even when he was pouting like a child.

Forcing his hand to still, he sat further back on the bench and leaned closer to his companion. "I'll be done with work at about six tonight. There's a great restaurant about ten minutes from here."

“I took the bus into work today. Where is this place?”

“Meet me in the garage, level three—the Sutcliff and Simon spots. I’ll drive.”

Rick nodded, and Jack noted the edges of his mouth curling up. He couldn’t resist. Confirming they were still alone, he leaned in and kissed Rick tenderly. Hearing a soft moan from his new friend, he stood up to leave the steamy confessional. “I’ll see you later.”

Licking his lips, Rick opened his eyes, gazing at Jack. “The garage. Level three... at six.”

Chapter 4

JACK made sure he'd finished editing his last manuscript for the day by five forty-five p.m. Continually looking at the clock, he felt like a fucking teenager, but he couldn't suppress the unfamiliar excitement as he anticipated seeing Rick. This wasn't about sex—not exclusively. There was more, something deeper he couldn't quite name.

When had he decided to become a damn grown-up, Jack wondered? It couldn't have happened overnight. Jack was shocked by his feelings for Rick. He thought back to the first time he admitted he wanted more than a hot ass and a stiff prick. It was less than a year ago when he and Steve met at their bar, and Jack, loosened up by a few drinks, confessed his true desires to his closest friend:

“Do you realize how many years we’ve been meeting at the same gym? We work out, cruise, and go to work every fucking day. Then, as if we weren’t already in some gay version of the ‘same old dull routine’, we head over to the same bar almost every night.” Jack ran his finger around the rim of the pint of beer on the table in front of him.

“Is this some kind of pre-birthday philosophical bullshit?” Steve glanced at his husband, Tom, playing pool. Jack still couldn't believe his friend had a husband.

“Because if it isn’t, you’re babbling. Of course I know how long we’ve been doing this... ever since we graduated.”

“It isn’t pre-birthday bullshit.” Jack snorted, then drank close to half his beer. “Well, maybe a little. I’ve been doing the same thing for eight years and I wonder why I’m still going home alone every goddamn night.”

“Stop whining. You don’t always go home alone. If I remember correctly, just last night you were accompanied by a very eager little twink with an amazing butt.”

“A hot, nameless twink.” Jack drank the rest of his beer and then ordered a second. When it arrived, he again drank half in one gulp. “That’s my point. Not all of us are as lucky as you. You found Mr. Right on a fucked-up train.”

“And your train hasn’t pulled into the station,” Steve laughed.

“That’s an inane analogy, or metaphor, or whatever the hell you were trying for.”

“I know, but at least I got a smile from you. What’s with all the melancholy crap?”

Jack gripped the edge of the table and looked at his friend. “I’m getting older—not old, but older. I’m ready for a change. Shit! I look at you and most of our other friends and you all have partners, husbands.... Christ, soon you’ll be adopting kids, and I’ll still be hanging out in the same bar, at the same table, taking home the same hot asses.”

“Are you saying you envy my life of monogamy and domesticity?”

“I’m saying I want to feel something for someone. If it includes monogamy, then I’ll give it a shot.” Jack chugged the rest of his beer.

“Hey, careful. Drink too much too quickly, and you might find yourself admitting you’re straight.”

Jack huffed. “No chance of that, but I may just admit wanting to find out what the fuck it’s like to love someone.”

“Stop being so damn pessimistic. You’ve loved plenty of people.”

Jack tilted his head and grinned.

Steve snorted. “Not like that. I mean you’ve felt love from and been loved by many people.”

Jack stared at the table, feeling empty inside and needing another drink. He raised his hand to call over the waiter, but Steve pushed it down.

“Now wait, listen to me. I love you, your family loves you. When you came out, no one batted an eye. We were both lucky that way. My father may not have been the greatest, but the rest of my family was fine.”

Jack nodded, remaining silent.

“Just because you haven’t met the guy of your dreams doesn’t mean you’ll never find love. Lots of people get married after thirty.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “Lots of people who are straight.”

“Lots of people, gay or straight.” Steve ran his finger over the ring his glass left on the table. “Maybe you do need to broaden your horizons, go someplace else.” He lowered his

head and whispered, “Someplace where no one knows you, where you don’t have a reputation of any sort.”

The waiter arrived and Jack ordered two more beers. As soon as they were alone again, he stared at Steve, grateful for their friendship. “You do understand, don’t you.”

“I’ve noticed how you are when you visit our apartment. Sometimes when I’ve left the room to get something and I return, you’re looking at the things Tom and I bought together. I even spotted you browsing through pictures of our vacations.” Steve briefly rested his arm over Jack’s. “It’s worth it, Jack—committing to that one special person. I hope you can find that someone too. I don’t miss partying or going out with more guys than there are days in the week.”

“Did you think you would?” Jack pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

Steve squeezed Jack’s shoulder gently. “Yeah, for a while I thought I was making a mistake, losing my freedom, but....”

Jack dropped his hands to the table and looked Steve in the eyes. “But, what?”

“But I didn’t need any of that crap when Tom came along. He filled something so much more important.”

Jack smirked but kept his sarcasm in check and remained silent.

“He filled my heart.”

“You’re such a fucking romantic.”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah, I am. But I bet if you found the person you wanted to spend your life with, you wouldn’t be such a critical asshole.”

“Thanks for the encouragement.” Jack rolled his eyes.

“If you really want to find someone, you will. Give it time; it’ll happen when you least expect it.”

Jack huffed. “I’ll keep your sage advice in mind. In the meantime, I think there’s a redhead with a bubble butt eyeing me, and your hubby is about to finish clearing the pool table.”

Steve shook his head. “Happy birthday, Jack. I hope you get what you really want this year.”

“Yeah, yeah—I’m done thinking about what might be and ready to get back to reality.” Jack rose, approaching his newest target.

He heard Steve call after him. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. It can happen when you least expect it.”

Jack turned around, winked at his friend, and made his move. Whatever his future held, for tonight at least, he wouldn’t be going home alone. He just wished he could shake this hollow, empty feeling. Hell, it was his birthday after all; just grab the redhead, take him home, and fuck away this melancholy.

Jack hoped he’d finally have a new, more meaningful reality.

Chapter 5

ARRIVING at his car a few minutes before the designated time, he took out his iPhone and started checking out the customer ratings of the restaurant he had in mind. Although he rarely dated, Jack wanted to impress Rick by taking him somewhere that was new and trendy, yet still had good food.

By the time his phone read six thirty, Jack got into his car and started reprimanding himself, thinking up every synonym for moron. *What a goddamn idiot I am.* Rick wasn't ready to take a step, let alone a leap. The idea of spending the evening with another man probably had him regretting meeting Jack earlier at the gym.

Jack turned the key in the ignition just enough for the car radio to play. Sitting back, he closed his eyes, trying to lose himself in the music. He imagined those firm, rippled muscles wrapped around his body, holding him, caressing him... fuck! Try as he might, Rick's face kept invading his thoughts.

When six forty-five registered on the car's digital clock, he rotated the key further and left, angry, horny, and disappointed.

He reached the bar—*his bar*—in record time. No reason to screw up his night because some asshole led him on. He

tossed his suit jacket and tie into the car and opened the top few buttons of his shirt.

Normally he would have asked Steve and Tom to join him, but not tonight. Tonight wasn't going to be about friends getting together.

Looking at his reflection in the driver's side mirror, he raised an eyebrow. "Not bad, Jack. I guess you're just not the type to settle down or find someone to care about... or find someone who'll fucking care about you. Shit!" Jack turned away from the vehicle.

He was already in his thirties and no one had come along. His friends were all in relationships. Even Steve had found the goddamn love of his life. Jack assumed he and Steve would continue as always: buddies till the end. Jack was happy for Steve, despite being saddened that he was no longer the most important person in his best friend's life. What Steve had with his husband was incredible and enviable, but no matter how hard he looked, there never seemed to be anyone out there to fill that space in Jack's life. He resigned himself to the fact that he would go on from trick to trick, looking for something he would never find.

As he entered the bar, heads turned. They always did. At least the night would produce a sure thing.

First, he looked around for Steve. If his friend happened to be there, he would get the chance to rant about the asshole who'd stood him up. Then he'd get down to business. Holy shit! Jack Randall had been stood up. He shuddered as he faced the truth.

Strutting through the tables haphazardly strewn throughout, Jack spotted a hot guy at the pool table near the far end of the room. He was alone, bending over in just the right way to line up a shot while giving Jack a great view. His trim build was... the opposite of not worth dwelling on. The blond hottie looked up as Jack approached, offering a half-smile.

“You look like you want something. Care to play?”

Tilting his head, Jack smirked. “Pool, or do you have something more interesting in mind?”

“I hadn’t thought much about it.” Bullshit. Blondie was turning up the heat by the second. “Do you have something else in mind?” The guy actually batted his eyes. Normally Jack would have laughed, but tonight he didn’t care. He wanted an anonymous, available ass and he’d found one: ready and clearly very willing.

“Bathroom! Now!” Jack barked the order, making sure his prey knew who was in charge.

The hottie followed Jack into the men’s room. More forcefully than usual, Jack dragged him into a stall. In one swift motion Jack pulled off the guy’s T-shirt, crashing his lips down on those of the waiting trick. Shoving his tongue deep inside, he heard the moans of desire. *Got him—he’s mine.*

Lips still locked together in a heated frenzy, the guy reached for Jack’s shirt, tugging at it, pulling it up, and reaching for the buttons. The trick’s fingers fumbled awkwardly. Jack swatted them away, unbuttoning his shirt

quickly, all the while his tongue shoved into the trick's mouth, never letting up.

With his shirt hanging completely opened, Blondie started holding him closer, pressing them together skin to skin, the heat building. Jack was hungry. The kisses didn't satisfy the need. He wanted more, now. Sliding his hand along the hottie's chest, slick with sweat, Jack reached down, feeling the expected bulge. He teased the hard cock, massaging but not releasing it from its confines while his own desire was building, desperately wanting to plow the hot ass.

Jack rubbed the front of the guy's pants as he continued his merciless onslaught of the swollen lips. Then his target moaned louder, needier. The kid moaned into the kiss and Jack recalled the sound he'd heard earlier in the day in the steam room when another man had opened up to him.

Pulling away, he couldn't get Rick's voice, touch, smell, and soft moan out of his mind. Jack banged his hand against the bathroom stall. "Damn!"

The trick started, stepping back, eyes darting side to side. "Hey, what's up? Why'd you stop?"

Unable and unwilling to answer, Jack stormed out of the stall, leaving the restroom with the trick shouting at him accusingly. "Asshole! What the fuck is wrong with you? You sure as hell don't deserve your reputation! Fucking tease!"

Storming out of the bar, his shirt still open, Jack got in his car and drove straight home, fuming, angry at Rick and

angry at himself. He finally met someone he connected with and the man was a closet case!

As soon as he entered his apartment, Jack threw his computer bag on the sofa and stripped out of his suit. Putting on his sweatpants and stepping on his treadmill, he tried to exorcise the demon dominating his thoughts, sweating him out of his system along with the toxins of the day.

“YOU’RE wearing a dent in my new Oriental rug.”

Steve glared at his friend, trying to be empathetic toward Jack and ignore his witty sarcastic remark. “Hey, you called me, sounding out of breath, and asked if we could hang out for a while.”

Jack was sitting on his sofa, still in his sweatpants. When Steve arrived, he’d answered the door while pulling his T-shirt on. “You didn’t have to come.”

Rolling his eyes, Steve remembered all the times Jack had been there for him. The worst had been when his parents divorced. His relationship with his father had been tenuous at best once he’d come out; following the divorce, contact virtually ceased. Jack had become the person Steve could talk to about “guy things.” While his mother would have been willing, she could never really help, being neither a man nor gay.

“Look, Jack, are you sure this guy is worth getting all”—Steve waved his hand toward Jack’s sweat-riddled body—

“hot and bothered over? After all, he did admit he’d been in the closet—no, make that a vault—for over ten years.”

Jack brushed his hand through his hair. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s like I’m fucking obsessed with Rick. It must be some psychological bullshit about wanting someone I can’t have.”

“Maybe subconsciously this’ll help you rationalize never having to make a commitment to anyone.”

“It’s one thing for me to analyze myself, but don’t you start too.”

“So why the hell did you ask me here?” Steve threw his hands out to his sides and let them drop down.

“So you would tell me to forget him, or that he’s not worth the time, or that I’m out of my mind to think about him one more minute. Pick one!”

Steve walked behind the sofa and kneaded Jack’s knotted shoulder muscles. “I’d be happy to do that, but something occurred to me during this visit.”

Jack turned, his eyes narrowed as he looked at Steve. “And what pray tell would that be, oh wise one?”

Steve huffed. “I may not be the wisest person you’ve ever met, but I sure as shit know you better than anyone else.”

“So?” Turning away, Jack began to bite his thumbnail.

“Maybe this guy really does feel something for you, if he wasn’t lying this morning. And since you had some hot trick right where you wanted him, so to speak, and didn’t want to do anything the second you remembered Rick...” Jack rested

his head in hands, shaking it as he did so, yet never contradicting a word being said. "...my guess would be you actually have some feelings for this guy."

"Don't you mean *this straight guy*?"

"No. He told you he wasn't straight, and that's not something people would typically lie about, especially since he has so much to risk losing."

Jack nodded into his hands, still not looking at Steve.

"Maybe you should give him a chance to explain why he didn't show tonight."

Jack mumbled into his hands.

"What did you say? I couldn't hear you."

As his friend looked up at him, Steve could see the strain on Jack's face, and sat next to him on the sofa.

"I said, what if he doesn't want to explain, or even speak to me anymore? Jesus, I sound like some asshole teen drama queen."

"No, my friend, you sound like a guy who wants more than an anonymous fuck."

Steve patted Jack's arm and then gave him a hug. He stood up, opened Jack's bar, and poured a shot of Scotch, handing it to his friend who took it and downed it in one gulp.

"Now shower, get some sleep, and maybe Rick will have a good explanation for you in the morning."

"Always looking on the bright side, Steve?"

“I have to, it’s better than always living with the alternative.”

“I hope you’re right. Damn, this *feeling* shit is hard.”

“It can be.” Steve watched Jack move toward his bathroom, stripping off his shirt as he walked. Pulling the apartment door shut behind him, he whispered, “I hope I’m right, because where this Rick is concerned... you’re totally fucked, my friend.”

Chapter 6

JACK parked in his usual spot in the garage. He got out of the car and reached in for his computer bag. Before he could shut the door, he felt someone behind him open it even more.

“What the fuck do think you’re—” His voice trailed off as he found himself looking into Rick’s blue eyes.

“I’m sorry about last night.” He sounded humble, but Jack remembered the pain and confusion from the previous night.

“Fuck *sorry*. You couldn’t do it—you’re straight, or at least you want to be—I got it.” Jack turned away, unable to continue looking at Rick, knowing he would be drawn in if he wasn’t careful. He needed to protect himself, to put distance between them.

“It’s not that. Please let me explain.”

Just as Steve had said, the asshole wanted to explain, only Jack wasn’t sure he really wanted to know the truth. He couldn’t hear this man tell him he wasn’t worth the risk. “Explain what? Explain why you’re a hetero, why your little experiment to try the dark side failed? Nothing to explain.”

Jack froze when he felt Rick touch his shoulder gently. Shit! He didn’t want to feel anything and yet....

“Yes, there is something.” Rick pleaded. “Please give me a minute.”

Jack placed his messenger bag on his shoulder and slammed the car door shut, trying to recall the anger from the night before, knowing it would give him the edge he needed. He spun around. “Fine, you’ve got one minute. Then I need to work off some pent-up energy in the damn health club.”

Rick nodded. “My wife....”

Jack grimaced but didn’t turn away.

The corner of Rick’s mouth curled up in a half-grin. “My soon-to-be *ex*-wife called near the end of the workday yesterday. Our daughter tried to imitate her big brother by climbing one of the trees in the backyard.”

Jack was already irritated with the sweet breeder story, wondering what cute anecdote he would be forced to endure.

Rick continued, “She’s small and, well, lost her footing.”

Jack looked at Rick. This was definitely not what he was expecting to hear. “Shit. Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. Sprained her ankle. But we had to take her to the emergency room for X-rays. I ran out of work, and since we hadn’t exchanged numbers, I didn’t know how to get in touch with you.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Jack felt a migraine coming on. It was like some ridiculous movie where there’s an oncoming train wreck and no one can look away. He

knew he should run—head up to Healthy Obsession, sweat Rick out of his system, and get to the office.

“Do I get another chance? I think we could’ve had a good time together.” Rick’s voice was soft and tender. “I was really looking forward to our... date.”

It was strange, looking at the walking, talking anachronism. This big hunk with the gentlest demeanor. Steve was right, he was fucked, and it was a relief to hear Rick’s story and know he was still interested.

Jack didn’t know what possessed him, but the words came out before he could manage to stop them. “Can you take a day off? I’ve got enough sick days piled up to stay home for a year.”

Rick’s slight grin turned into a huge smile as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “I’m suddenly feeling really sick. I’d better call into the office and tell them I won’t be in today.”

TAKING off his sports jacket and tie, Rick tossed them on the back seat of Jack’s car. He walked quickly to the opposite side and sat in the passenger seat, buckled his seat belt and smirked. “Hey, I thought we were going somewhere. I came by bus, so you’ll have to be the tour guide.”

Jack nodded, stunned by the surprising turn of events. He would have bet anything Rick was a lost cause. Instead he found himself even more intrigued and enticed by this bold move—and from an *accountant*.

Mimicking Rick's earlier actions, Jack tossed his jacket and tie in the car, opened the top three buttons of his shirt, and rolled up his sleeves. He knew he was taking a chance letting Rick in—in more ways than one—but Jack couldn't deny the attraction.

Jack had waited a long time to find any man that would unlock feelings that extended beyond the desire for a quick fuck. Now that he was experiencing the connection, he couldn't risk losing this chance due to circumstance.

The two Greater Boston residents spent the better part of their day acting like first-time tourists. They enjoyed the view from the top of the Hancock Building and followed the ridiculous red line painted on the ground, illustrating the Freedom Trail. On several occasions throughout the journey, their hands brushed. Looking at the headstones in the historic cemetery they ventured into, Jack took the opportunity to hold Rick's hand at the isolated site. It was both a challenge and a pleasure.

Rick stood still and gazed into Jack's eyes. Rolling his lips inward, Rick nodded and squeezed his companion's hand. Breathing an inward sigh of relief, Jack continued to explore the names of the great Revolutionary heroes buried beneath them.

When they reached Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall, the pair stopped to have lunch. Jack couldn't remember the last time he had so much fun and adventure in the hot and crowded food hall, as he and Rick selected a variety of taste-sized dishes to try.

“I haven’t been here in ages. Probably before my kids were born.”

Jack covered his surprise with a smirk. “I thought this was one of those places families were required to go to on a regular basis.”

“You’re right. But my wife likes the peace and quiet of the suburbs. She prefers taking the kids to local parks and museums outside Boston.”

“You mean you live just a short distance from one of the greatest cultural centers in the entire United States and you haven’t brought your kids?” Jack wasn’t sure what to make of Rick or his wife.

“Oh, I brought them—not here, but to some other places. My wife was furious.” Rick put down his spoon and stared off to the side. “She threatened to tell the whole family I was an unfit father who put himself and his interests before our children.”

Jack couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “That’s bullshit! Parents who don’t expose their kids to the world and its history, art, and science are the ones who are screwing up, especially if it’s right in their goddamn backyard.”

Rick tilted his head. “I couldn’t agree more, but by that time we both knew our marriage was on the downslide. I hadn’t come out. I was too afraid of everything to tell my wife the truth, but it was obvious. She’s not stupid. No matter what she tried, I wasn’t interested, and we both knew I wasn’t interested in other women.”

“So what? She was setting you up to make sure she’d have custody of the kids?”

Rick brushed his hand over Jack’s. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that was her goal, not that I’d fight her. She’s a pretty good mother overall.” Rick ate a spoonful of clam chowder. “After that, I didn’t take the kids out alone, so we ended up in all the places my wife was willing to visit.”

“Shit!”

“It’s not so bad.”

“I’m not talking about you—well, not exclusively. She’s really screwing with your children.”

“I know.” Rick stopped eating. “I figure once we’re divorced I’ll take them everywhere, but until then I’m toeing the line.” He looked away. “You must think I’m a coward.”

Jack laced his fingers with Rick’s. “No, I think you’re smart and brave... and a damn good parent.”

“I just hope my son and daughter think so. Remember, I’m the one leaving.”

“They may not get it now, but they will later.”

“You might be right, but I won’t know until they’re older.”

Jack snorted. “You’re giving them fodder for their future therapists.”

Rick huffed. “I guess it’s always about the parents.”

Jack brushed his hand over Rick’s, returning to his fried clams. He knew this man would have a tough road

ahead, but Jack wasn't afraid of some bumps. His vulnerability made Rick even more attractive. "Come on, let's finish our food. There's a place I'd like to show you, share with you."

"Is there any place left in Boston we haven't covered?" Rick chuckled.

"Maybe one or two." Jack looked down at his food, unsure if he would be pushing too hard. "It's just... this is one of those places I've never brought anyone else to."

"Okay." Rick picked up his spoon. "I'd like to go anywhere with you. I'm ready."

Jack couldn't help feeling anxious, but this was a step he had to take.

Chapter 7

THE Boston Common Public Garden wasn't crowded, as it was a workday for most. Jack guided Rick to a patch of grass, shaded and secluded by several trees. He knew it was overly sentimental, but bringing Rick to this spot was a decision borne from something deep within. Steve had never seen this place. Jack had shared everything else with him, but never this, his secret haven. He was upping the ante with Rick, and hoped it wasn't a huge mistake.

"How the hell did you find this place?" Rick asked. "I've been coming here my whole life and resigned myself to crowded paths lined with benches or flat patches of grass with barely enough room to throw down a picnic blanket."

"I used to come here when I was in college. It was a good place to write and do assignments without all the bullshit my roommates used to bring home or the girls they brought in day and night." Jack bent over, brushing his hand over the cool blades of grass. "No matter what was or wasn't happening in my classes or my fucked-up life, this spot gave me a safe haven to calm myself, refocus, and get a grip on whatever wasn't working." He huffed. "I know it probably sounds ridiculous and overly dramatic, but it somehow worked."

Jack looked away, embarrassed by his confession and yet wishing Rick would somehow understand the importance of being brought to this special location.

Rick ran his hand over the broad tree trunk. He mumbled, “A little piece of heaven, unknown to all but one.”

Jack turned back and smiled. “You’re pretty damn poetic for an accountant.”

Rick shrugged. “I’m more than an oversized calculator.”

Jack nodded. “I can see that.”

The two stood side by side in companionable silence until Rick asked, “Where did you go to college?”

“Boston University.” Jack chuckled. “I changed majors two times—good thing it’s a fucking huge school. I started out in the School of Arts and Sciences in the English Department, moved onto the School of Management, and finally ended up with a dual degree in Management and English Literature.”

Jack couldn’t stop himself from answering Rick’s questions with more information than was necessary. He was usually the king of the one-word, curt response. Now he wanted to spill every detail of his life without even knowing if Rick really cared. Shit! He really hoped he cared; Jack wanted him to care as much for him as he did for Rick.

“I wish I’d gone there. Maybe things would have been different.” Rick settled himself on the ground lying back on the grass with his arms crossed behind his head.

“Different? What are you talking about?” Jack sat with his back against the largest tree, beside Rick. He spoke softly, more curious about this beautiful man than he’d been before, needing to know him. “How could a school have changed your life?”

“I hadn’t admitted to myself I liked... well, you know.”

“Cock?” Jack smirked at Rick’s hesitation. It was refreshing to know even the biggest studs had some insecurities. He was also glad Rick was comfortable opening up to him.

“Yeah. I did everything possible to convince myself I was straight.” Rick closed his eyes. “I even married a nice Catholic girl to prove the point.”

“Nice going. You fooled me when you mentioned her. I thought my gaydar was totally screwed up.” Jack wanted to make it easier for Rick, but he soon understood laughter wasn’t appropriate for this conversation.

Rick opened his eyes, turning his head in Jack’s direction. Jack saw the pain of denial. He’d seen it in other guys he’d fucked. Most of them were middle-aged men, sentenced to a life trapped in a hetero marriage. He’d never given a shit before. If those assholes didn’t have the guts to come out, it was their own fault, but, somehow seeing Rick like this—in pain—changed the picture. He wanted to remove the fear, the hurt, and help him move forward, help him find his way to an honest, open, and full life.

Jack brushed his fingers over Rick’s arm and leaned down. He was never this slow, this gentle, this concerned,

but the last thing he wanted was to spook Rick and give him another reason to run and hide.

Rick's eyes opened wider and Jack detected a note of moisture at the edges of his lids. He was inches from Rick's lips and stopped. "I want to kiss you. Fuck. I want to kiss you more than I've ever wanted to kiss anyone, but I won't if you're not ready."

Rick licked his lips and nodded.

Jack adjusted his body, moving into a reclining position next to his man. Yes, he wanted Rick to be his, even if he couldn't allow himself to admit it completely. He outlined Rick's lips with one finger and cautiously lowered himself until their lips met in a gentle kiss.

Wanting more, Jack lingered, hoping not to be pushed away. Instead, he felt Rick's hand holding him in place on the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair. It was a small gesture, but it meant so much.

Lifting his head, Jack saw Rick's darkened eyes and he crashed his lips down, his need and urgency no longer harnessed. The heat between them escalated as they opened up to one another, tongues meeting, devouring. By the time he pulled back, their lips were swollen.

Jack ghosted his hand over Rick's heaving chest. "You're so damn hot... and beautiful." He'd never felt the need to react or share confirmation of his thoughts with another. Jack didn't give a shit how his tricks felt after a fuck, let alone a damn kiss. Now it mattered. This must be

what Steve had been raving about from the moment he met Tom.

Rick smiled, his mouth still moist and reddened. “You too. I can’t take my eyes off you.” Jack could see the blush rising in the larger man’s cheeks, knowing it matched his own. “So, what now?”

Jack thought of all the sarcastic answers he’d like to give and everything he wanted to do to and with Rick, but he settled on holding back, not wanting to scare Rick away. “Considering this isn’t particularly private, I say we take a walk.”

“Any place in particular?” Rick bit his lip.

“Is that a question or a proposition?” Jack raised an eyebrow. He could see the telltale bulge trapped in Rick’s pants. It would have been so easy to take him at that moment, but this wasn’t about sex. The time had to be right, so he had to be patient.

“I’m not sure what the hell I’m offering, but I know I’m not ready to leave you.” Rick slowly closed his eyes and bit his lip. “I can’t leave you.”

“An honest man. It must be all those years of lying to yourself. Now you’re trying to adjust the balance and make up for lost time.” Jack wanted to kick himself for being so thoughtless and smarmy, but he was pleased to hear Rick chuckle.

“Maybe it’s finally my time.” Rick sat up and crossed his legs, guiding Jack’s head to rest in his lap. Jack was shocked by the tender action. Normally he would have

laughed off the romantic gesture, but now, he found himself feeling more comfortable than he had in years. The warm connection between them was pure bliss.

Leaning against the tree, Rick began to stroke Jack's hair. Jack held back his desire for more contact despite the demands his body was making. With every touch, Jack's cock responded, wanting attention as his pants tightened unbearably. He sighed, resigned to taking pleasure in the soft touches offered by his gentle giant.

"You know, Jack, when I was in high school, *and* in my freshman year at college, I did try to pursue who I really was... am."

Unable to contain his curiosity, Jack asked, "What changed?"

"I guess it was family pressure... and my own cowardice."

Jack's eyes closed as Rick continued his delicate ministrations. "So you've been with a guy before?"

"It's been almost a decade, but I know it was better for me than anything since... until now."

Jack wanted to look into Rick's eyes, but forced them to remain closed, hoping to help him exorcise his regrets and guilt. "You didn't fuck around on your wife?"

"I thought about it, but I knew it wouldn't be fair." Rick took a deep breath. "That's when I decided to be honest with Fran. She deserved a marriage where her husband wanted her as much as she wanted him."

“How’d that go over?”

Rick huffed. “About the way you’d imagine. We fought, we yelled, and finally she told me what I could do with my deviant interests.”

Jack whistled. “I hope the kids weren’t around.”

“No, they weren’t. By the time they returned that night we were in a cold war, but I didn’t back down. I couldn’t, if I ever wanted to have a life worth living.” Rick’s hand stilled and he cupped Jack’s chin.

Jack opened his eyes as he was met with an intense stare. He whispered, “Any regrets?”

Rick shook his head. “None.” Leaning down he kissed Jack, who eagerly parted his lips when he felt Rick offering his tongue. Jack moaned as they mingled their tastes and desires, holding each other closer than he imagined was possible. It was the moment Jack understood how it felt to be in love, and hoped he wouldn’t regret it.

Chapter 8

JACK stood from under their secluded spot and offered Rick his hand. He wanted to run. Every rational thought told him this was going to be a fight and he'd be supporting the underdog. Rick had a tough road ahead; divorce *and* coming out at the same time was a one-two punch. Ready to muster up his courage and get rid of this guy before he was drawn in too far, Jack made the mistake of looking into Rick's eyes as he stood, continuing to hold his hand.

"Shit!"

Rick's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"I'm totally fucked." Jack brushed a hand over his face.

Rick gripped Jack's other hand tightly. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Jack huffed. "My entire goddamn life I've been careful—never got into a tangle I couldn't slip away from. But you...."

Rick continued looking directly at Jack, remaining silent. He ghosted his fingers over Jack's shoulder as they stood facing one another.

"Damn, you make me hard just looking at you, let alone what happens to me when I hold your hand. It's not supposed to happen like this." Jack reached out, tucking a

wisp of stray hair behind Rick's ear. He let his hand linger longer than was necessary.

"What's not supposed to happen like this?"

"When I decided it was time to let myself feel for another guy, to find more than another hot trick on another cold night, it should have been easy. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of single gay men in the Greater Boston area." Jack pinched the bridge of his nose, but couldn't break his other hand away from Rick's. "But I met *you*."

"My life is too complicated." Rick choked. "More complicated than you bargained for. But I think I'm worth the effort. I'm sure we're worth it."

Jack nodded. "Of all the men I've been with, you're the only one I can't get out of my mind, and we haven't even fucked. Hell, we haven't done anything." Jack shook his head. "I knew that health club was a mistake."

Rick looked down. Jack could feel him trying to pull his hand away, but he wouldn't let him go.

"The truth is," Jack admitted, "while joining the gym may have been a mistake, meeting you... that wasn't."

Rick tentatively raised his head and stared into Jack's eyes. His expression softened. Jack couldn't resist. He tenderly caressed Rick's cheek. "Is easy always better?"

Jack snorted. "No. I thought I'd regret this... us... today, but I don't. It was a conscious decision, to allow myself to feel. And I do feel more than I ever expected, especially when I'm this close to you. I just want to...." His voice trailed off as he smirked, seeing Rick's face heat up from the declaration.

“Come on. There’s someone I want you to meet.” Rick turned to leave their hidden shelter.

Jack could feel the hairs on his neck standing. “You’re not going to introduce me to your wife and kids? I’m not ready for that.”

Rick laughed. “No, I’m not that insane.”

“I never thought you were. I’m the one who’s insane, but I can’t seem to stop myself.”

Still holding Jack’s hand, Rick led the way to the street. The two walked silently to a T-Stop and hopped on the Green Line.

Passing through the Boston University grounds, Jack recalled his college days. He’d started as a Literature major, eventually turning his love of words into cash by entering the School of Management. While he was nurturing his ability to critique all types of literature as editor of the university’s newspaper, he also developed his technique for picking up guys.

He was careful to make sure all his *dates* knew he was not the relationship type, fucking them and then leaving them. Some made it to the next morning, but that’s as far as it ever went. Attachments might complicate his future, and Jack wanted no complications. He grinned, knowing he was walking into a minefield with the handsome stud sitting next to him. But Rick was right: *easier* isn’t always better.

As the train continued rattling along, his entire past seemed shallow. Yet looking at the man seated beside him, Jack was glad he’d waited. Feeling his cock respond to their

close proximity, he hoped Rick would be worth waiting for in more ways than one.

Shortly after passing the final building belonging to Boston University, Rick grabbed Jack's hand, indicating they would disembark at the next stop.

After the train departed, Jack looked left and right. They were in front of a strip of small stores. Rick pulled him toward a little restaurant-bar near the corner.

"We're going into this dive?" Jack noted the dingy windows and tacky neon sign, already on despite the early hour: The Dugout. "Why the fuck do we need to go into a sports bar? Fenway's only ten minutes from here. There are more upscale drinking establishments a few blocks away if you want to throw back a few before we meet your friend." If this was the type of place Rick liked, maybe they really didn't have enough in common to make a relationship work.

"Stop complaining. Come on." Rick dragged Jack into the tiny bar and eatery.

Jack had the place pegged. It was dark, small, and had few patrons, although it was too early for dinner and clearly not a typical happy hour destination.

"Hey, Scottie, where the hell are you?" Rick called out. Jack thought he was being crude, but clearly the diners didn't even notice. They continued eating or drinking at the simple wooden tables.

"Is that you, Rickie?" An older man, appearing close to fifty if Jack were to make a guess, popped his head up from

behind the far end of the bar. “You haven’t visited me in months! Where’ve you been?”

Rick walked quickly toward the back of the bar and the two men hugged like long lost brothers. “I’ve been trying to get my act together, and before that, it was tax season.”

“Tax season—are you accounting types still using that as an excuse to hide for four months every damn year?”

Rick gave a hearty laugh. Jack felt an unfamiliar warmth while listening to the two. He could see Rick’s shoulders loosen up, and a calm sweep over him that was contagious. Despite the obvious closeness between the two, Jack was relieved to feel no pangs of jealousy.

“I see you brought a friend. Now that’s a change.”

Rick turned to Jack. “Jack, this is Scottie. He owns The Dugout. He’s also been tending bar here forever.”

“You make me sound like Methuselah.” Scottie focused his attention on Jack. The two shook hands. “Nice to meet you, son. And to correct my young friend here, I’ve been tending bar for about thirty years—hardly forever in these parts. Pubs in Boston go way back.”

Jack liked listening to Scottie. He had a touch of an Irish brogue that fit the setting. “Any business lasting thirty years these days might as well be forever.” Jack scanned the bar. The shelves had all the best brands in stock. “But why here? A few blocks over you’d be in the heart of Red Sox country. You’d be rolling in big bucks.”

“That’s why. I wanted a place off the beaten path where anyone could feel comfortable. The money would have been nice, but this place suits me just fine.”

Jack smiled. “Your own version of *Cheers*?”

All three men laughed. “You might say that, kid, but my place has a bit of a twist.”

Searching for Scottie’s meaning, Jack slowly viewed the room. The patrons were generally sitting in pairs—same sex pairs.

“What’s all the damn commotion? Is someone giving a party?” A gruff, larger man in a cook’s uniform burst into the bar area from the kitchen.

“Stop bellowing, you old bear. I’m gonna start calling you Grizzly if you don’t hold it down.” Scottie approached the heavier set man and kissed him on the lips.

Jack’s eyes widened. Wouldn’t you know it—even the closeted gay man found a gay-safe zone where he could be himself. He had to hand it to Rick; he’d made a life for himself, despite his self-imposed restrictions.

Leaning toward Rick, Jack whispered, “I can see why this place appealed to you.”

Rick rested his forehead tenderly against Jack’s. “Years ago, when I was trying to be myself, I discovered this place. I went to Boston College, right up the street.”

“What happened when you locked yourself in the closet?”

“I used The Dugout as my oasis.” Rick blinked a few times as he shared his past. “I never tricked, but here I could always be myself. I’d sit at the bar, and even if I only ordered a soda Scottie would never chase me out.” Rick looked away.

Jack cupped his chin and guided him back. He nodded. “It’s good to have a friend you can confide in.”

Rick nodded back and watched as Scottie and his partner exchanged a few quiet words before the cook returned to the kitchen.

“You’ll have to pardon him. Lou isn’t very social, but he’s damn curious, and I think he sensed something was up. He may not seem like the sensitive type, but he has a lot of empathy for boys like our Rickie.”

Jack grinned. “So you and Lou....”

“Yeah, Lou and I opened this place when we were thrown out by our families. That’s how it worked, even in a supposedly liberal Boston. But that was over thirty years ago. We were high school sweethearts in a way few understood.”

Scottie wiped down the bar in front of Jack even though it was already clean. “It’s nice to know times and tides are changing in the world,” Scottie continued as he looked pointedly at Rick. “Does this introduction to Jack mean your tide’s changing too, kiddo?”

“I hope so.” Rick glanced Jack’s way and he didn’t hesitate to nod. In this place, he couldn’t deny anything. It was obvious why Rick found comfort within the safety of the dark corner dive.

“Well, it’s about time, Rickie boy. I’ve never looked back, and it’s been the best years of my life. If I didn’t have Lou....” Scottie paused to press his fingertips against his eyelids. He pulled out a handkerchief, dabbing his eyes, and stuffed it back into his pocket. “Without Lou, everything would be worth shit.”

Jack envied Scottie’s life with Lou and admired him for his bravery in a far more homophobic time. He had made a bold move and found happiness, despite the crap he must have gone through to make it happen. “Scottie, if you’re a bartender, why don’t you give Rick and me each a pint of your best on tap?”

Rick sat on one of the bar stools and Jack took the one next to him. Placing one hand on Rick’s knee, Jack held up his glass with the other. “A toast to Scottie, Lou, their fine establishment, and their fine example.”

“Thank you, my boy. Now you’ll have to excuse me, I see a few more regulars coming in for an early supper. Please don’t rush off. It’s great to see Rick here again, especially with you.” Scottie left the bar to tend to his customers at the tables.

Jack raised his glass again toward Rick. “I’d like to make another toast: to your surrogate father. Too bad we all can’t have one.” Jack kept his glass raised but didn’t drink. He waited until his eyes locked with Rick’s. “And to us. Fuck—I really do want there to be an us.”

Rick tapped his glass against Jack’s, accepting the wish. The two drank in companionable silence, continuing somehow to remain in physical contact the entire time.

“Rick, do you want to eat here before we leave?”

“Okay, but I should probably go home and see my kids after dinner.”

Jack nodded, suddenly fearing the threat of distance and the loss of their growing connection. After supper, he handed Rick his business card, adding his home address and private phone numbers on the back.

Rick took it, and in a cheesy, romantic gesture, he held it over his heart before placing it in his pocket.

“So, is this it? Is our brief interlude over?” Jack absentmindedly bit his thumbnail, knowing he sounded needier than he wanted to. He was afraid once they left the bar all the special moments of the day would fade into nothing.

“No. I won’t let it be over.” Rick gripped the edge of the table. “I can’t,” he whispered.

As they left the restaurant, Jack couldn’t resist. He grabbed Rick, pulling him close and crashed their lips together. Their tongues mingled, savoring one another. Neither seemed willing to separate. The pair clung together, desperate to share their desire, yet realizing their time together was nearing its end as the dark of night had settled over the city. Pulling back, Jack hoped Rick could see his need. Not just his physical need, but the hunger for more of *them*.

“I’d better let you go.” Jack reluctantly dropped his arms, releasing Rick back into his hetero world.

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“Don’t let me go.”

Jack nodded, the evening mist causing his eyes to water as he watched Rick walk away.

Chapter 9

STEVE met Jack at their usual bar to play pool. He had asked Tom to remain home, sensing his friend needed him for more than just mere company.

“Where’s your other half?” Jack hammered another ball into the corner pocket. The force of his stroke was so strong, the crack of the balls made Steve flinch. “I thought you two were joined at the hip. Besides, he’s better at pool than you.”

“Whoa! What the fuck is wrong with you?” Steve stilled Jack’s stick before he could set up another shot. “You’re the one who called me sounding like you’d lost your job or something, so I came running, leaving Tom and a good movie back home.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should have stayed home and cuddled up on the sofa with popcorn and a big dick to suck.”

Steve grabbed the cue out of Jack’s hands and slammed it on the table. “Okay, that’s it! Are you gonna tell me what the hell has you so wound up that you’re treating me *and* my husband like shit, or do I tell you to fuck off and then leave? Wait a minute; this doesn’t have anything to do with hetero-man, does it?”

“Why would you say that?” Jack’s voice softened, losing its angry edge.

“You didn’t try anything with him at work, did you? He could get in big trouble, especially if he’s not out at the office. It wouldn’t do your career any good either.”

“No, I wouldn’t do anything that ridiculous.” Jack turned away, picked up the eight ball, and started rolling it between his hands as he mumbled something.

Steve watched as his friend’s shoulders drooped and his head lowered. Approaching Jack, he patted his back, concerned by the sullen behavior Jack was displaying. He whispered, “I didn’t quite catch the last part.”

“We spent the day together.”

It took Steve a minute for the meaning to sink in. “You took a day off from work... for him!”

“Yep. I haven’t done anything like that since high school. I played goddamn hooky from work, and so did he. We spent the whole time together.”

“And?” Steve forced his voice to remain even although his curiosity was piqued.

“And we never got tired of one another the entire day.”

“Did you take him to your place? I know his would certainly be off limits.”

“No.” Jack shook his head. “That’s the weirdest thing; we were together for over ten hours. Shit, we went to all the biggest damn tourist traps in Boston, and then....”

Steve slowly guided Jack to a table not far from the bar. “And then what?”

The two sat and Jack finally made eye contact again. “Then I took him to some private places, and he took me to one, too, to meet some special people in his life.”

“Then you went back to your place?”

“Nope. We never went to either of our homes.”

Steve stared at his friend, eyes widening. “Do you mean you spent the entire day with this Rick and you never fucked him?” In all the years they’d known each other, Jack had never gone anywhere with anyone and not at least gotten a good blowjob out of it.

Jack clasped his hands together on the table, making one large, tight fist. “We only kissed, and it was better than anything I’ve ever felt or done with any other guy.”

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his chair. This was definitely not what he was expecting to hear. He called out to a nearby waiter, “Two Chivas—make them doubles, and get them here fast.”

Jack snorted. “I see you’re beginning to understand.”

“You’ve fallen for a straight guy.”

Jack held up his hand. “Not straight. He’s most assuredly gay, is getting a divorce, and is still in the closet to most of his friends, family, and colleagues.”

“Holy—” Steve closed his mouth when the drinks were set down. He lifted his glass toward Jack but made no toast, not knowing what to say.

Jack mimicked the move and the two downed their doubles in one gulp. Wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, Jack looked at Steve. “So, any sage advice?”

Steve laid his hands flat on the table. “You’re in love with him.”

“That’s not advice.” Jack sighed. “When we parted it felt like I might never see him again... except maybe in passing at that goddamn health club. It was as if I was sending him off to war knowing he’d never return.”

Steve remained silent, unable to comfort Jack, not knowing how to ease his obvious pain and confusion. His best friend finally found the man of his dreams, but between Rick’s family and job, it seemed like the roadblocks would be insurmountable.

“Fuck, I still can’t believe it.” Steve lowered his head.

“Believe what?”

Steve waved at the waiter, indicating they wanted two more of the same. “I still can’t believe you’ve finally fallen in love.”

Jack huffed. “Yeah, I did—with the wrong person.”

Chapter 10

JACK left the bar and walked the short distance to his empty apartment. *Empty*. The perfect word to describe everything about his life. He viewed his space, needing something—a memory, a moment to hold onto, reflecting a time his pristine living environment had actually felt like a home. He thought of the first night he'd brought Steve over to show off his new place. It was just over four years ago. He'd earned a major promotion and the salary that accompanied it. His primary focus was to get out of his old studio and find a more spacious apartment.

Moving to a beautiful, two-bedroom apartment in Cambridge overlooking the Charles River was his reward, and Jack was so proud of his achievement.

Tom was busy with family, working late or some other bullshit, so Steve came alone. Jack and he spent the night eating greasy pizza, watching the second half of the *Star Wars* series of films, drinking bottle after bottle of Guinness Stout, both reveling in Jack's success.

By the time the credits rolled at the end of *The Return of the Jedi*, they were both totally smashed.

Jack sat on his sofa and gazed out at the boaters on the Charles, a grimace crossing his face as he recalled that night.

Steve lay back on the floor. "I've gotten plastered and I can't get up."

The two laughed uproariously at the lame joke.

"It's the truth. You'll be stuck walking over me for as long as you live in this place, which is hotter than anything I've ever fucking seen."

"Told you. I'm top shelf from here on in with everything. No more cramped living space for me."

"Tom asked me to move in with him." Steve sighed, the sides of his mouth curling up as he stared at the ceiling. "He doesn't live far from here."

"Shit! Are you gonna do it—take the fucking plunge?"

"It's not taking a plunge to move in—it's taking a plunge when we get married."

Jack's eyes widened. "You two have talked about marriage! Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Because we haven't had a chance to get together in a place private enough to have that kind of conversation."

Jack sat on the floor next to Steve and tucked his knees up to his chin. "Damn! My best buddy is thinking of becoming a part of the real, grown-up world. I'm not sure I can face life on my own."

Steve giggled uncharacteristically, the booze having clearly taken over his senses. "You'll never be alone. I'll be close by and we'll always have each other. Kind of like Luke and Leia."

“They’re brother and sister; they’re stuck with each other.”

“Well, you’re the closest thing I’ve ever had to a brother. It still works.”

Jack looked into Steve’s eyes, pained at the thought of no longer being the most significant person in his best friend’s life. Tom had become more and more important to Steve as the days, weeks, and months had passed. Now there was no question who would take first priority in his friend’s life.

He wasn’t sure if it was the atmosphere, the early hour of the morning, the alcohol, or the threat of losing him, but Jack cupped Steve’s cheek and leaned down to kiss him. Not the friendly, playful kisses they’d shared numerous times, but the kiss of the predator. Uniting their lips, he felt Steve’s mouth open in response.

Jack ran his fingers gently down the front of Steve’s shirt. When Steve didn’t object to the skillful ministrations, he gradually moved his hand lower and lower.

Steve moaned as Jack cupped his balls through his jeans, never breaking their hungry kisses. Opening his friend’s pants, he lowered his hand, squeezing the stiff member that had been trapped inside.

“Fuck! Oh, fuck!”

“That’s right, Steve. If you want me, you’ll get all of me.”

Steve dug his fingers into Jack’s back. Jack felt the pressure through his shirt, urging him on.

“Tom, I love you.”

Jack pulled his hand away and sat up abruptly, staring down at the starry-eyed body below him. Steve's eyes slowly closed and he wore an expression that could only be described as pure bliss as he started rubbing his own cock, and soon passed out.

"You are such an asshole!" Jack whispered to himself. He had nearly fucked up years of friendship because he selfishly wanted to keep Steve for himself.

Although he had never admitted it, Jack had been searching for his Mr. Right long before now. In his desperation to find a life partner, he nearly lost his best friend. If his actions had been successful, it would have destroyed them both and sabotaged Steve's future happiness. The only upside was his friend's total lack of memory when he awoke the next morning. He'd called Tom and told him he'd passed out, and, great guy that Tom was, he never gave Steve a hard time about having gotten that drunk.

Jack combed his fingers through his hair, one thought overtaking all others: he wanted Rick. He wanted him in his apartment to share the peaceful view of the river at night. But that wasn't all; Jack wanted Rick in his life. Damn! He'd never fall asleep if he couldn't get these constant thoughts about the beautiful man out of his head.

He lay on his bed thinking of Rick's eyes, needy and hopeful. The irony of him, big and muscular, yet with the gentlest touch. Those lips, red, full, and hungry. Jack remembered feeling Rick respond when the two caressed one another tentatively in their secluded spot in the Boston

Garden. Jack would never think of that patch of grass again without envisioning Rick. He unzipped his pants and closed his eyes, imagining his gentle giant hovering above him, both of them longing to satisfy their true nature and find love with the right person.

Jack knew he was right for Rick, but could he really expect him to make the break from the hetero lie of a life he'd created and lived with for so long?

Jack pictured Rick lying next to him in bed... their bed... stroking him and gazing into his eyes with desire and need. His Rick watched, grinning, as he brought his lover to climax with a touch and a whisper. "I want you, Jack. I want you inside me." Jack arched his back as he spilled his passion over his chest and hand, alone again with only his imagination, remembering Rick was home with his wife.

Unable to relax, Jack took a shower to help him settle, returning to his bed as a feeling of melancholy took hold.

At three o'clock in the morning Jack was roused by the sound of incessant knocking on his apartment door.

Recalling a time he'd left his phone off the hook, Jack remembered Steve once pulling this kind of crap, overly worried. He swung the door open harder than he'd intended. "What the fuck do you...."

Jack rubbed his eyes, astonished and disbelieving.

"I know it's sooner than you probably expected, but can I come in?"

Backing away from the threshold, Jack gestured for Rick to enter.

Chapter 11

“IT’S a little early to head to the gym.” Jack tried to keep things light despite his shock, forcing down the feeling of hope welling up inside.

Rick huffed. “The gym... right.” Before closing the door, he dragged in a suitcase and computer bag. “Best decision I was ever forced into, joining that place.” He looked at Jack. Moisture lined Rick’s lower lids.

“You don’t look nearly as good as you did earlier. Care to share what the fuck happened after you left to go home?”

Leaning against the door, Rick sighed. “You don’t look so hot either. Do you want to go first?”

Jack couldn’t take his eyes off Rick. He still couldn’t believe Rick was in his apartment, especially at such an insane hour of the morning. “Okay. I’ll go first.”

He had two options. Either Jack could brush off his evening and pretend that separating from Rick at the end of the day was no big deal, or he could be honest. He decided it was time for the truth. The time for pretense was over.

“I watched you leave, assumed that was it for us, visited a local pub with a friend, and came home.”

Rick lowered his head. “And came home with a trick to help you forget I existed.”

Jack cupped Rick's chin, forcing him to look straight into his eyes. "No."

"No?" Rick's voice was barely audible.

"I came home alone to my goddamn empty, albeit lavish, apartment because all I could see was you. It pissed me off, but, yes, that's what I did." Jack tried to keep the frustrated edge in his voice at bay but failed miserably.

"I see." Rick took Jack's hand from his face and laced their fingers. "Can we sit?"

Jack guided Rick to the living room sofa. The two sat facing one another. Rick hesitantly brushed his free hand through Jack's hair. His breathing quickened as he entangled his fingers in the sleep-matted locks and pulled Jack in for a kiss.

Releasing his hand from Rick's, Jack wrapped his arms around this man, *his man*. He knew from the moment their lips touched he would never be able to let Rick go. Hungrily, he ran his tongue along Rick's lips, seeking and being granted entry, deepening the kiss as Jack searched for more contact, needing to connect as much as possible.

Rick gripped the back of Jack's robe. As the silky fabric fell from his shoulders, Jack shuddered when it was replaced by strong palms holding him close, possessive and unyielding.

"Rick—"

"I know what I want," Rick declared through heavy breaths. "It's been a long time, but I've been with men

before.” The two rested their foreheads together. “Never like this. Nothing ever felt like this.”

Jack ran his fingers under the hem of Rick’s shirt, pulling it off slowly, revealing the sculpted body beneath. “Beautiful. So beautiful. But....”

“No buts. I’m here—I *have* to be here. Please.”

Fear rose. This was territory Jack had never explored with anyone. He’d seen this type of connection build between Steve and Tom. He’d thought it was out of his reach, thought it would remain out of his reach forever.

“How can you be sure? You’re married. You have kids.”

“I know.” Jack moved to stand, but Rick held him in place. “Don’t get up. I want you close. I need you.”

“Can you honestly tell me you’re ready to come out and live life as a gay man in this fucking straight world?” Jack asked.

“Yes. I’m sure I can. I’m ready. Hell, I’ve been ready for years, but it took finding you to seal the deal.”

Jack scrubbed his hand over his face and looked away. Had he really found that elusive Mr. Right he and Steve laughed about? Could Rick honestly make a commitment to him despite his family obligations? He rested his head in his hands. “Shit!”

Rick began to rub Jack’s back. With a tender touch from Rick, Jack grew hard, wanting more than he thought he could possibly have or ever expect.

“I’m bringing baggage—”

“A fucking shitload of baggage.” Jack huffed. “How can I trust this? How can you be sure you’re ready?” He hated sounding needy, but the close proximity to Rick hurt. He was still not convinced the handsome man would be able to commit fully to a new life with him or could admit to the world that he was gay.

“Jack, look at me. Please.”

Sitting up and facing Rick was almost as painful as not responding immediately to his touch. Rick ran his fingertips over Jack’s chest, ghosting them over Jack’s erect nipples. “Oh God!” Jack’s head tilted to the side as Rick moved to caress his shoulder, following it with a kiss. “Damn you.”

“We still haven’t talked about what I did after I left you.” Rick gently drew Jack close, guiding him to lean against him, skin to skin, back to chest.

Jack made a weak attempt to resist, but with a mild nudge, Rick encouraged him to relax. Lying on the sofa together, Rick spoke softly. Jack could feel his reaction to Rick’s breath on the hair at the back of his neck as it stood on end.

“What did you do?” It took all of Jack’s energy to form the words.

“I went home. My ex-wife and I still live in the same house despite our legal separation. It was cheaper, and it’s given us a few months to gradually get the kids used to the idea that I would be moving out.”

Jack nodded, resting his head on Rick’s shoulder, unable to speak.

“The kids were already in bed but not asleep, so I gave each of them a kiss goodnight and told them it was time for me to leave.” Rick choked. “They were so good. No crying, no arguing. I did tell them I loved them and that would never change.”

“I’m sure it helped.”

“Hope so.”

Jack began to run his hand up and down Rick’s jean-clad leg, reminding himself this was no fantasy. Rick was there, in his apartment, holding him. He could feel Rick’s body responding to the touch. Normally he would have taken him immediately, but this wasn’t about sex.

Crossing his arms across Jack’s chest, Rick continued. “After I left the kids I started packing a bag. Fran watched but said nothing. She followed as I unplugged my laptop and stowed it too.”

Rick held Jack tight.

“Then what?”

“I told my wife everything she didn’t already know.”

Jack snorted. “What was left to tell her?”

Jack turned over, aligning his body with Rick’s, gazing into lust-darkened eyes he knew matched his own. As they lay facing one another, pressed chest to chest, Jack could feel their racing heartbeats. His robe fell to the side. Unable to stop himself, Jack began to move. Lying directly on top of Rick, Jack could feel the need, the fire, building in both of them.

Rick leaned into the touch as Jack stilled and brushed his fingers over his cheek. “Jack.”

“Shhh, I’ll take care of you.” Tucking Rick’s hair behind his ear, Jack gently nipped the lobe, softly pressing his lips to his beautiful man’s neck and cheek until he reached another pair of waiting lips.

The first kiss, barely a brush of lips, soon intensified. The heat both men had been harboring for each other was released as their tongues met, tasting and savoring all they could. Rick nodded as Jack unzipped his pants and pulled them down slightly. Jack watched as the muscular man bit his lip, seeing the fear and vulnerability in his eyes. He tenderly brushed his lips over Rick’s once again, waiting for permission to move forward.

Muscular arms engulfed Jack as Rick laced his fingers in his hair, inviting him in for another, hungrier kiss. Beginning to move again, cocks aligned, Rick joined the rhythm Jack had initiated. “Jack... oh God... I don’t think....”

“Don’t think. Enjoy.” Both bodies moved as one. Jack continued to set the pace, knowing neither of them would last long. There was urgency in every kiss, every touch, as tongues and hands explored. Both of them were filled with desire, wanting each other in every way.

Being this close to Rick was too much. Just as Jack began to lose control, Rick dug his fingers into his back. There would be marks left behind to remind him of their first intimate moment together.

Arching his body, Rick shuddered. “I don’t want to leave. Hold me.”

That was all it took. Jack pressed his body against Rick’s, his release more intense than he expected. “Rick!”

The two lay entwined, their clothes moist from their shared passion, neither attempting to separate from the other.

Burying his head against Jack’s neck, Rick clung to him. “I told my ex-wife I was in love with someone and I wanted to be with him, if he’d have me.”

Kissing him on the cheek, Jack whispered, “He’ll have you.”

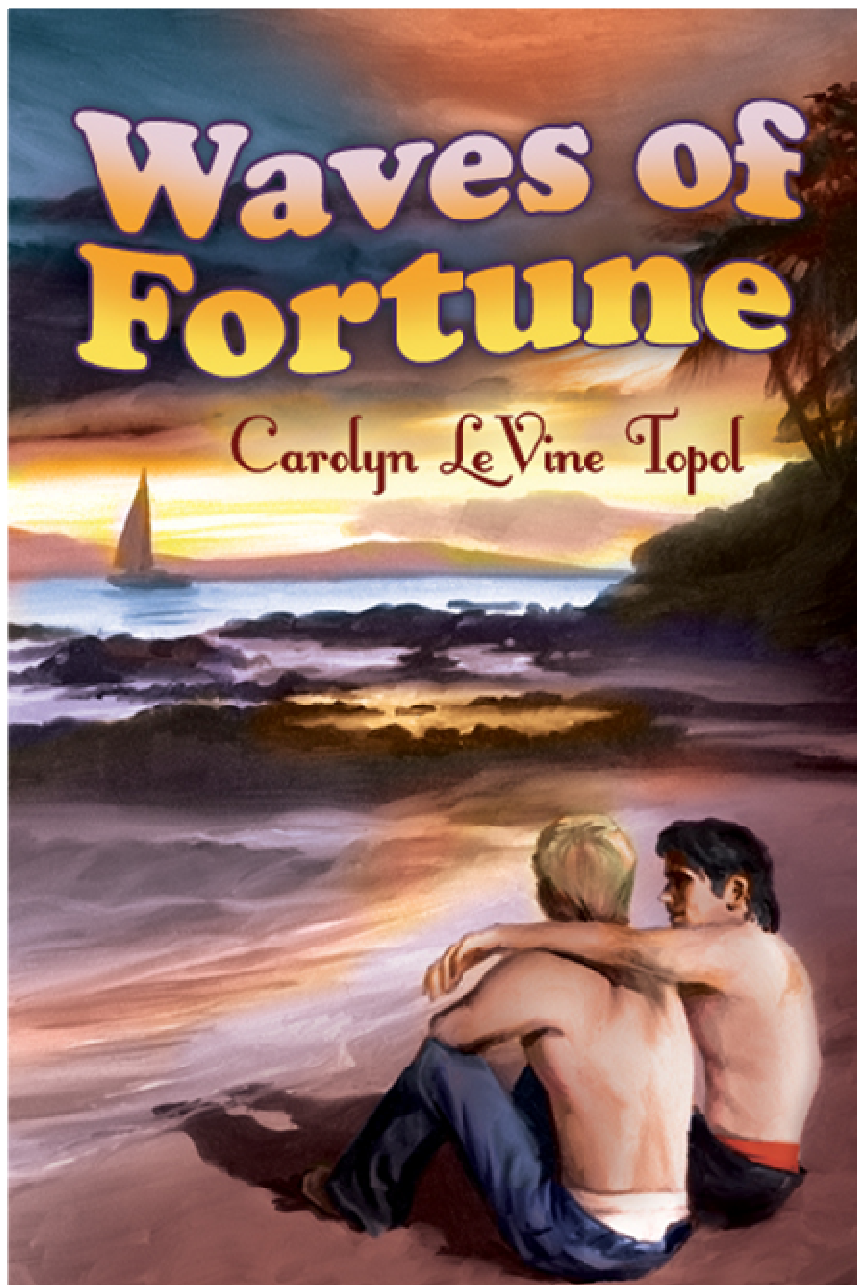
Born in Brooklyn, CAROLYN LEVINE TOPOL grew up just outside New York City. Three passions dominated her life: reading, writing, and theater. Having always dreamed of writing her own version of The Great American Novel, it took her many years to discover her most heartfelt stories took their form in the creation of M/M romances. Sharing her writing with a small circle of online friends, Carolyn received advice, encouragement and joy from their feedback.

Spending her days working as an executive assistant in a synagogue, Carolyn relishes the quiet wee hours of the morning to lose herself in writing of the loves, passions, and adventures driving her characters.

With the backing of a supportive husband and two young adult children, Carolyn continues to explore the fabulous world of gay romance with the philosophy "Every person deserves their happy ending."

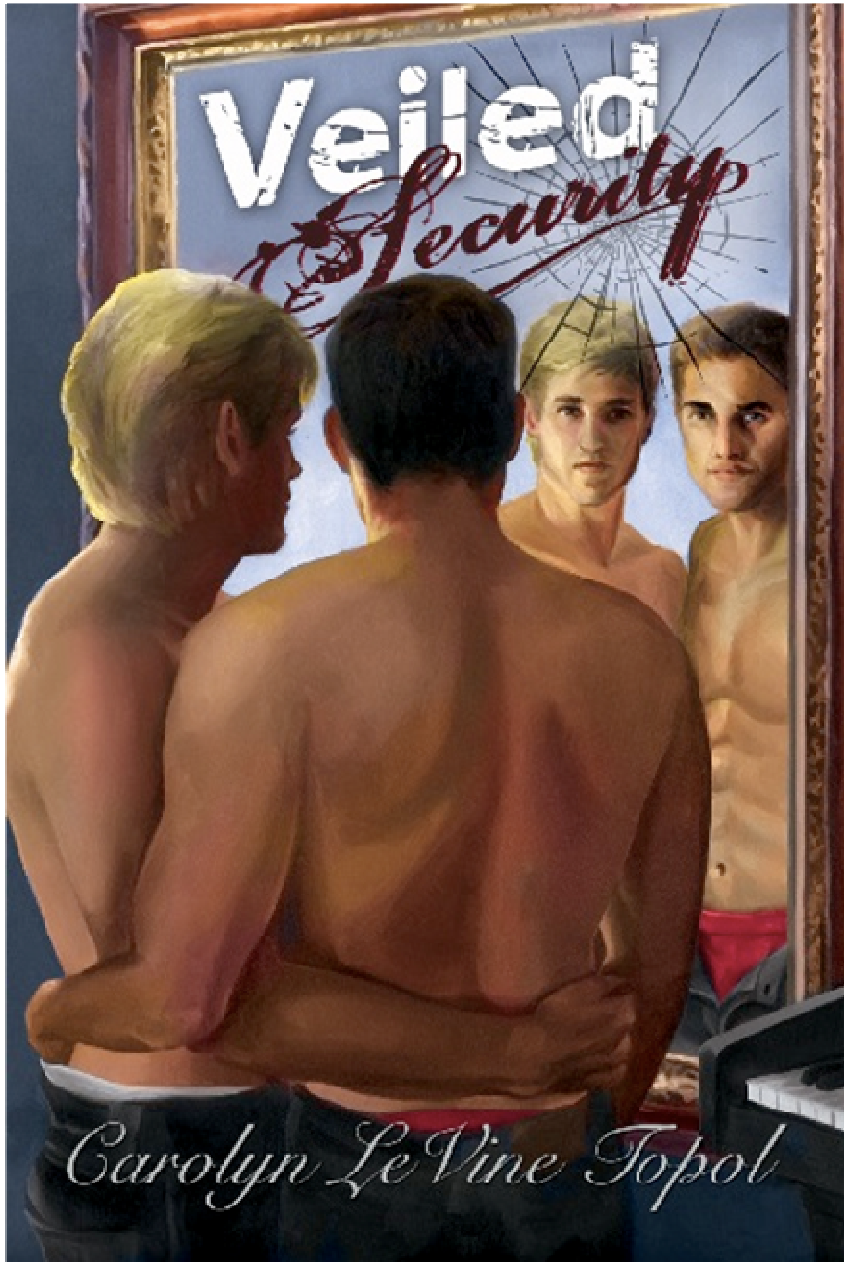
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