



To Keep and to Love

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*This novel is dedicated to jj:
Thank you for traveling this road with me.
I could not have done it without you!*

Chapter 1

RYAN stood in front of the French doors studying the autumnal garden, fascinated by the play of colors in the bright morning sunshine. The golden red of the trees and the sparkling green of the bushes against the deep azure of the sky produced a tantalizing mix. It was as if nature had produced the perfect embodiment of his soul-deep joy about Daniel's marriage proposal last night. His fingers positively itched with the need to paint it all.

He was glad he hadn't let his homophobic parents' threats keep him away from his younger twin sister's wedding to his best friend Peter Miller, who was also Daniel's younger brother. He'd been so relieved that Nicole hadn't rejected him. His fears that their parents might have poisoned her mind against him while he was gone had been unfounded. Nicole hadn't only welcomed him back with open arms but had stood at his side to defend him when their parents got nasty.

"What the hell?" Daniel's deep voice interrupted his reverie.

"Hm?" He turned around to see his good-looking fiancé standing in the doorway.

"I don't believe this." Daniel's hand was shaking, his blue eyes wide as he looked up from a sheet of bright orange paper. "Who do they think they are?"

"What is it?" He didn't like the way Daniel stumbled toward the black leather sofa before sitting down. "What's wrong?"

"This is... just cruel." Daniel raked his free hand through his long dark hair.

“Let me see.” He sat down next to Daniel and took the piece of paper from his fiancé’s trembling fingers.

Words cut from a newspaper had been stuck in neat little rows onto the page. It looked like one of those blackmail letters from a movie. Ryan read the text with widening eyes and a growing feeling of dread.

Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. Luke 17:3.

You have sinned against both God’s will and His law by choosing a lifestyle which is immoral and wrong. But the Lord Jesus teaches that you can be saved if you repent and ask for forgiveness. Even homosexuals are still God's children, in need of His forgiveness and healing.

Please return to Him before it is too late. We will help you get the reparative therapy you need to make you healthy and whole again. The renowned Thomas Aquinas Psychological Clinic specializes in cases like yours and has been very successful at curing the affliction you have succumbed to.

We pray that you will finally see the error of your ways and find your way back to righteousness by accepting the assistance you need.

George and Linda Johnston, your brother and sister in Faith

Ryan stopped breathing. His hand fell to his side, the sheet sliding to the floor as his fingers were suddenly too weak to hold on. His parents’ sudden willingness to forgive and help him was strange enough, considering that they’d disowned and kicked him out of their home four years ago when he told them he was gay. But therapy as the solution?

Did they truly believe that his being gay was a mental condition that could be “cured?” Would they never accept him the way he was, leaving him alone to live his life the way he wanted? Now that he’d finally found Daniel again and was hoping to make a life with the man he’d loved for years, would they try to take that away from him?

“God, I’m sorry, sweetheart.” Daniel moved closer and took Ryan into his strong arms. “It was just a white envelope inside the Sunday newspaper, no stamp or return address, so I opened it because I was curious. Now I wish I hadn’t.”

“I just can’t believe they’d go this far.” Ryan put his head on Daniel’s shoulder and shook with the emotion of having his recent happiness challenged like this. “I just can’t believe they’d do this. What have I ever done to make them hate me this much?”

“You haven’t done anything, Ryan.” Daniel slid a hand behind Ryan’s neck. “This isn’t your fault. They are just small-minded, bigoted people. Don’t let them get to you.”

“They took everything away from me once already.” Ryan’s stomach was cramping painfully, despite Daniel’s reassuring strokes to the back of his head. “I thought it was finally over when security removed them from the reception last night. But it looks like they’ll try and take everything away from me again. Why? I mean it’s not like we’re living next door to them, like we even have the same friends or anything. Grand Rapids is a big city. We won’t ever even run into them.”

“I guess they just can’t stand you making your own choices.” Daniel was rocking them back and forth now, clearly upset himself.

“You know, maybe that’s it.” Ryan lifted his head and looked into those blue eyes he loved so much. The sudden insight made him dizzy.

“What?” Daniel looked straight back but didn’t stop stroking the back of Ryan’s head, making him feel safe despite everything.

“Maybe they just don’t want to see me do what *I* want. I returned to see Nicole get married, and they probably don’t like that because they thought I’d stay away. Perhaps they think they can still run my life like they used to when I was a kid. Force me to accept their values without question.” Ryan took a deep cleansing breath and sat up straight. “I guess I’ll just have to disappoint them again.”

“You will?” Daniel’s lips were twitching.

“Uh huh. I made my choice when I accepted your proposal last night and I won’t let them run me out of the city again. There’s so much more at stake now.” Ryan smiled and lifted a hand to caress

Daniel's cheek. "I won't let them take you away from me a second time, love."

"Excellent." Daniel smiled and kissed the palm of Ryan's hand.

"I thought it was going to be easy, you know?" Ryan tilted his head. "All I want is to marry you, be your partner, and share my life with you. We're not going to let their stupidity stop us, are we?"

"No, sweetheart, we're certainly not." Daniel moved closer and kissed him on the mouth, just a brief reassuring brush of his lips against Ryan's. "So, what do you want to do about this?"

Ryan frowned. Their sudden need to help "cure" him was disquieting, undermining him on an emotional level. To think that his own parents believed him to be mentally ill was in many ways worse than the financial and physical threats against him and his friends they'd used before. Back then that had been enough to make him leave and run all the way to Canada to keep them safe. This new emotional intrusion made him feel inadequate and worthless, even though he knew they were wrong.

There was only one thing he could do, despite the fact that four years of living at the bottom end of society—sometimes as a homeless person—had taught him to stay as far away from anyone connected to law enforcement as possible. He didn't trust them any more now than they'd trusted him in the past, but they were probably his only hope.

"I think we need to tell the police." Ryan grinned when he realized the effect that might have on his parents. "My parents are all about being 'morally upstanding citizens,' so seeing the police on their doorstep and having them ask questions might make them think twice."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Daniel smiled.

Before they could do anything about it, the phone rang. Daniel picked it up.

"Daniel Miller." Daniel's eyes widened as he listened to whoever was on the other end. "Yes, he's here. I'm not sure he wants to talk to you, though. Okay, I'll ask him."

Ryan's heartbeat went up. That sounded suspiciously like it might be his parents. Or was he was getting paranoid?

"Ryan?" Daniel covered the receiver's mouthpiece. "It's your father. He wants to talk to you."

Ryan just nodded, momentarily mute with shock. He'd been right.

"You don't have to, you know?" Daniel's lips were pressed into a thin line.

"No." Ryan reached for the phone. "No, I think I better talk to him. Maybe I can convince him that they're wrong. Tell him that I'm not going to do what they want."

"All right." Daniel let go of the receiver and put a hand on Ryan's thigh, squeezing it in reassurance.

"This is Ryan." His heart thudded in his chest. He didn't really want to face his parents' hatred and rejection again so soon after the ugly scene they'd made in the church right after Nicole and Peter's wedding ceremony. Not to mention the ruckus they'd caused at the reception later in the evening.

"Ryan. We know that you have received our letter and are calling to make sure you really listen to what we have to say." His father's voice was low, controlled. "We have prayed and asked for the Lord's guidance. We have discussed you with our pastor. He has urged us to offer our help. He has reminded us that you are still a child of God, despite your deviant behavior. We want to help you reject your detestable choice and come back to the Lord. Will you listen to us and accept our support in the form of therapy?"

Ryan swallowed. How did they know he'd received the letter? Why did his father sound so sincere making his version of an offer for help? It made the underlying nastiness of being called deviant even worse. Ryan didn't even know where to start, so he said the first thing that came to his mind, reacting to the statement that had upset him most.

"First of all, my behavior, as you call it, is not deviant. It isn't considered deviant any more by most rational people these days." Ryan leaned back and closed his eyes. "Second of all, being gay is not a choice. I told you this four years ago. It's who I am. There's nothing to fix, so I don't need therapy."

"How can you be so closed-minded?" His father snorted. "What you are doing, living with another man, is unnatural. It is a sin. Why won't you see that?"

“I do not share your belief that loving another man is a sin.” Ryan sighed. Was there even any point in arguing with so much pig-headedness?

“But there are people who can help you stop these abnormal urges. Wouldn’t it be better if you were able to lead a normal healthy life? Find a nice girl to love and start a family?” His father was close to pleading.

“I do *not* have any ‘abnormal urges.’ Daniel is a wonderful, loving man who will make me very happy. He’s all the family I need.” Ryan took a deep breath. “Look, all we want is to live our life in peace. We’re not interfering in your lives. We live all the way on the other side of the city, so we won’t even run into you. Just leave us alone and everything will be fine.”

“Everything will not be fine.” His father’s voice rose in volume. “You are living in sin. Your abnormal mental condition is causing this. In fact, the more I think about it, the clearer it is that you are too mentally ill to even know how much trouble you are in.”

“I am not mentally ill, father.” Ryan was losing his patience. “Being gay is not a mental illness. The American Psychological Association removed it from the list of mental disorders a long time ago. Why won’t you accept that?”

“It isn’t just me who won’t accept that.” His father sounded indignant. “NARTH really focuses on the issues of treating and curing gay people which the APA has turned its back on. It supports many eminent psychotherapists like Dr. Joseph Nicolosi who have had great success treating gay people and curing them. The clinic we have selected for you is one of the best known in the country. The people there will help you become healthy and normal again.”

“I will *not* submit to any kind of charlatan treatment which is potentially very dangerous and damaging.” Ryan needed to communicate at least that point to his father very clearly. “Do you hear me? I *refuse* to go to your clinic. So stop badgering me.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Ryan.” His father sounded calm and collected again. “We know what is best for you and believe me, we will do anything we can to help you see the error of your ways and get the help you so desperately need. We will be in touch again soon.”

Before Ryan could reply the dial tone made it clear that his father had ended the phone call. He stared at the receiver in shock. He clearly hadn't been able to get through to him at all.

"Ryan?" Daniel took the receiver from his hand and returned it to its cradle. "Are you all right?"

"No." Ryan shook his head in disgust at his own inability to get through to his father. "No, I'm not. I couldn't even get him to listen to me."

"I heard." Daniel slid closer and put his arm around Ryan's shoulders. "You tried but there is no reasoning with people like that."

"Do you know what he said at the end?" Ryan didn't even wait for Daniel to respond. "He said that they'd be in touch again soon."

"What?" Daniel's eyebrows rose toward his hairline. "That doesn't sound good."

"No, it doesn't." Ryan leaned into Daniel. "It creeps me out. It sounded almost like sending letters was only the beginning, and they might do more if I don't 'repent' and come around to their twisted point of view."

"I'm afraid you're right." Daniel tilted his head. "We may need to think about getting some sort of protection."

"Like what?" Ryan shuddered. "You've got an alarm, right? They can't come in here and harm us, can they?"

"No, I think we're safe inside the house." Daniel smiled. "I was thinking of getting the police to do more than go ask some questions to scare your parents off."

"I'm not sure they would, but it's worth asking, I guess." He sure hoped they'd come up with something. "It looks like the only thing we can do right now. But let's call them tomorrow. I don't want to deal with this anymore right now. It's not like this is an emergency, right? And what are they going to do on a Sunday anyway?"

"Okay." Daniel nodded. "We can do that."

Ryan moved closer to Daniel. There'd been enough serious discussions and negative feelings. He wanted to return to enjoying his time with Daniel. He made sure their robe-clad thighs touched. He smiled and took Daniel's hand, entwining their fingers. He was going to ignore his hateful parents and focus on what was really important.

Daniel pulled their linked hands into his lap and squeezed Ryan's fingers, as if to agree by lending silent support. Ryan turned toward him and moved in for a kiss. When their lips touched he stilled, just breathing in his lover's scent. It smelled like home and love and safety all wrapped up into one exceptional human being. He moved forward and started licking along Daniel's full lips before slanting his head to deepen the kiss. Shivers of delight went down his spine as their tongues touched and slid together. It made his cock rise and throb with need.

The kiss went on and on. He just couldn't get enough of Daniel. Wanting to feel skin rather than fabric he got up, removed both their robes and kicked them aside. He straddled his lover's lap, put both arms around his neck and sighed with the skin to skin contact from chest to groin. Kiss after kiss soon had him breathing more quickly, his cock hardening further. He moaned and started rubbing his erection against Daniel's equally excited cock.

It felt too good to stop, so Ryan just went with it. They soon found a rhythm that had them both panting. Precome slicked their way enough to make the increasing friction a very pleasurable experience.

"God, baby, want you so much." Daniel groaned into his mouth, bucking his hips as Ryan was bearing down.

"Daniel. Oh. Don't stop." Ryan was frantic, his entire body was tingling and sparks of arousal were chasing up and down his spine. The slight pressure against his balls as he was pushing himself against Daniel's was making him ache to come.

"Not... not stopping," Daniel panted, moving his mouth to Ryan's shoulder, nipping and biting the sensitive skin there. The stubble-roughed cheek rubbing against the sensitive skin on Ryan's neck drove his arousal even higher.

Daniel slid one hand down Ryan's spine until he reached his ass. He pushed their lower bodies even more closely together. That did it. The additional pressure was more than Ryan could take, and he let himself go.

"Daniel... love!" His balls contracted, and his entire body shook as wave after wave of release pulsed through him, his hot semen spurting between their bodies.

“Ryan!” Daniel went rigid for a moment, and then more heat splashed against their stomachs. Daniel jerked against him a few times, moaning into his shoulder as he finished.

Ryan was too stunned to move. That had certainly been different. He’d needed to reconnect with his lover on this basic level after all the unpleasantness of his parents’ intrusion into their just-found happiness. Pleasure continued rippling through him as they slowly calmed down, still clinging to each other. He was sated and relaxed.

“Nap?” Daniel’s voice was gentle and sounded at least as worn out as Ryan felt.

“Naps are good.” Ryan smiled and was asleep before he could even start worrying about the sticky mess they’d made.

SOFT, warm wetness was sliding across Ryan’s stomach in slow circles. He was on his back, the soft leather of the sofa warm against his skin. He opened his eyes to see Daniel bent over him, removing the residue from their earlier activities with a wash cloth.

“Hey.” God, but he felt good now, his father’s rantings only a distant memory.

Daniel placed a kiss on his clean stomach and then looked up and smiled.

“Hey, yourself.” Daniel held out a hand. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah, thanks for helping me focus on what’s really important.” He’d desperately needed to reconnect with his lover. He reached out for Daniel’s hand and let himself be pulled up into a standing position.

His stomach growled, making him blush with embarrassment.

“I guess I better get breakfast started.” Daniel grinned. “Wouldn’t want you to starve or anything. Omelet okay?”

“God, I’m sorry.” Ryan looked down, mortified.

“Hey, don’t feel bad.” Daniel stepped closer and hugged him. “I know you probably haven’t eaten well over the past four years. I’m just glad you’re here now, and I can feed you properly.”

“You don’t mind?” Ryan looked up into the bluest eyes he’d ever seen. “It just seems like I’ve been hungry for so long. All I was able to

take with me when they kicked me out was a backpack with a few spare clothes, my favorite sketchbook and some key documents. Surviving without a proper job was hard. There was never enough money for more than just the basics.”

“Of course I don’t mind, sweetheart.” Daniel kissed him on the lips. “I love you and would do anything for you. I want us to focus on what we have together as much as possible and cooking is just one of the many things I’d like to explore with you over the next fifty or sixty years.”

“Okay, as long as you’re sure.” Ryan hugged him back. “You’re stuck with me now, so you need to be sure.”

“I’m sure.” Daniel smiled. “I’ve never been so sure about anything in my life.”

Chapter 2

DANIEL looked up from cutting vegetables for their omelet when he heard Ryan's soft steps approaching. Seeing Ryan enter the kitchen made his groin tighten. His fiancé was wearing the sea green robe they'd bought during yesterday's shopping expedition for wedding-suitable clothes. The color made his deep green eyes stand out even more. His curly blond hair was still in perfect disarray from their earlier romp and nap on the sofa.

A shy smile curled up Ryan's pink lips and made the man's face look even more gorgeous. Daniel was going to do everything in his power to protect him from the Johnstons' viciously underhanded attacks on his mental and emotional well-being.

"Can I help?" Ryan stepped up to the center island where Daniel was working. His long fingers caressed the wooden surface of the butcher block top.

"Sure." Daniel tore his eyes away from Ryan's hand. "You can get some juice from the fridge and set the table if you want?"

"The one in the nook?" Ryan was already moving toward the fridge.

"Yeah, I like to sit there and watch the squirrels chase each other in the trees." Of course today he'd be hard pressed to look anywhere but at Ryan. "You'll find place mats, plates and glasses in the cupboard on the left of the fridge and silverware in the drawers next to the oven."

"Okay." Ryan opened the fridge and gasped. "Is there enough juice in here?"

"What?" Daniel turned around to see. "Are we running out?"

“Not exactly.” Ryan chuckled. “I’ve never seen so many different types of juice anywhere but in a shop.”

“I just like to have some variety in how I take my vitamins.” Daniel grinned. “Pick whatever you feel like.”

“Hmm, they all look interesting. Choices, choices.” Ryan frowned in concentration, finally picking one. “This sounds good—kiwi, orange, mango.”

Daniel suppressed another grin as he watched his lover collect the things needed to set the table. When Ryan was done, he sat down and stared out the window for a while, looking serious and sad. Daniel wished he could find the right words to take Ryan’s pain away, but he’d never been very good with emotions.

As Daniel poured the eggs over the vegetables in the frying pan and added the grated cheese, he watched surreptitiously as he racked his brain for the right thing to say to cheer the other man up. Ryan sighed, shook himself, and turned his attention toward the juice filled glass. He looked at it with intense concentration, still a bit skeptical. Then he took a small sip, and his eyes widened. A big grin split his face, and he downed half the content before Daniel could blink. The smile stayed on Ryan’s face as he turned to watch Daniel finish the omelet.

When it was almost done, Daniel popped bread in the toaster. He took the covered platter with pastries from the fridge and set in onto the countertop so they wouldn’t be too cold for eating later. He poured coffee into the two mugs next to the coffeemaker. Ryan got up and carried them to the table while Daniel distributed the omelet onto two plates, added the toast and sat down to enjoy their first leisurely breakfast together.

Ryan took a bite, and his eyes widened as he looked up. “Wow, Daniel... this is really good.”

“You like it, huh?” Daniel knew he was a good cook. He *was* a chef and restaurant owner, after all. Still, praise from the man he loved was much better than some food critic’s. It made him feel all warm and affectionate inside.

“Like it?” Ryan took another bite and moaned as he chewed. “I think that’s an understatement. I love it.”

“Good.” Daniel watched Ryan eat, almost forgetting his own food. Thank God he’d given his lover the larger portion. He not only needed the food but enjoyed eating it. He’d found another good way to distract him from any negative thoughts. Between eating his own portion and watching Ryan, Daniel was quite entertained.

The food was soon gone, and Ryan looked like he was about to lick the plate clean. Instead he used a slice of toast to gather up every last morsel.

“That was awesome.” Ryan finally looked up. “Thank you.”

“Glad you liked it.” Daniel smiled and gathered their used plates and silverware. “Would you like some pastries with your coffee?”

“There’s more?” Ryan grinned. “Man, you’re spoiling me. I love pastries. Just never had the money....”

He ducked his head but not before Daniel saw the small tear rolling down one cheek. It made his heart hurt to think about all the suffering his fiancé had gone through.

“All that is over now.” Daniel took one of Ryan’s hands and squeezed it. “I’ll take care of you. I promise.”

“I’m s-sorry.” Ryan shook his head and wiped at his eyes with a sleeve before looking up. “I don’t even know why I’m crying. I have no reason at all for being so emotional. I should be happy now, shouldn’t I?”

“Oh Ryan.” Daniel got up and pulled the trembling man into his arms, holding him tightly. “You don’t have anything to apologize for. You’ve had to go through so much, all on your own. It’s perfectly normal that all those feelings are coming out now that we’ve found each other again. And your parents’ intrusion earlier must have brought back some bad memories, right?”

“I guess so.” Ryan’s arms came around his waist. He lifted his head from the shoulder it had rested on and looked at him with hope in his beautiful green eyes.

“You’ve had to be strong for so long.” Daniel kissed his forehead. “And now that you feel safe you can finally release all those pent-up emotions. Including the new ones caused by your parents interfering yet again. I just hate that I wasn’t able to be there for you before. But I promise you, I will be there for you from now on.”

“Thank you.” Ryan looked surer of himself already. “I’m just so glad I decided to go to Nicole’s wedding despite everything.”

“So am I, sweetheart.” Daniel buried his face in Ryan’s soft curls and held on.

After a while Ryan took a deep breath and loosened his grip, stepping back.

“I think I’m ready for those pastries now.” Ryan’s smile was almost impish.

“All right.” Daniel grabbed the used plates, carrying them over to the dishwasher. “One selection of pastries is coming up.”

“Do you want more coffee?” Ryan had followed him with the empty glasses and the coffee mugs.

“Yes, please.” Daniel smiled as he removed the cover from the platter to reveal the pastries he’d made yesterday morning while Ryan was still asleep. “Could you get a couple of small plates from the cupboard, while you’re at it?”

“Sure.” Ryan got the plates and more coffee and returned to the table.

When Daniel turned around there were two steaming mugs of coffee next to the small plates. Ryan’s eyes lit up when he saw the pastries. His gaze stayed glued to the platter as David carried it over. He was tempted to put it onto Ryan’s place mat instead of the middle of the table, but he didn’t want to embarrass him.

Putting it down in the center, he started pointing and explaining.

“Raspberry, apple, and blueberry tarts. Those are mini lemon-mousse and mango-pear mousse molded cakes. The Napoleon and Princess slices are next to the small coffee and chocolate éclairs. And you’ll find the cream horns and vanilla puffs at the very end.” Daniel grinned as he watched Ryan almost drool.

“You... what... how....” Ryan swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again to stare some more. “They look wonderful. I’ve never seen anything like this. And so many of them....”

“I aim to please.” Daniel grinned at seeing his man so happy, all the earlier ugliness forgotten for the moment.

“You mean... you made these *yourself*?” Ryan’s eyes were big as saucers.

“Yeah.” Daniel was absurdly pleased. “Professional baking and pastry was my major when I went to the International Culinary School in Novi to get my associate’s degree. Of course, I sort of love eating pastries myself as well....”

“Wow. I’m marrying a pastry chef.” Ryan’s eyes lit up with joy. “I hope you have a gym membership so I can work off all the extra calories I’m going to be consuming over the next few years.”

“A gym membership?” Daniel laughed. “Baby, you won’t need to worry about your weight for quite a while. You have a lot of catching up to do. And anyway, I’d rather we take our exercise in the bedroom, if you know what I mean.”

“The b-bedroom?” Ryan blushed a deep pink. “Man, you’ve sure got some interesting ideas about exercise.”

“Indeed I do. Way more fun than a treadmill, trust me.” Daniel winked. “But if you don’t think it’s enough, there’s always the home gym in the basement, and of course we can run together like we used to, if you want.”

“Right.” Ryan nodded, his twitching lips showing that he was trying to suppress another grin. “Got it: bedroom, gym in the basement, running together. Can I please have some pastries now?”

“I like a man who knows his priorities.” Daniel pushed the platter toward Ryan. “Here, go ahead, knock yourself out.”

“Don’t mind me if I do.” Ryan selected pastries until his plate was full.

Ryan swept a rueful gaze over the ones he hadn’t been able to fit. Daniel almost got up to get the man a bigger plate but decided he’d rather watch his lover taste the sweet treats. He was pretty sure it was going to be an event worth seeing.

He was right. Loud sighs and moans of enjoyment soon followed. He’d never been able to resist pastries before. The sight of his lover coming close to having an orgasm while eating his way through every single kind of pastry on the platter proved there was a first time for everything. An occasional sip of coffee interrupted Ryan’s bliss, but every time he quickly returned to nibbling, licking and biting his way through the small treats. It was as though he was making love to them. Daniel had never seen anyone enjoy pastries this much. He almost envied his own creations.

Finally every type of pastry had been tasted and appreciated. A very replete Ryan leaned back in his chair, sighing deeply.

“Wow, that was an amazing experience.” Ryan’s voice was husky. “These were the best pastries I’ve ever had. And you’re the most wonderful and incredible man for making them for me. Thank you so much.”

“You are very welcome.” Daniel chuckled. “I’m glad you liked them.”

“Liking them is the understatement of the century.” Ryan stroked his flat belly. “I can’t believe I managed to try all of them. There were so many....”

“I’m quite impressed with how well you did.” Daniel started clearing the table. “So, which one was your favorite?”

“I have no idea.” Ryan groaned as he rose from his chair to help. “I’m going to have to try all of them again, I’m afraid. Man, am I going to get fat if I’m not careful.”

“Like I said earlier, you’ve got a ways to go before you need to worry, sweetheart.” Daniel laughed. “And do you know what the good news is?”

Ryan shook his head no.

“There are so many more you haven’t even tried yet.” Daniel was going to make sure his lover would always be supplied with pastries.

Ryan just rolled his eyes and patted his belly again.

When the phone rang Ryan cringed and visibly paled. Shit, that earlier call had left a lasting impression.

“It’ll probably be *my* parents this time. They always call on a Sunday morning.” Daniel got up and picked up the receiver of the set on the kitchen wall.

“Daniel here.” He grinned, looking forward to finding out how his parents were going to deal with his new situation.

“Hi, Son.” His father sounded amused. “You sound happy. Is Ryan with you?”

“Hi, Dad.” Daniel rolled his eyes. “Yes, Ryan is here.”

Ryan looked startled, and Daniel winked at his lover to reassure him.

“Hm, is that a permanent arrangement, then?” His father tried to sound serious but the quick little breaths gave away the fact that he was probably trying to suppress laughter.

“Yes, it’s permanent.” Daniel’s smile almost split his face as he watched Ryan blush the most adorable shade of pink.

“Finally!” His father sounded so relieved it was funny. “Hey, Susan, our son says it’s permanent, just like we suspected.”

“Well, good.” This from his mother who must have been listening in. “So, when are they going to come over to let us celebrate?”

“You hear that, Son?” His father was openly laughing now.

“Yeah, I heard that.” God, he loved his parents for being so understanding. And he’d never even told them he was gay. “Ryan, they want to know when we’re going to come over to celebrate our ‘permanence’ with them.”

Ryan looked surprised, but pleased. He’d probably need some time to get used to accepting and loving parents. He shrugged, suddenly looking insecure.

“Does this afternoon work for you, sweetheart?” Daniel raised his eyebrows.

Ryan just nodded.

“Okay, Dad, Mom, this afternoon works for us.” That’s right, they were an *us* now. “Is that okay with you?”

“Sure, honey.” His mother chuckled. “I bet you’re getting such a kick out of finally being part of a couple, aren’t you?”

How did she always know?

“Yes, Mom.” He wasn’t going to discuss this over the phone. “We’ll probably go see Ben, Karen, and the kids at the restaurant, so we should be with you around four or so.”

“Okay, Son, we’ll see you then.” His father ended the phone call with his usual lack of fanfare.

Daniel replaced the receiver and turned around to the sight of a pale Ryan who was hugging himself around the middle.

“They’re really okay with me living here?” Ryan’s voice sounded shaky.

“Yes, I think they really are.” Daniel quickly moved to Ryan’s side and took him into his arms, starting to walk them toward the sofa

in the living room. "Didn't you notice how friendly they were yesterday at the wedding and then later at the party?"

"Well, yes, sort of." Ryan leaned into him when they sat down. "I just wasn't sure whether that was because of all the other people or because they were really okay with it."

"It was because they're really okay with it, don't worry." Daniel hugged Ryan a little closer. "They've never cared about what other people thought of them. And they've never hidden their feelings and opinions about anything from Peter and me, even when we were very young. They always explained things to us so that we could understand. But somehow we never talked about me being gay."

"What?" Ryan pulled back, eyebrows up. "Why?"

"I don't know." Daniel shrugged. "It just never came up. I never dated, so I never felt like I had anything to tell them. They must have figured it out all by themselves. My mom is funny that way, always has been. If I didn't know better I'd think she was a mind reader. Her sense of what's going on with her family is uncannily accurate."

"Wow, that's amazing." Ryan's color was getting back to normal. "Do you think that means she 'knows' that we're getting married as well?"

"That's an interesting question." Daniel laughed. "It'll be a good test of my mom's 'abilities,' won't it?"

"I just hope they'll both be okay with it." Ryan's voice was so low that Daniel had trouble hearing him. "It would be so nice to have at least *your* parents' support."

"It certainly sounded like they're fine with it." Daniel pulled Ryan back into his arms, needing to feel him close.

Ryan's arms came around his middle, and he put his head on Daniel's shoulder. Daniel brought up a hand to his lover's head and slowly stroked the soft curls. After a while Ryan took a deep breath and looked up.

"Thank you." Ryan's eyes were moist and sad. There was just so much the other man was dealing with right now. Daniel was sure that his parents were going to be as loving and accepting as they'd always been. Ryan just needed to see it himself. In the meantime, Daniel wanted to do everything he could to help replace the sadness with a happy twinkle in his lover's glorious emerald eyes.

"I'd like to go to the restaurant just to check what's going on." Daniel grinned. "Of course, I'd also like to see my friend Ben and his kids. You know the one I told you helped me start my first restaurant and is now helping me run all three of them? He's a really great guy and has been a good friend over the years. You met him and his wife very briefly last night, but I'm not sure you were very focused then."

"Um...." Ryan frowned. "I'm sorry. I didn't really pay attention to anyone other than Nicole and you last night."

"Don't worry, he'll understand." Daniel tilted his head. "Do you want to go?"

"I think I'd like that." Ryan shrugged. "Are you sure they're going to be okay with us being together?"

"Very sure." He grinned. "Once they found out I'm gay after I wouldn't accept dates with any of their female friends, they switched tactics and tried setting me up with 'Mr. Right' instead. Until I told them about you and made it clear I wasn't interested in anyone else. They'll be ecstatic that I finally found you again."

"What about the kids?" Ryan didn't look convinced.

"How do you mean—what about the kids?" He wasn't sure what Ryan meant.

"Well, you know, will they be okay with their children seeing two men together? As a couple, I mean. Most people aren't, you know?" Ryan had the most adorable little frown when he was worried.

"Oh, that." He should have realized what Ryan was thinking.

"Yeah, that." Ryan's frown got deeper.

"Ryan, these guys are my best friends. They've accepted me from the very first. They're also incredibly open and honest with their boys about everything. I can't see why they would object to little Eric and Edward knowing we're a couple."

"Okay." Ryan was hesitant. "I guess we'll just have to see?"

"Yes, I guess we do." He smiled. "But please don't worry. Everything will be fine, you'll see."

Chapter 3

RYAN was stuffed. He hadn't eaten this much in years. Even though Daniel had told him yesterday that he was a chef, the actual food he'd made for breakfast had blown Ryan's mind. It was about to blow his stomach as well.

He sighed. He hated his parents intruding on his new life. Why did they need to try and make him behave according to their bigoted moral standards? He'd hoped they would stop bothering him, but now he knew better. His father had sounded awfully determined on the phone. He was going to be just as determined. He didn't like the thought of going to the police but getting their assistance was better than letting his parents run his life.

He focused on the garden again. It was a great way to calm down. The golden-red leaves of early fall were still making his fingers itch with the need to paint it all, just like earlier this morning. But the best part was that Daniel was going to be his husband. How had he gotten this lucky?

He studied the gold band on his finger and smiled. It looked so good there. What he loved most about it was that it represented a promise for a life with Daniel, a promise that he was going to be more than just accepted. The soul-deep need to become a true partner for the man he loved almost hurt it was so strong.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Daniel's voice made him look up.

"I was just thinking...." Ryan's hopes and feelings went so deep that it was difficult to talk about them.

“About our wedding?” Daniel had finished setting the kitchen back to rights, a task he’d insisted on doing himself, and sat next to him on the sofa.

“Yes.” Ryan smiled, unable to keep the happiness from bubbling to the surface.

“Good. I wanted to talk to you about that.” Daniel took a deep breath, looking nervous. “I know this has all been a bit sudden, my asking you to marry me and everything. I’d like to move as fast as we can, after waiting all this time, but I also want to make sure you’re really okay with it.”

“Of course I am.” Ryan smiled. “I know that it looks a little sudden but it doesn’t feel like we’re moving too fast. I’ve loved you for so long that it’s more about the organization happening quickly, you know? There’s nothing sudden about my feelings or how certain I am about them.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.” Daniel took another deep breath. “So, when and where should we do this? And who do we want as our best men? Then there’s your stuff to think of—do you want to move that here?”

“That’s quite a list.” Ryan smiled. “I’d like to wait with setting a date for Nicole and Peter’s return from their honeymoon. I’d love to have Peter be my best man. Unless—do you want him to be yours? He’s your brother, after all.”

“No problem.” Daniel laughed. “I was thinking of asking Ben anyway. And I’m okay with figuring out a date next week. What about location? Here or Canada?”

“I don’t know.” Ryan frowned. “There aren’t many US states that allow gay marriage. And we have no real connections to any of them anyway. So, maybe Canada makes more sense? There must be at least a few gay-friendly wedding planners since gay marriage is legal there. That should make it easier to find a location and everything, right?”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.” Daniel smiled. “And we can set it all up when we go to retrieve your stuff.”

Ryan ducked his head and blushed. He so didn’t want Daniel to know how crummy his living conditions had been.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Daniel cupped his jaw and made him look up.

“There isn’t a lot.” Ryan started to tremble with unwanted memories. Daniel’s calm presence gave him the strength to fight his tears. “And it isn’t a very nice place. It’s just a crappy room in a run-down house shared with some students.”

“Sweetheart, listen to me.” Daniel sighed. “I don’t care if it’s not a lot of stuff. It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Ryan nodded. He did have a small collection of his sketches and some of his favorite art books that he’d bartered for at flea markets. He couldn’t stand the thought of his awful ex-housemates keeping them.

“And as for your room not being nice—I didn’t assume you lived in a palace from what you’ve told me so far.” Daniel snorted. “And I don’t care what it’s like, whether it’s nice or not. Well, I do, sort of, because it would have been better for you if you’d had a nice place to live. Oh, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Ryan had to smile at Daniel’s confusion. “Thanks.”

“Sure. So, what about driving to Sudbury to organize your move but taking our time, taking a few days extra to scout for wedding locations?”

“Um....” Ryan’s gut roiled.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Daniel squeezed his fingers.

“It’s... it’s just that there’s... you know... a lot of miserable memories there.” It was bad enough they had to go back at all, but since he’d decided to stand up to his parents, he wasn’t going to let his awful housemates intimidate him out of getting his stuff.

“Oh Ryan, I’m sorry. I didn’t think.” Daniel looked crushed. “Where would you like us to get married then? Is there anywhere else in Canada you’d rather go?”

“I’ve always wanted to visit Vancouver.” Ryan blinked. “I think the contrast between sea and mountains would be amazing to see.”

“Okay.” Daniel nodded slowly. “I like that idea. I’ve never been either but it’s a big enough place to give us some choice for wedding planners and locations. We should probably do some research on the

Internet first and set up some appointments before flying there. Maybe after we return from Sudbury?"

"So we can go there? Just like that?" Ryan was feeling excited at the possibilities. But flying? He'd never been on an airplane before. His parents had money, but they'd always said it was "frivolous" to spend it on luxuries. "I guess it's too far to drive."

"Flying can be fun, you'll see." Daniel hugged him.

"I guess." He'd have to take Daniel's word for it.

"I could do with a few days off work this week. We won't spend any extra time in Sudbury but what about taking our time getting there and back? Exploring a little? It'll be like a mini-honeymoon." Daniel wiggled his eyebrows and made Ryan laugh.

"That sounds really good, love." Ryan hesitated, not sure how to ask this. "Do you think we could... well... get tested before we leave?"

"To get ready for the real honeymoon?" Daniel looked thrilled.

"I guess." Ryan blushed again.

"Hey, don't ever be embarrassed about your needs and feelings. I love it that you asked. I guess it means you want to take the next step with me?" Daniel pulled their joined hands up to his chest and held them against his heart.

"Yes. Oh yes. So much." Ryan was almost whispering. "It doesn't mean we have to wait until then or anything. I know we can get condoms if you want. I just thought... well, I just don't want anything between us when we're married."

"Baby, that is so romantic. I love it" Daniel kissed Ryan's hand before returning it to his chest again. "I don't know if I want to wait until we're married for us to go all the way. But we can do it if you want."

"I don't think I want to wait that long either. It might be months till we get all the details sorted out." Ryan shrugged. "But I do know that I'd love our first time as husbands to be, well, just naked skin."

"I agree." Daniel smiled. "And don't worry, these tests don't take long. We can go to a clinic this afternoon on our way to the restaurant, and we'll know in a few days."

Daniel stood and extended a hand to him. Ryan took it and let the man pull him up, right into his arms.

“I think there’s time for a shower before we leave. I’d quite like to clean up the leftovers from the little mess we made this morning.” Daniel grinned. “Not that it was a bad mess or anything.”

“Yeah, a shower sounds good.” Ryan smiled, remembering how nice making that mess had felt.

“Come on then, let’s get wet together—again.” Daniel winked and started walking them upstairs.

Ryan still couldn’t believe how luxurious Daniel’s shower was. Well, the whole bathroom screamed luxury, but the shower topped it all off. He looked at the glass brick wall that curved around the shower area, marveling at how the morning light was reflected back from it and made the whole bathroom sparkle. He lifted his hand and ran it along the surface, admiring what looked like bubbles captured in the glass.

“Beautiful.” His voice came out as a whisper.

“I’m glad you approve.” Daniel had stepped up behind him, put his arms around his waist and started kissing the side of his neck.

“I just like the way the light is broken by the inner structure of these blocks. The colors are amazing and make the light look almost alive.” Ryan wanted a proper canvas and oil paint. “I just wish I could paint this.”

“I think that would be incredible. We’ll get you the supplies you need, and then you can have a go.” Daniel continued to kiss and nibble his way up and down Ryan’s neck.

“You’d do that? But the good stuff is quite expensive.” Ryan’s heart flipped with joy. Was there anything this wonderful man wouldn’t do for him?

“Sure. Why not? It’s not like I don’t have enough money to spend on the important stuff.” Daniel had reached his earlobe and pulled it into his hot mouth with his teeth.

Ripples of excitement ran down Ryan’s spine, making him forget finances. He’d never known that his earlobe was so sensitive. But then, he’d never known a lot of things about his body before Daniel had started exploring it.

“God, Daniel. That feels so good.” Ryan tilted his head for better access.

“Mmm. You smell good here, baby.” Daniel’s hands slid along his waist and started undoing the belt that held his robe closed.

One warm hand moved underneath the fluffy terrycloth and started stroking his belly in large, soothing circles. Ryan leaned his head back onto Daniel’s shoulder and closed his eyes to better focus on the pleasure. His groin tingled and his cock started to harden. As if he hadn’t already come just this morning.

Daniel’s hands slipped lower as if the man sensed what was going on. He stroked his way down to the top of Ryan’s thighs, then caressed the sensitive skin where thigh met groin. Ryan moaned as his cock stiffened to complete hardness. When Daniel’s hand moved lower to caress and cup his balls he even whimpered. He needed a touch on his cock so badly.

“Touch me. Please.” Ryan’s hips started moving of their own volition, trying to find the friction he so desperately needed. “Please, love. Need your touch.”

“I am touching you, baby.” Daniel chuckled and moved his hands away to take first Ryan’s, then his own robe off.

The loss of the strong arms around him made Ryan shiver, and he turned around to see what Daniel was doing. The robes were being tossed toward the hamper and then Daniel stepped closer and took him back into his arms.

A long, slow kiss later he drew back.

“Shower. Now.” Daniel started walking them toward the enclosure. “Or we’ll never get clean.”

Who wanted to get clean when they could have their lover’s hands stroke them to ecstasy? But he followed Daniel’s directions, hoping for some wet, slick shower sex like they’d had last night.

Daniel pressed the button that switched on the multiple showerheads and water erupted from everywhere. Ryan closed his eyes and enjoyed the warm spray caressing the skin all over his body. Moments later Daniel’s slick hands started massaging his back. The scent of sandalwood swirled around them. Ryan sighed with delight.

When Daniel was done with Ryan's back, his hands moved lower. He caressed his ass cheeks, the back of his thighs, his calves, even the tops of his feet and between his toes. Then those wonderful hands moved back around to Ryan's front, covering the shins, back up to the thighs, circling his stomach and chest, and ending at his neck.

Still not a single touch to his aching cock. Ryan grumbled and opened his eyes to a mischievously grinning Daniel.

"Just give me a minute, baby." Daniel soaped himself up with quick, efficient movements, then put more body wash into both hands and stepped behind Ryan.

One slippery hand went to his balls, the other to the small of his back. When both started sliding around his most sensitive areas Ryan sighed and leaned back against Daniel's chest. His arms came up behind Daniel's neck to give him something to hold on to. His balls were thoroughly cleansed and softly squeezed causing him to squirm with arousal. When Daniel finally enclosed Ryan's swollen cock in a warm, slippery hand, his hips bucked involuntarily. He was shaking with the need to come.

While jacking him slowly and sensuously in front, Daniel's other hand moved down between his cheeks and slid back and forth all the way from just behind his balls, across his hole and up his crack.

"Hmmm, that feels so good, love." Ryan turned his head to kiss his lover.

Between that kiss and the hands stroking him below, he was soon panting with desire. He started thrusting his hips and whimpered when Daniel increased the pressure on his cock. Need coiled more tightly in his belly. He was so close.

Daniel pulled his head back from the kiss and watched him. His blue eyes looked straight into Ryan's soul.

"I love you, baby." Daniel's voice whispered across Ryan's skin and it was all over.

"Daniel!" Ryan screamed as his head snapped back, and he came in long, shuddering spasms.

An answering hot spurt against his back told him that Daniel had come as well.

“God, baby, you are so gorgeous when you come.” Daniel’s low voice was right next to his ear.

Still a little weak in the knees Ryan turned around in his lover’s arms and leaned in for another long, slow kiss. Their tongues met and slid against each other tenderly, making Ryan’s cock twitch. No way was he going to be able to get hard again. He was going to have sore balls at this rate, so he drew back from the kiss and smiled at Daniel.

“I love you, too, Daniel. So much.” Ryan hugged Daniel and just stood there for a few more moments, enjoying the closeness.

RYAN was quiet and withdrawn in the car. He just couldn’t stop thinking about this morning’s phone call from his parents. He hated the fact they were reducing his focus on Daniel and their new relationship. He just wished they didn’t still have the ability to get to him on such a fundamental level.

They stopped at a local walk-in clinic to do their tests. They were done within an hour and were given cards with a number to call on Wednesday for their results.

On the way to the restaurant Ryan started looking around to try and figure out where they were going. Grand Rapids hadn’t changed much, and he realized they were now right in the middle of downtown. When they pulled into a parking lot of a huge classic-looking building he was speechless.

It looked more like the modern version of a renaissance palace than a high-end restaurant. The central entrance door was painted a deep emerald green and set within an arch which was supported by simple white Tuscan columns on both sides. The name Emerald Palazzo was engraved into the highly finished masonry above the arch and colored the same deep emerald green as the double entrance door. Numerous large windows were set symmetrically around the square two-story building. Each had a triangular pediment and was framed by white pilasters. It looked like there was even a dome over the center of the building.

“Um....” Ryan looked from the restaurant to Daniel and back, his mouth agape.

“What?” Daniel’s jaw muscles twitched.

“This....” He closed his mouth and looked back at Daniel. He gestured toward the building. “This is your restaurant?”

“Yes, don’t you like it?” Daniel definitely looked worried now.

“Like it?” He coughed. “It looks like a royal palace!”

“You’re right. It was actually modeled on an Italian seventeenth century palace.” Daniel grinned. “The previous owner was a bit of a megalomaniac. By the time he went bankrupt, it had fallen into disrepair with the bank eager to sell it. Ben and I took one look at it and decided it would make a great restaurant after some remodeling.”

“Wow.” Ryan stared at the building again and didn’t move. “Just wow.”

“Do you want to see the inside?” Daniel sounded hopeful.

“You think they’ll let us inside... dressed like this? Jeans and everything?” He turned back to Daniel, both eyebrows raised.

“Sure they will.” Daniel laughed. “First of all, I *am* one of the owners. And secondly, Sunday lunchtime is for families and everything is much more relaxed than usual. Including the dress code.”

“You have family lunches in a luxury restaurant?” Ryan smiled and shook his head. “That’s kind of cute.”

“Well, I don’t know about cute.” Daniel chuckled. “It’s more that lots of our customers have children. And they want their kids to be exposed to eating in a nice atmosphere as well as the usual fast food and more relaxed family restaurants. So, we get rid of the restrictions one day a week and everybody has fun. Including Ben’s twins who come here with Karen most Sundays.”

“That makes sense.” Ryan relaxed a little.

“Ready to go in?” Daniel reached for the door opener.

“Yeah, let’s do it.” Ryan’s smile felt shaky. It was all a bit intimidating.

Daniel got out, walked around the car and opened Ryan's door for him. Once the car was locked, he took his hand and guided them into the restaurant.

A painfully thin young man stood at the door and greeted them, looking at Daniel with large adoring eyes.

"Hello, Daniel." Slate gray eyes, framed by long dark lashes looked up at Daniel as if he'd hung the moon. "Would you like a table? Number twelve has been reserved for Ben's family."

"Hello, Acton." Daniel smiled carefully, as if uncomfortable with the level of adoration he received. "Table twelve will be fine. Have they arrived yet?"

"His family isn't here yet, but Ben's in the office, talking to Vittorio. I can get him for you if you want." Acton looked down. His eyes widened when he saw their joined hands. He started twirling his fingers in his medium long chestnut brown hair nervously.

"Okay. Please let him know that it's not urgent, but we'd like him to join us at our table as soon as he can. We've got some great news to share." Daniel looked relieved when they left Acton behind.

Ryan took in the interior architecture while they walked. He really liked this place. It had been a little overwhelming when he'd first seen it from the outside, but the inside felt more comfortable. The walls were covered in a light green plaster and white pilasters framed the doors and the many windows. The ceiling had wood panels, probably maple or ash. It gave the place a light, spacious feel.

When they reached the main restaurant area, Ryan stopped walking. It looked like a courtyard. It was framed by white Tuscan columns that were encircled with ivy growing from pots at the bottom of each one up to the lintel at the top. Bright light flooding in from above pulled his eyes to the ceiling, to find a huge glass dome covering everything.

There was a grand piano in one corner of the courtyard and the rest of the area was covered in toys and small tables with paper, crayons, and pencils. About ten children were playing and drawing quietly. The adult guests were sitting at tables spread across the rest of the room.

"Do you like it?" Daniel's voice interrupted his admiration.

"I love it." He turned around. "It's beautiful, Daniel. And look at all those children... you're really serious about making them feel welcome as well, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I think that's really important." Daniel squeezed his hand. "I'm glad you like it. Ben suggested it when his kids first got more mobile. But it was a big success with all our customers with children or grandchildren. So, every Sunday we remove the tables from the central courtyard and put out the toys and little tables."

"I wish I was still a kid and could join them." He was only half joking. Seeing all those pencils and crayons was very tempting.

"That's our table over there." Daniel pointed at an empty round table for six near a big window.

They'd barely sat down when a tall man with short, coal black hair and olive skin walked toward them from a side corridor. Daniel had pointed the man out to Ryan at Nicole's wedding party.

"Daniel!" Ben embraced Daniel enthusiastically. "It's good to see you again."

"Hey, man. Good to see you too." Daniel smiled and returned Ben's embrace. "Sorry we didn't get to talk more last night. How was your holiday?"

"Great. The kids loved the beach and Karen adored the 'all-inclusive' fruit cocktails." Ben smiled and stepped back, turning to Ryan. "But enough about that. Let me have a closer look at this gorgeous young man you were dancing with all evening."

"Ben, this is Ryan Johnston." Daniel straightened his back and put his arm around Ryan's shoulders.

"*The* Ryan?" Ben's large eyes grew even larger and his eyebrows went up.

"Yes, Ben." Daniel smiled indulgently. "The one and only."

Daniel turned to him.

"Ryan, this is my best friend Ben Venneri. The man who helped me set up this restaurant as well as the two others we now own." Daniel's smile grew wider as he watched Ryan eye Ben.

“Well, I’ll be....” Ben opened his arms and hugged him. “I’m so glad I finally get to really meet you, rather than just seeing you from afar.”

“It-it’s nice to meet you too.” He pulled back and returned to Daniel’s side. “But how come you know about me?”

“What do you think?” Ben’s grin almost split his face as he pointed at Daniel. “This man here has been singing your praises almost since I first met him.”

“He has?” Ryan looked at Daniel, unable to suppress a slight smile.

“Guilty as charged.” Daniel smiled back and kissed him on the lips, right there for everyone to see.

“So, let’s sit down, and then you can tell me everything, Daniel.” Ben sat down. “How did you finally manage to find the love of your life again?”

Chapter 4

DANIEL sat down as close to Ryan as the chairs allowed. He couldn't help smiling as he told Ben what had happened during the last two days since he'd found Ryan sitting on that park bench near the church on the evening before Nicole's wedding.

"Whew, what a story." Ben leaned back and raked a hand through his short hair when Daniel was done.

"And the best part is that it doesn't end there." Daniel grinned.

He took Ryan's hand and lifted it so Ben could see the gold band on his ring finger.

"You didn't!" Ben looked ecstatic and jumped up, walking toward Daniel.

"I did." Daniel nodded.

"And I said yes." Ryan smiled shyly.

"Congratulations, you two." Ben spread his arms and hugged both of them at the same time. "That is such great news. Karen will love it. So, when's the wedding?"

"As soon as we can get you to agree to be my best man." Daniel stepped back, keeping his arm around Ryan. "And get some other little details organized."

"Oh Daniel, I'd love to be your best man." Ben couldn't stop grinning. "Just wait till I tell Karen and the twins that there's going to be a wedding!"

"Speaking of which—where is your lovely wife?" Daniel looked around as if she was going to appear from under the table.

“She’s supposed to be here any minute now.” Ben’s laugh lines crinkled as he looked around. “Aha, there she is.”

Ben slid his chair back and kneeled on the ground, his arms wide open to catch the two laughing little boys that were barreling toward him. Their short hair was curly and just as black as Ben’s. They looked like identical five-year old replicas of their father. Karen, a petite woman with long black hair and brown eyes, walked up to the table, smiling at the twins’ antics. She looked her usual impish self with her pert little nose and bright smile.

Ben let go of the boys and stood up to embrace his wife. The boys looked around and barely squealed “Uncle Daniel!” before rushing over and each hugging one of his legs as if their lives depended on hanging on.

Daniel let go of Ryan’s hand and squatted down so he could embrace the boys. He hugged them until they squealed.

“Don’t squish me.” But Eric was giggling.

“We missed you.” Edward put his head on Daniel’s shoulder and closed his eyes. His skin tone was a shade lighter and his nose a little smaller than his brother’s, but otherwise they looked pretty much the same.

“No squishing, Eric.” Daniel chuckled and kissed the first boy on his head. “And I missed you, too, Edward. Both of you.”

Daniel kissed Edward on his head for good measure and pulled back. He held both boys at a distance and his face turned very serious.

“There’s someone very important I want you to meet.” Daniel let go of the boys and reached up to pull Ryan down beside him. “Eric, Edward, this is Ryan.”

Both boys turned their big brown eyes on Ryan and stared.

“Is he your boyfriend?” Eric tilted his head.

Daniel nodded. God, these kids were clever.

“I like him.” Edward smiled and stepped toward Ryan, throwing his little arms around Ryan’s neck.

“I like him too.” Not to be outdone, Eric stepped up and hugged him as well.

Now Ryan had two arms full of little boys. Daniel noticed that Karen and Ben were smiling at the emotional scene, arms around each others' waists.

"Now, boys, don't squish Ryan," Daniel chuckled.

"We're not squishing him." Edward shook his head but then thought better of it and looked up at Ryan to check. "Are we?"

"No, you're not squishing me at all." Ryan smiled at them. "I love a good hug."

They let go of him and stepped back, probably just in case the adults came up with more accusations.

"Are you going to marry Uncle Daniel?" Eric had always been the more inquisitive of the two.

"Eric!" Karen frowned. "Mind your manners."

"What? Uncle Daniel *said* Ryan was his boyfriend. And after you're a boyfriend you get married, right?" Eric frowned.

"You do. Look, he even gave me a ring." Ryan showed them his ring. "And yes, we are going to get married."

"Yippee! A wedding." Eric pumped his arm in the air. "Will you have a big party? Leo at kindergarten said his mom had the biggest party *ever* when she and her boyfriend got married."

"Would you like a big party?" Ryan smiled at little Eric's enthusiasm.

"I'd *love* a big party." Eric pursed his lips. "Can we have one that's bigger than Leo's, so he'll stop bragging about it?"

"Eric, really." Karen tried to sound serious but couldn't quite suppress a grin.

"We don't know yet how big the party will be." Daniel snorted. "We haven't even started planning it. But it'll be in Canada, so you'll get to go to a new country."

"Okay, that's good." Eric nodded to himself, clearly satisfied with the bragging potential of that scenario.

"So, does that mean you're our new uncle?" Edward's voice was soft as he looked up at Ryan.

Ryan looked at Karen and Ben, asking for their guidance. They smiled and nodded, and Ryan looked relieved.

"I guess it does." Ryan looked back at Edward. "Is that okay?"

"Yes, it is." Edward nodded and hugged him again. He'd always been just a little more withdrawn than his exuberant brother and took a little more time to think things through. But the results were just as delightful.

"Can we please go and play now?" Eric turned to look at the little tables and toys. Apparently he thought that the topic was finished for now.

"Sure. Just be ready to come get your lunch when we call you." Karen sent them off and turned to Ryan as he got up. "Hi, Ryan, nice to see you again—this time hopefully with a little more time to get to know you better than last night. Sorry about the boys... I hope they didn't shock you too much?"

"No problem." Ryan stepped back toward Daniel who had risen as well. "They're so cute... and clever."

"They seem to like you a lot." Ben smiled and sat back down. "I mean, they're not exactly shy by any stretch of the imagination, but it usually takes them at least a little while to get used to a new person."

"Well, they obviously sensed that Ryan isn't just *any* random new person!" Daniel grinned with pride as they all took their seats around the table.

Ryan blushed at the compliment. He really had the most adorable blush. God, he had it bad for this man. He was so proud of his shy lover who'd handled everything so well. Not that he'd expected problems, but it was still a lot for Ryan to take in at once.

He picked up one of the menus from the table and handed it to Ryan.

"You okay?" He leaned close as he spoke into Ryan's ear to make sure the others wouldn't overhear.

"Yeah, thanks." Ryan's smile was radiant. "I really like your friends."

"Good." He gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "I think they like you too."

A few minutes passed with everyone quietly studying their choices. They were interrupted by Acton who was ready to take their drink orders. Apparently he was their waiter after his shift at the door

ended. The young man was just—weird. He focused on Daniel, as if the others didn't exist, until it was time to take the orders.

When he was done writing them down Acton walked away, and Daniel turned back to their table. He sighed, relieved he was no longer being stared at.

“So, what would you like to eat?” Daniel grinned, refocusing on reality. “I have it on good authority that everything on the menu is excellent.”

“You would say that, wouldn't you?” Ryan laughed. “I can see why this place has done well with you advertising the food with so much enthusiasm.”

“Hey, everything here *is* really good.” Ben tried to look insulted but didn't quite manage to keep his lips straight.

“Yeah, like you're so much more objective.” Karen playfully punched her husband in the arm, clearly putting no force behind the movement at all.

“Well, neither can you.” Ben mock glared at her, still trying to suppress his grin. Karen just shrugged, obviously unfazed.

“Okay, so who can give me an objective view, then?” Ryan grinned.

“Hm, let me think.” Daniel tilted his head, enjoying the banter. “The boys are probably the closest you'll get to an unbiased view. They're too young to understand flattery or social correctness.”

“That seems to make sense.” Ryan nodded. “So, what would they recommend if I asked them?”

“The chicken nuggets.” Daniel heard Ben and Karen say the same thing.

“You mean—they're better than those at McDonalds?” Ryan's eyebrows rose.

“That's... that's exactly what the boys say.” Daniel could no longer suppress his mirth and snorted with laughter.

“Well, since we've declared them to be unbiased....” Ryan's lips twitched. “I'll just have to follow their recommendation.”

“You... what?” Daniel laughed even harder.

“You know, go with what the local experts say.” Ryan’s smile broke through.

“Oh sweetheart, that’s just priceless. You’re so right. Go for it.” Daniel didn’t seem to be able to stop laughing.

He was still wiping tears of hilarity from his eyes when Acton approached the table with their drinks. After they were distributed, Acton pulled his pad from his pocket, ready to take their food orders.

“What would you like, Daniel?” Acton’s voice was soft and sounded far too intimate for the setting they were in.

Daniel frowned. He pointedly looked over at Karen. Any beginner knew that the women at the table were always asked for their order first.

“S-sorry, Daniel.” Acton had the decency to blush and turned to Karen. “What would you like, Karen?”

“I’d like the chicken lasagna, please, and a side salad.” Karen returned the menu to Acton and leaned back in her chair.

“Ben, what can I get you?” Acton didn’t even look up.

“I’ll go with the Piccata Milanese, please.” Ben handed his menu back. “We’ll also take two portions of nuggets and fries for the twins.”

When Acton nodded and made to turn toward him, Daniel shook his head and pointed at Ryan with his eyes.

“What would you like?” Acton sounded like he was gnashing his teeth as he spoke.

“I would like the chicken nuggets, please.” Ryan looked quite serious.

Acton just laughed.

“What?” Ryan looked confused.

“But that’s a kid’s meal.” Acton sounded condescending.

“So?” Ryan squirmed in his chair.

“You can’t order a kids meal! That’s ridiculous.” Acton had a disdainful smirk on his face that really annoyed Daniel.

“What—why....” Ryan took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down.

Before he could recover enough to say anything, Daniel took his shaking fingers in his warm hand for support.

“Excuse me, *Acton*.” Daniel was angry enough to let his voice show it.

Acton had squinted at their joined hands with a frown on his face. Now his head snapped up, making eye contact with him.

“Daniel?” Acton was the one looking confused now.

“We’ll have a separate discussion about this later.” Daniel lowered his voice. There was no need for other guests to be disturbed. “For now, suffice it to say that Ryan can order anything he wants. And not just because he’s my fiancé, either. He’s the guest here, and what he wants goes, as long as the kitchen can make it.”

“Your fiancé... but...” Action was blushing furiously, managing to look angry at the same time. Not apologetic in the least.

“No buts!” Daniel balled his free hand into a tight fist. “You’ll ask Ryan whether he wants his nuggets as a starter or as a main course. Then you’ll enquire whether he’d prefer fries or spaghetti. Lastly you’ll check which sauce he’d like and if he wants a side salad. Is that clear?”

“Well!” Acton stood there for a few moments, fuming. “Okay.”

The rebellious waiter got through the questions with a minimal amount of politeness, grinding his teeth the whole time. Ryan kept a tight grip on Daniel’s hand.

Finally Acton turned to Daniel.

“And what would you like, Daniel?” Acton sounded a lot less sure of himself than he had before.

“I would like the nuggets as well, please.” Daniel kept a straight face and didn’t move his eyes away from Acton. “Exactly the same way Ryan just ordered his.”

“Y-yes, sir.” Acton scribbled something on his pad and hurried away without even taking his menu.

“Thank you, Daniel.” Ryan’s voice was soft. He looked dejected. “But you didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes I did, sweetheart.” He looked into Ryan’s eyes. “Acton’s behavior was inexcusable. I have no idea what got into him. I’m really sorry he treated you like that.”

“I don’t think he likes me very much.” Ryan shrugged.

“I’m afraid you’re right.” He frowned. “But why? He’s only just met you and you haven’t even spoken to him.”

“I... well... it’s just the way he was looking at you....” Ryan was looking down.

“What?” Daniel’s eyes grew bigger. “You think... oh, sweetheart, I never gave him any reason to think I was interested in him in any way.”

“I know.” Ryan finally looked up. “But I don’t think Acton would see it that way. Looks to me like he thought you were interested in him, and I took you away from him.”

“Shit.” Daniel shook his head. “I think you could be right.”

“‘Shit’ is right, Daniel.” Ben looked just as upset as he felt. “I think I better be the one to have that little talk with him. We don’t want to give him a reason to spend any more time with you. He’ll only interpret that the wrong way and cause more trouble.”

“I think you’re right, Ben.” Daniel nodded. “Thanks.”

He hated the fact that the mood had deteriorated. Luckily the twins chose that moment to come up to their table. Eric had several sheets of paper in his hands and Edward carried two boxes of crayons and a mesh bag containing pencils.

“Can we come and color at your table, please?” Eric sounded impossibly polite while looking at Karen, obviously keen on getting his way.

“We’ve even brought enough paper and stuff so you can join us.” Edward was looking at Ryan, though.

“Sure you can, honey.” Karen smiled as her sons quickly scrambled onto their chairs, both just tall enough to comfortably reach the table top. Eric sat between Daniel and Karen, Edward was next to Ryan and Ben.

“Can you pass these to Edward, please?” Eric gave Daniel some of the sheets, and he dutifully handed everything to Ryan.

Rather than passing on all of them, Ryan took a few, giving the rest to Edward.

“Thank you, Uncle Ryan.” Edward grinned and handed back a box of crayons. “Could you pass these to Eric, please?”

Having blushed a deep pink when Edward called him “uncle,” Ryan did as his neighbor had asked. Edward then opened the other box and set it between the two.

“We can share, right?” Edward glanced up at Ryan.

“Sure we can.” Ryan smiled back. “I’d prefer the pencils, though. Is that all right?”

Edward nodded happily, and Ryan grinned as he opened the mesh bag and pulled out the colors he wanted. Daniel watched quietly as the three ‘artists’ started working. The twins had saved the day.

He watched Ryan’s developing sketch. He glanced up to see Ben and Karen do the same. Ryan was oblivious. He was working quickly, a small happy smile on his lips.

After a while Edward had finished his picture of a house and garden. He looked over to see what Ryan was working on.

“Wow.” Edward stared at Ryan’s sketch which was now almost done. “Uncle Ryan... you drew *us*?”

Ryan just nodded, putting the finishing touches on his double portrait. The twins were on a swing, arms around each other and big grins on their faces. They looked like they were about to jump off the page, they were so lifelike. Daniel was very impressed.

“Eric, Eric.” Edward was jumping up and down on his seat. “You’ve got to see this. Uncle Ryan drew *us*. On a swing.”

“Where? Let me see.” Eric slid off his chair and raced around the table. “Wow!”

Both boys stared at the drawing. Ben and Karen got up and stood behind them to get a better look.

“Oh my God, they look so alive.” Karen looked at Ryan, clear admiration in her eyes. “You’re really good, Ryan.”

“Thank you.” Ryan smiled and winked at her. “I had good subjects to work from.”

“This is a beautiful drawing.” Ben sounded touched. “Would you consider giving it to us so we can frame it and hang it up at home?”

“You would do that?” Ryan’s eyes were big and luminous.

“Oh yes. It’s great.” Karen smiled. “You’ve captured exactly who they are, their inner personalities even with a just a few strokes of a pencil. That’s an amazing talent, especially since they’re twins and look so much alike. Are you a painter?”

“No. No, I’m not.” Ryan looked down at his lap.

“Well, maybe you haven’t got any official qualifications, but I think you deserve the title anyway.” Daniel was so proud of his fiancé he could just bust. He’d suspected Ryan had talent based on what he remembered from four years ago. But this sketch was in a whole different league. Ryan had obviously developed his abilities.

“I agree. Have you ever considered painting professionally?” Ben smiled.

Ryan carefully rolled up the drawing and handed it to a smiling Karen. She sat back down and pulled an elastic band from her big handbag to keep the drawing protected. The boys watched her closely, only returning to their seats when they’d seen the sketch vanish into her bag.

“I-I have.” Ryan nodded slowly. “I’ve even sold a few drawings for some extra income over the last four years, but I’m not sure that counts, does it? I guess I’ve just never had the right tools or the time to do much more than experiment.”

That was going to change as soon as possible. Daniel was going to make some calls. Richfoot Construction was working on the new restaurant, but he was sure they’d be able to help with a small project as well. One of the upstairs bedrooms would become a painting studio while the two of them traveled to Sudbury. That would be a nice surprise for Ryan when they got back.

“Okay, now that you’re engaged to Daniel, I’m sure that’ll no longer be a problem.” Ben grinned as Daniel nodded. “So, are you going to do an exhibition once you’ve done a few pieces?”

Ryan’s mouth fell open.

“That’s a brilliant idea, my friend.” Daniel was elated. It would solve so many of Ryan’s issues about not being sure what to do for a living. And as for not contributing to their life—a worry his lover had mentioned right after agreeing to Daniel’s marriage proposal—well, with any luck that problem might soon be gone as well.

“I’ve never thought of them as good enough for an exhibition.” Ryan shrugged.

“Do you have others that we could have a look at?” Ben wasn’t going to let this drop.

“I have a few—back in Canada.” Ryan looked doubtful.

“Well, I think we should have a look at those first.” Daniel took Ryan’s hand and stroked his knuckles. “And then you can always make new ones, right?”

“Right. Sure.” Ryan smiled slowly, his eyes beginning to sparkle. “I think I would enjoy that.”

Chapter 5

“DO YOUR parents still live where they used to?” Ryan yawned into his hastily pulled up hand, surprised at how tired he suddenly felt now that they were once again in Daniel’s lovely sports car and on their way to meet Mr. and Mrs. Miller.

But then, a lot had happened today. Not just the bad start with his parents’ horrible letter and intrusive phone call. The good had been pretty spectacular as well. The idea of exhibiting his paintings took his breath away. It was as scary as it was exhilarating. He wasn’t ready for that at all. But maybe, just maybe, it would give him a chance to contribute something to his partnership with Daniel. Make him a more equal partner. Hearing Daniel talk about just flying to Vancouver and buying painting supplies for him had increased his worry. Seeing the restaurant today hadn’t helped reduce his increasing feelings of inadequacy.

“I think it’ll take us about another half hour to get all the way out to the north east.” Daniel briefly smiled over at him, his eyes quickly returning to the road. “You can take a nap if you want.”

“Sorry, I’m just sooo tired.” He yawned again.

“Hey, no problem.” Daniel reached over and stroked his thigh. “Sleep will help you recharge your batteries.”

“Kay.” He leaned back and closed his eyes.

WHEN he opened his eyes Daniel was just pulling into the Millers’ circular driveway. The prairie style house with its wood and brick

exterior looked as magnificent as he remembered. He stretched, admiring the big old trees across the entire lot.

“Did you have a nice nap?” Daniel grinned over at him as he turned off the engine.

“Yeah.” He didn’t quite feel awake yet. “Needed that.”

They unbuckled, got out of the car, and walked toward the big wooden entrance door. It opened before they could even ring the bell.

Both Millers had broad grins on their faces. Mrs. Miller still wore her chestnut hair in a tight bun, and her eyes sparkled in that fascinating silvery-blue that he’d never been able to replicate on paper. Mr. Miller was as tall and imposing as ever—his raven black hair slightly graying at the temples but not a bald spot in sight. His eyes were a shade lighter than Daniel’s and twinkled joyfully.

“Welcome back.” Mrs. Miller hugged him. “It’s been too long.”

“Glad you could make it, Son.” Mr. Miller shook Daniel’s hand and then turned toward him. “You, too, Ryan. We’ve missed you.”

Mrs. Miller hugged Daniel and then motioned everyone inside. The spacious living and dining areas were straight ahead. The last sunlight of the day came in through the floor to ceiling window walls leading onto the large open patio in the back. The master bedroom suite was off to the right, and so Mrs. Miller led them to the left half of the house. They walked past Mr. Miller’s study, through the kitchen and into the family room.

It had been his favorite room. Peter and he had usually done their homework here rather than upstairs where Peter’s and Daniel’s bedrooms were. Wonderful smells from the adjoining kitchen had added to the attraction. The view into the backyard with the miniature adventure playground had been his other favorite part until they outgrew it.

“Sit down, sit down.” Mrs. Miller pointed to the big wooden table which was covered with a snow-white tablecloth and had been set with the nice china. “You may not be very hungry, but I baked a couple of cakes just in case.”

“Mom, you’re just too much.” Daniel laughed and sat on a chair with a view of the garden, pulling Ryan down next to him. “You know that nobody can resist your cakes, they are better than good.”

Ryan stared at the huge chocolate cake that sat next to what looked like a raspberry shortcake. He was totally stunned.

“You remembered.” His voice was shaky with emotion.

“What’s that, sweetie?” Mrs. Miller smiled at him, her eyes sparkling.

“It’s just—you remembered my favorite cakes.” His lips quivered. “My mother never baked cakes for us but you always did. It made me feel so welcome here.”

“Oh sweetie.” Mrs. Miller came over and hugged him, her long eyelashes moist. “You were always welcome here, you know that.”

“And you still are.” Mr. Miller coughed, covering his mouth with his big hand.

“Thank you. Thank you both.” He sniffled, slightly embarrassed by his emotional outburst. Why couldn’t these people be his parents? “That means a lot to me.”

“And to me.” Daniel’s voice was soft as he put his arm around him, handing him a handkerchief.

Who knew Daniel carried handkerchiefs? He was such a gentleman.

“Well, what can I get you boys to drink?” Mrs. Miller had stepped back and wiped her eyes with a sleeve. “Coffee, tea, something else?”

“I’d love some tea, please, Mom.” Daniel scooted his chair closer and kept his arm around Ryan’s shoulders.

“Could I have some milk, please?” He loved Daniel’s warmth against his side.

“One tea, one milk for the boys.” Mrs. Miller winked at them as she said it. “What about you, Thomas? Your usual Irish coffee all right?”

“Yes, dear, that would be great.” Mr. Miller smiled at his wife. “Would you like some help with all that?”

“Thanks, darling, that would be nice. It’ll also give the boys some privacy.” She winked at them and pulled her husband into the kitchen area.

“Some privacy.” Daniel shook his head and laughed. “You’re right there and can hear every word we say.”

“Well, sure. How else would I know what’s going on with my boys?” Her voice did carry exceptionally well all the way from the large kitchen.

“Oops, is that how she always knew what we were up to?” Ryan was embarrassed. A lot of the plans Peter and he’d made had been hatched right here at the table. He’d never thought that she’d be able to overhear them.

Mrs. Miller just giggled. Daniel laughed and pulled Ryan closer to his side, placing a kiss on his temple. It was probably better to shut up at this point. Listening to the preparations in the kitchen was relaxing, and he soon felt better.

A few minutes later the Millers were back, Mr. Miller carrying a wooden tray with the various drinks. They were distributed and everyone took a first sip.

“So, which cake would you like to start with, sweetie?” Mrs. Miller winked at him and held up a large knife.

“The chocolate cake, please, Mrs. Miller.” Just look at the size of that piece. He was going to have to find this gym of Daniel’s soon. But no way was he going to return the cake or ask for a smaller piece.

“Same for me, Mom.” Daniel held out his plate and was given another large piece.

Mrs. Miller cut much smaller pieces for her husband and herself. Soon the only sounds were gentle moans of enjoyment as everyone dug into the sweet perfection. It made Ryan realize where Daniel’s talent for baking had come from.

The others talked about Peter and Nicole’s wedding and the reception, but Ryan was too busy devouring his cake. When he was done, he leaned back in his chair.

“That was excellent, Mrs. Miller. Thank you so much.” He stroked his belly. “Although, between this cake and the pastries Daniel fed me this morning, I’ll be too fat to fit into my clothes in no time.”

“You’re welcome.” Mrs. Miller smiled at him. “And don’t you worry. You could easily do with a few extra pounds.”

“That’s what Daniel said....” He grinned. “Is this a conspiracy?”

“Never.” Daniel kissed his hand and winked. “Just the truth.”

“So, talking about the truth, when is the wedding?” Mr. Miller leaned back in his chair, an almost devilish grin splitting his face.

“Thomas!” Mrs. Miller stared at her husband, eyes wide with surprise.

“W-what?” Daniel almost lost the tea he was trying to swallow.

“I thought that your mom was the one with psychic abilities?” Ryan turned to Daniel. The words were out before he could stop himself.

“Psychic abilities?” Mrs. Miller’s facial expression changed from surprised to slightly amused.

“Yes, Susan, your ability to sense what’s going on with everyone.” Mr. Miller patted her on the shoulder. “You know the one you used to figure out that our eldest son was gay, probably long before he even knew it himself. Isn’t that right, Son?”

“Oh jeez.” Daniel rolled his eyes and actually blushed. Ryan was impressed. He’d never seen Daniel blush before.

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” Mr. Miller grinned.

“Da-ad!” Daniel was very cute when he was embarrassed. When he nodded, a very satisfied grin appeared on Mr. Miller’s face.

“So, now that we’ve clarified that, can we get back to the topic of your wedding, please?” Mr. Miller was determined.

“How did you know?” Daniel could be stubborn too.

“Well, darling, actually I told him this morning that I thought there was another wedding in the air.” Mrs. Miller patted her husband’s knee. “He just mumbled something and ignored me.”

“Humph.” Mr. Miller frowned.

“So?” Daniel wasn’t giving up. “If you didn’t believe Mom, what changed your mind? Or are you just curious?”

“Actually, Son, if you must know, I saw the ring on Ryan’s finger when you kissed his hand just now.” Mr. Miller smiled.

“Oh.” Daniel sat back and took Ryan’s hand in his, twining their fingers when he looked at him. “Should we tell them, sweetheart?”

Ryan nodded, still speechless from listening to the whole exchange.

“We’re going to set a date when Peter and Nicole return from their honeymoon next week.” Daniel turned back to his parents. “It’ll be as soon as we can get everyone together and everything organized.”

“That’s so wonderful!” Mrs. Miller beamed with happiness.

“Congratulations, boys.” Mr. Miller looked just as thrilled. “And welcome to the family, Ryan. Well, officially welcome, that is. You’ve felt like another son to us for a long time. Hasn’t he, Susan?”

“Yes, he certainly has.” Mrs. Miller tilted her head. “Just like Nicole has always felt like the daughter I’ve never had.”

“Thank you Mrs. Miller, Mr. Miller. That means a lot to me.” Ryan had already been close to them, but hearing that they felt the same way was even better.

“Now that you’ll ‘officially’ become our son, Ryan, don’t you think it’s time to stop calling us Mrs. and Mr. Miller?” Mr. Miller grinned and Mrs. Miller nodded.

“What... what would you like me to call you?” Ryan was floored.

“What about Mom and Dad? Or if you’re not comfortable with that, how about Susan and Thomas?” Mrs. Miller smiled.

“I... well... I don’t really have parents anymore. They not only disowned me four years ago, but yesterday, after the church ceremony, they told me that they don’t think of me as their son. And this morning, well, they’d sent this letter and said they were trying to forgive me and accept me if I ‘repented....’”

“They sent a letter? Asking you to ‘repent’ what—a part of who you are?” Mr. Miller’s eyebrows rose. “I didn’t think they’d even want to acknowledge you after the scene they made yesterday.”

“No, well, I didn’t expect it either.” Ryan swallowed. “And the letter wasn’t even the worst bit, but they followed it up with a phone call, and what my father said made it very clear they think of me as being mentally ill.”

“What? I thought that sort of thinking was behind us.” Mrs. Miller shook her head. “I mean, I sort of know that some right wing Christian groups and organizations sponsored by them still have that attitude. I just never thought your parents would be just like them. That’s just awful.”

“You’re right. You know, after everything they’d done to me already, I really didn’t expect anything they would say could still shock me. But this—hearing what they actually think of me....” Ryan swallowed. “If I could have chosen my parents when I grew up, it would have been you. And now, more than ever, it would still be you.”

“Come here, sweetie. That deserves a hug.” Mrs. Miller got up, and he walked straight into her arms.

“Thank you... Mom.” His voice was just a whisper. He’d never felt this good using that word for the woman he’d grown to think of as no more than his birth mother. He hadn’t had a real mom for many years.

“Good decision, Son.” Mr. Miller grinned at him and joined the hug.

“Thank you... Dad.” He cleared his throat.

He walked back to his chair and waited for everyone to be seated. Then he turned to a misty-eyed Daniel.

“Daniel, there’s one aspect of getting married that I’ve been thinking about since you asked me. Your parents being so nice and accepting just now has suddenly given it an additional dimension.” God, he hoped Daniel would be okay with this.

“What’s that, sweetheart?” Daniel’s smile was soft and loving.

“Well, I was wondering... would you mind if I take your name?” He swallowed. “I just really don’t want anything to do with my parents anymore. Especially after that awful letter and the horrid phone call this morning. And Nicole has already changed hers to Miller. I was just hoping....”

“Oh sweetheart.” Daniel took his face between his warm hands and kissed him right on the mouth.

Before he could think about it, he opened up and dove into the passionate kiss. Their tongues stroked and caressed each other until he needed to come up for air. He blushed furiously when he looked at the Millers’ grinning faces and realized what they’d just done.

“Yes, of course you can take my... our family name.” Daniel didn’t seem to be aware of his parents at all and placed more kisses all over his face. “It means you really have nothing at all in common with those awful people who’ve called themselves your parents for far too

long. And it would make me very happy to share the same last name with you.”

“Thank you.” He hugged Daniel tightly and turned around to his new parents. They were smiling indulgently, so hopefully they hadn’t minded that kiss too much. “Is that okay with you as well, Mom and Dad?”

“Not that you need our permission, now that Daniel has agreed.” Mr. Miller smiled. “But we’d be more than happy to have your status as our son made official.”

“Yes, I agree.” Mrs. Miller took Mr. Miller’s hand. “Those people don’t deserve to be called parents. They give the rest of us a bad name. What they did four years ago was bad enough, driving you away like that. But what they did yesterday and this morning just takes the cake. It serves them right if you break all ties with them. Make them your ex-parents, as it were.”

“You said it, Susan.” Mr. Miller lifted Mrs. Miller’s hand and kissed it. “More than that, though, it just makes me proud to officially have you and Nicole as our children.”

Ryan sat back in his chair and marveled at what had just happened. Daniel’s parents had accepted him so easily, like he really was their long lost son who had finally returned. Nicole and Peter had welcomed him the same way. And of course there was Daniel who had totally overwhelmed him by proposing.

It made him feel almost uncomfortable. He hadn’t really done anything to deserve their love and trust, had he? He’d left them without even saying good-bye. He sighed, eliciting a worried glance from Daniel. He really wanted to do something to try and make up for all his shortcomings. He needed to find a way of showing them he deserved their love. Because, really, that was the least he could do.

Chapter 6

DANIEL thought about the day's events while he was driving them home. True, it had started badly with an awful letter, followed by the intrusive phone call. Ryan had been afraid of not being accepted by anyone else. But, with the exception of Acton, everyone they'd met today had welcomed Ryan with open arms. It had done his fiancé a world of good to see that he wasn't disliked universally. He'd needed the boost to his self-confidence and support after years of being attacked for who he was, having to fend for himself. Today had tired him out. His closed eyes were proof of that.

He yawned, deciding he must be ready for an early night himself. It *had* been a long and emotional day. In fact he was tired enough to start imagining things. He frowned and checked his rearview mirror again. He wasn't sure but hadn't that dark sedan been behind them ever since they'd left his parents' house? He shook his head at his overactive imagination. Definitely time to get some sleep.

He turned his attention to the quiet man next to him.

"You asleep?" Daniel hadn't heard a peep out of Ryan in quite a while.

"Hmmm?" Ryan sounded as sleepy as he looked when Daniel risked a quick glance across, seeing blond curls tumbling every which way and eyes that were only half open.

"I guess that's a yes, then." Daniel turned his attention back to the road.

On top of their long day, Ryan was probably still recovering from lack of sleep during his trip back to Grand Rapids earlier in the week. All the hardship he'd had to endure because he'd had no money had

exhausted him. Staying up late yesterday evening because they'd enjoyed Nicole and Peter's wedding party hadn't helped. And they hadn't exactly gone straight to bed after that, either. He grinned, remembering the hot kisses, how Ryan's velvety skin had rippled under his fingertips and how his lover's lips and mouth had made him come harder than he ever had before.

"Uhm?" Ryan lifted his head, yawning. "Are we home yet?"

"Almost." Daniel chuckled.

Pulling into his driveway off the quiet road, he thumbed the electric garage opener and parked the car. He turned off the engine, unbuckled himself, and went around to help a struggling Ryan. Grabbing the bag of dinner leftovers his mother had given them from the back seat, he slipped an arm around Ryan's middle. They only made a quick stop in the kitchen to put the bag with leftovers into the fridge. Then it was straight upstairs and into the master bathroom.

"Mmm, sorry, love." Ryan snuggled against his chest when they stopped in front of the sink. "M just so tired."

"It's okay, baby. It's been a long couple of days." Daniel hugged him and stroked his back with one hand while he got Ryan's toothbrush ready with the other. "Here, do you want help with that?"

"What?" Ryan blinked a few times, eyes bleary. "Oh, teeth."

"Yeah. Teeth." Daniel laughed and supported his arm to help him brush.

When they were done, Ryan yawned again, closed his eyes and leaned right back into his arms, all warm and cuddly. Maybe he thought that Daniel was his pillow? Grinning at the cute little sleepy sounds Ryan was making, he started shuffling the half-asleep man toward their bed. Turning down the covers with one hand while holding onto his wobbling lover, took a while. He finally managed and sat Ryan down to undress him.

When he carefully lowered Ryan onto the mattress the man was mostly gone.

"Night, love." Ryan grabbed his pillow and burrowed his face in it, sighing deeply as he drifted off.

“Good night, baby.” Daniel kissed his temple and stroked his head, enjoying the feel of the soft hair sliding through his fingers. “Sweet dreams.”

Having finished his own short routine in the bathroom he closed the curtains and joined Ryan in bed. As soon as he was under the covers Ryan mumbled in his sleep and moved closer. Putting one arm around Daniel’s middle, Ryan buried his face between Daniel’s neck and shoulder and sighed. With an armful of warm, sleeping man, Daniel quickly followed him into the land of dreams.

IT WAS almost ten o’clock on Monday morning by the time Daniel sat back in the chair in his study downstairs. He surveyed the desk, which was now covered in several sheets of notes, printed out maps and tourist tips. The last couple of hours after he’d left Ryan asleep in their bedroom had been very busy.

The creation of Ryan’s painting studio in the upstairs bedroom with the garden view and the northern light had been secured with Richfoot Construction. They were doing such a good job with the new restaurant that he was confident they would have this finished by Friday. His mother had agreed to supervise them. She was also going to get a selection of art supplies to fill the studio with. She’d suggested asking a painter friend of hers to make sure they didn’t forget anything essential.

The call to his lawyer, Cordell Finley, had mostly consisted of catching up with his college roommate. At first Cordell had been stunned by the news of Daniel’s engagement. Then he’d sounded almost envious as he complained about the lack of a committed relationship in his own life. Daniel’s reply suggesting he stop expecting to find the love of his life in a gay bar or leather club, had been met with a disgruntled mumbling sound. They’d quickly switched to the business at hand. Ryan’s name change was going to be set in motion. They discussed what steps needed to be taken to have Ryan added to the deed for the house and all of Daniel’s bank accounts. The will also needed to be changed and Cordell promised to have a look into all the necessary papers. Daniel had rung off with an invitation to come meet Ryan over the weekend, and Cordell had agreed enthusiastically.

Finally Daniel had turned to planning their trip to Sudbury, checking maps for the best route and picking potential hotels. Even though he had GPS in his car, he still liked to know his options.

Now he needed to prepare food for the rest of the day, and then he'd be ready to wake his lover. Twelve hours of sleep should be enough.

He was on his way to the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Huh? He wasn't expecting a delivery. When he opened the door a smiling young man in a brown UPS uniform stood there, holding a clipboard. His shiny name tag read "Zack."

"Hi. Delivery for a Ryan Johnston?" Zack pointed to a sizeable parcel in brown wrapping paper at his feet.

"Hi, Zack. We're not expecting anything." Daniel frowned, remembering yesterday's surprise letter. "Can you tell me who it's from, please?"

"Sure." Zack checked his clipboard. "It's from an Eric and Edward Venneri at an address in South East Grand Rapids."

"Eric and Edward..." Daniel laughed, wondering what those two were up to. "Well, that's all right. I'll sign for it."

Zack handed over the clipboard and a pen. Daniel signed and handed it back.

"Thank you, sir. Will you need help with the parcel?" Zack tilted his head.

"No, I've got it, thanks." He bent to pick it up, staring at the colorful label.

"Okay. Have a nice day, sir." Zack made his way back to his van.

Looking back down Daniel admired the artfully decorated label. Butterflies and flowers, even a few little dogs. It read *Uncle Ryan Johnston* in shaky letters clearly drawn by an unpracticed hand. He was bursting with curiosity but it was clearly addressed to Ryan. He closed the front door behind him and carried it to the study.

He decided the food preparation could wait. Holding Ryan in his arms again was more important. He grinned as he thought of an excuse if he was challenged. Exercise was, after all, in both their best interests.

He quietly slipped into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. There was just enough daylight coming through the edges of the curtains so he could see. Opening them wide allowed the bright sunlight of mid-morning to illuminate the room.

Ryan lay on his right side with his back to the bedroom door. Only his head with sleep-mussed locks and his left arm which was curled around his pillow were visible. When a ray of sunlight touched his cheek he grumbled and moved his hand up to cover his face, rubbing slightly. A soft moan followed when the irritation didn't stop, and he turned his head into the pillow, trying to hide.

Daniel quickly took off his T-shirt, sweatpants, and warm socks, throwing the clothes into the direction of the closet door. He could put everything away later. His naked, sleep-warm lover came first.

He slid under the covers and moved toward Ryan. Sliding one arm under Ryan's head and around his shoulders, he put the other around his middle to pull him closer. He slid a leg between Ryan's so their groins touched. Ryan was half hard and he wasn't far behind. He sighed at how well they fit. It felt so good, so right, to be this close.

"Mmm, missed you, love." Ryan's voice was deeper than normal, still rough from sleeping. "'S been lonely in this big bed without you."

"Sorry. I thought you were still asleep." He'd just wanted to make sure Ryan got all the sleep he needed.

"I was." Ryan yawned and slowly opened one eye, blinking up at him, a small smile curling his full lips. "I guess I got used to having you near me all night. It just wasn't the same without you."

"I like sleeping with you in my arms as well." In fact, he suspected that he'd already begun to depend on Ryan being in his life. "I really am sorry. But I didn't want to wake you earlier. You were so tired last night. I thought you could use the extra sleep while I got a few things done."

"S okay. I did need the sleep." Ryan stretched lazily and made their bodies rub against each other in the most delicious way. "Oooh, I feel much better already."

"Good." Daniel started stroking the warm back, enjoying the soft skin and the bumpy spine under his fingers. "You're ready for some exercise, then?"

“Exercise? Now?” Ryan’s other eye flew open, and he looked shocked. “I’m still half asleep. I haven’t been to a gym in ages and was never good at running in the mornings. I don’t think it would be safe for me to exercise right now.”

“Don’t worry, baby.” Daniel chuckled and kissed his forehead, keeping up the slow caresses of his lover’s back. “The exercise I have in mind doesn’t require leaving the bed.”

“It doesn’t?” Ryan tilted his head, clearly confused.

“Uh-uh.” Daniel shook his head no and winked.

“Oh...” Ryan blushed and ducked his head as understanding dawned. “Oh, you mean *that* kind of exercise.”

“Yep. My favorite.” Daniel grinned, feeling wicked. “You up for it?”

“What, you can’t feel how much I’m up for it?” Ryan was mumbling, but the increased pressure of his now fully hard cock against Daniel’s equally stiff organ communicated most clearly how *up* his lover was.

“I can feel it all right.” The conversation was over, and he dove in for a kiss.

His lips touched Ryan’s and he leisurely traced the soft skin with his tongue. He licked and nibbled his way along Ryan’s mouth until the other man opened fully and let him in. With a soft moan he started exploring every moist recess, every sensitive surface. He played with Ryan’s tongue, sliding his against it until the other man started moaning and moved his entire body closer to him.

His hand went from Ryan’s shoulder to the back of his neck to hold him in place. He caressed Ryan’s nape with trembling fingers as he drank in his lover’s sweet flavor. With deep breaths he drew the scent of his strong male musk deep into his lungs. He continued the slow kisses, one after the other, making his blood boil. His cock was so hard it ached by the time he pulled back for some air.

Ryan’s eyes were luminous pools of emerald green emotion. He wanted to drown in them, forget everything and just keep staring into the depths of Ryan’s soul. His lover’s face was flushed a light pink and his full lips were swollen from the kissing. Hot, quick breaths puffed against his skin as Ryan visibly tried to regain his composure.

That just wouldn't do, so he started placing feather-light kisses all over Ryan's face, moving along his jaw and down his neck.

"So good." Ryan turned his head for better access, tightening his grip around Daniel's waist.

He licked and kissed his way further down. When he reached the pulsing hollow at the base of his throat and sucked, Ryan whimpered and bucked his hips.

"Yes, love. Yes." Ryan's eyes closed as he rocked his hips against Daniel's, increasing the friction between them.

Currents of desire traveled from his swollen cock and throbbing balls up into his brain. He groaned in response and moved his right hand down Ryan's spine to cup his ass. Massaging and kneading the tight cheeks made Ryan whimper.

Watching the delight on Ryan's flushed face and listening to the soft moans and whimpers almost made him forget his own increasing need. Ryan was beautiful as he gave in to his feelings. His eyes remained squeezed tightly shut, his mouth slightly open.

He slipped a finger down Ryan's crack. His lover moaned and slid a leg up onto his hip, opening further, totally trusting him. Fuck, he was going to lose it just from watching Ryan abandon himself to the pleasure. He slid his finger further down between the warm cheeks until he reached the wrinkled skin of the hot little opening. He increased the pressure just slightly without pushing in and Ryan's eyes flew wide open.

"Daniel! Love!" Ryan's movements against his groin turned frantic.

He returned his lips to Ryan's mouth, sealing them together. He swallowed the little screams Ryan made as he carefully penetrated him with his finger for the first time. Just to the first knuckle since he had no lube handy. He wasn't going to hurt his lover. Mimicking what he wanted to do with his tongue, he slowly fucked Ryan's mouth with it while moving his finger in and out of his lover's spasming hole in the same rhythm.

Moments later, Ryan stilled for a moment before he started spraying his hot spunk up between their bodies. He pulled back and roared as his lover's scent drove him across the edge. Jerking pulse

after pulse of hot release against Ryan's abdomen made the other man shudder in aftershocks, setting him off again and again.

Finally his balls had no more to give, and he collapsed. Too weak to do anything else, he rolled onto his back, pulling Ryan with him. Chests heaving, their ragged breaths were the only sound in the room for a while.

"God, baby, what you do to me." There, a complete sentence.

"It's mutual," Ryan chuckled and lifted his head, immediately putting his chin down onto Daniel's chest for support as if the effort had exhausted him.

"It sure is." Daniel managed to bring up an arm to stroke the back of Ryan's head.

"I think I could get used to this type of exercise." Ryan smiled, his eyes twinkling with happiness as he snuggled closer, spreading the stickiness.

"Yeah?" Daniel laughed.

"Yep, definitely." Ryan winked at him and put his head back down onto his chest. "You've converted me to making this our primary type of physical activity."

He could live with that. He nodded to himself as he drifted into sleep. He could so live with that.

DANIEL woke up a little later and smiled at the itching sensation where he was stuck to Ryan. Without opening his eyes, he remembered what had led to yet another little "mess" they'd made together. Ryan was just so hot. He wanted to make love to him all the time. It looked like he'd finally found a partner for his favorite type of exercise.

He wasn't sure what had woken him. But when the loud rumbling from Ryan's stomach interrupted his thoughts, he knew. A soft chuckle escaped him, and when he looked down at Ryan who was using his chest as a pillow, he saw another cute blush color his lover's cheeks pink.

Ryan slowly opened his eyes and blinked into the bright sunlight. He lifted his head, and Daniel looked straight into his favorite set of green eyes.

“Hey.” Daniel’s voice was soft.

“Hey back.” Ryan stretched to place a gentle kiss on Daniel’s lips. “Sorry my insatiable stomach woke you.”

“Don’t worry, I was already awake.” Daniel winked. “Thinking about ways to feed your insatiable stomach....”

“Um....” Ryan looked embarrassed. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Me? Never!” Daniel tried hard to look innocent.

“You-you....” Ryan opened his mouth, then shook his head and closed it again.

“Yes... me.” Daniel hugged his lover tightly and whispered into his ear. “Please don’t be upset, sweetheart. I know why you’re hungry, and I love feeding you. I just think joking about it is better than being serious.”

“Oh. Okay.” Ryan smiled.

“Good.” Daniel placed a much-too-short kiss on the kissable lips and pulled back. “I suggest we take a quick shower and get dressed. I’d like to take you on a date.”

“A date?” Ryan looked stunned.

“Yes, a date.” Daniel grinned and cupped his lover’s face. “I just realized this morning that we’re doing things backwards. I’ve already asked you to marry me, so now we should go on our first date. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah.” Ryan laughed and then shook his head. “You’re right, that is a bit backwards. But I’d love to go on a date with you, backwards or not.”

“Great.” Daniel sat up, un-sticking them and pulling the warm covers away. “I’ll just get things ready for our date while you take your shower.”

“You mean we’re not going to shower together?” Ryan sounded adorably whiney, close to actually pouting.

“No, baby, I don’t think we should.” Daniel got out of bed, grabbing his robe from the chair next to the dresser. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I don’t want to. I just think you’re too hungry to be able to do more ‘exercise.’ And I just know that’s all we’ll get up to if we get into that shower together.”

“I guess you’re right.” Ryan sighed. “So, we’re going on our date right now?”

“Yes.” Daniel grinned as he tied his robe closed. “It’s a brunch date, and we’ll be outside, so dress warmly.”

“Outside?” Ryan’s eyebrows rose to the top of his forehead.

“Yes, outside. It’ll be great, you’ll see. It’s still warm enough, I checked. The sun’s shining and the fresh air will do us good.” And with that Daniel left the room, quietly closing the door behind him. He was going to make this the best ‘first date’ ever, starting with the food preparation.

Chapter 7

BY THE time Daniel got back upstairs and into his shower, Ryan had just about managed to decide what to wear. Compared to the two pairs of jeans, couple of shorts and some T-shirts he'd had in Sudbury, all these new clothes Daniel had managed to talk him into buying during Saturday's shopping spree before Nicole's wedding, were quite confusing. He sighed as he pulled the dark green woolen jumper over the soft white cotton turtleneck. Done.

"I'll see you downstairs," he yelled into the steamed-up bathroom. He forced himself not to look although he really wanted to. He was *not* going to tempt himself by watching a naked Daniel. He was too hungry now.

He wandered into the kitchen and was touched when he discovered what looked like a mini-snack buffet on the work surface next to the fridge. Daniel was taking such good care of him. There were some bananas and raisins, cereal bars, a little bowl with rice pudding that was warm to the touch, a fruit smoothie and a steaming cappuccino.

He took the rice pudding and added some raisins to it, grabbed the cappuccino and took a large sip before he'd even made it to the small breakfast table. He went back for the fruit smoothie—mhm, smelled like mango—and sat down to devour his "snack." Jeez, there'd been times he'd have considered this enough food for a full meal.

He was just debating getting a banana to top it all off when Daniel came down the stairs. He wore black jeans and a light gray shirt with the top button open under a cornflower blue sweatshirt. His long hair

was still a little damp from his shower and had been tied back into a cute little ponytail. The man looked good enough to eat.

“Hey, you found my little snack buffet.” Daniel grinned. “Looks like it met with your approval.”

“It sure did.” Ryan finished the smoothie and started clearing the table. “Thank you, it was wonderful. Just right to help me survive whatever you’ve got planned for our date. Which, by the way, I hope will include some food so you can eat too.”

“Don’t worry, I had some breakfast this morning and an apple while you showered.” Daniel put away the remaining food. “Ready for our date?”

“Yeah.” He nodded and stepped closer to Daniel. “So, since we’re doing things backwards anyway, can we start the date with a kiss?”

Daniel laughed out loud and grabbed his shoulders to pull him even closer. His arms went around Daniel’s neck, and he snuggled into all those warm muscles.

“I love you, baby.” Daniel was still chuckling as his large hand slid around the back of Ryan’s neck to support his head. “Love your sense of humor as well. And you can have as many kisses as you want, whenever you want them. Date or no date.”

“Really?” Oh, he could do with more of Daniel’s kisses.

“Really.” Daniel breathed this straight into his mouth. He was so close.

Daniel’s hot tongue took a long, leisurely swipe across his trembling lips before delving deep into his mouth. He closed his eyes, moaning as their tongues danced around each other. Daniel tasted like the minty toothpaste they both used, yet with something darker, male, and purely Daniel underneath. One hand caressed his nape, playing with his hair. Tingles of desire raced straight down his spine and settled in his balls. His nipples drew up tight, and he was soon gasping for air.

He tangled his hands in Daniel’s hair, pulling it free from the ponytail so he had a better grip. Daniel tugged him even closer, grinding their groins together in little circles that drove him mad. God, kisses with Daniel were an all-over body experience. But he wanted his date, so he pulled back. Daniel opened his eyes seconds later. Those sapphire blues were dazed, pupils dilated with desire.

“Date?” Single words were about all he could manage right now.

“D-date. Right.” Daniel visibly pulled himself together, put his hair back into a ponytail, and smiled. “Baby, you can sure kiss well.”

“Yeah?” Ryan grinned. “I had a good teacher.”

“Uh-uh.” Daniel stroked the side of his face as he stepped back. “You have a lot of talent—enthusiasm and passion too.”

Ryan smiled at the compliments, still slightly out of breath.

“Date.” He twined the fingers of one hand with Daniel’s. “Where are we going?”

“To the lake. For a picnic. You can get to know the neighborhood while we have brunch.” Daniel smiled, breathing still a little uneven, eyes a touch uncertain.

“The lake?” He didn’t even know where Daniel’s house was. Daniel kissing him like that didn’t exactly help him think clearly either. “Which one?”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I never told you where we are, did I? Let me show you a map.” Daniel walked them into the study next to the living room and pulled a map from a shelf. Steadier now, Daniel unfolded the map and started pointing.

“Look, we’re in Michigan Oaks. The house is here, on Westboro Drive and this is West Lake.” Daniel looked up.

“Your house is right next to the lake?” They were in one of the best neighborhoods.

“Well, not the house itself.” Daniel shrugged, returning the map to its space. “But the garden borders on a bit of forest and a path leads down to the shore. There’s a small beach hut with a porch, so we can go inside if it gets too cold.”

“Wow.” Not just a beach, but a place to stay as well.

“Oops, I almost forgot.” Daniel walked into a corner of the room. “You’ve got a parcel.”

“A parcel? For me?” Who even knew he was here?

“Yes. It was delivered this morning while you were still asleep.” Daniel pointed at a box wrapped in brown paper, about two feet square and a foot high.

Daniel brought it over to the little couch next to the fire place. Ryan looked at the label his eyes widened.

"It's from Eric and Edward!" What could they possibly send him?

"Yes, and the curiosity is killing me. I wanted to open it when it first arrived. But it *was* addressed to Uncle Ryan, so I had to wait." Daniel grinned and handed him a pair of scissors from his desk. "Here, open it already."

"Just look at that label." He grinned when Daniel huffed with impatience. "We'll have to save that."

"Sure. Anything. Just open the darned thing." Daniel was almost vibrating.

"Okay, okay." Ryan carefully cut the string, took off the wrapping paper and stared at the carton box inside. His knees buckled, and he slumped onto the couch, right next to the box. He took a deep breath. "It's—it's from Raffael's Art Supplies."

"Is that good?" Daniel had a twinkle in his eyes when Ryan looked up.

"Good?" His hands began to shake. If he was right that box held one of the greatest treasures he could imagine. Those two little boys had thought of the perfect gift for him.

"Sweetheart?" Daniel sat down next to him and put his warm hands on his shoulders, giving him strength. "Are you okay?"

"I... it's just...." He rubbed at his burning eyes. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything, sweetheart. Just open the box and we'll call the twins this afternoon when they're back from kindergarten and thank them." Daniel sounded so reasonable, like a rock in the storm for Ryan to hold on to.

"Okay." He took a deep breath and lifted the lid.

Inside a bonanza of art supplies greeted him. He pulled out two large spiral-bound multi-purpose sketching pads; three smaller top-glued sketchbooks for pencil work in different sizes; a tin with forty oil-based polychromos pencils; another one containing sixty color pencils; a charcoal sketching collection containing both pencils and charcoal sticks; several sharpeners; and two erasers in a mesh bag. He

carefully studied each item, putting each onto the little coffee table next to the couch.

At the bottom he found a handwritten letter with *as dictated by the twins* written on top. It said:

Dear Uncle Ryan,

Thank you for the drawing you made for us. Daddy has framed it. It looks very nice over the fireplace in the big room. Mommy and Daddy have promised that you can come visit soon to see for yourself.

We think you like making drawings. You looked very happy yesterday when you did ours. Mommy said you didn't have any of the good pencils with you right now. So we went to the art store yesterday afternoon on the way home and got some for you. The nice lady there helped us pick them. We hope she was right.

Please make many more drawings.

Please come visit us soon and bring Uncle Daniel too.

We love you, Uncle Ryan.

Eric and Edward

"Oh my God." Ryan was so touched that a few tears managed to escape. "These kids are just too amazing. And so are their parents."

"Yes." Daniel wiped his eyes and hugged him. "Yes, they are very special people."

"Do you know what this means?" He could hardly contain his excitement and blurted out the answer before Daniel could even open his mouth. "I can finally draw as much as I want! And it'll look perfect, because this is the good stuff!"

"Yes, you can. But I'm sure it would look amazing no matter what supplies you used." Daniel grinned and then tilted his head, trying to look serious. "Does this mean I should by stock in manufacturers of art supplies?"

"Oh, you...." He felt like punching Daniel in the arm for making fun of him.

"I'm sorry, I should be more serious." Daniel winked and looked at the stack of supplies on the coffee table. "I think I better find you a bag so you can carry all this stuff with you. I have a feeling you might not want to part with it very often."

He nodded and blushed. How did Daniel know him so well? Although in this case, he'd been pretty obvious. Daniel got up and rummaged in one of the cupboards. Finally he pulled out a dark leather messenger bag.

"This looks about right." Daniel handed it to Ryan. "Here, sweetheart, try it."

"That's a beautiful bag." It was very soft leather, just like the leather jacket Daniel had bought for him. "Thank you."

Daniel just nodded and watched him fit everything inside.

"Perfect." He closed it and held it up. "I look like a real artist now."

"That's because you *are* a real artist." Daniel laughed. "I can't wait to see all the stuff you'll draw. It'll be like having a picture story of our life together."

He smiled at Daniel's enthusiasm and support. It was incredibly good to be loved and accepted like this.

"Should I start with a drawing of the lake?" He just knew it would be amazing outside, and he couldn't wait to try out the oil-based pencils. He'd never worked with them because they were very expensive, but he'd seen pieces made using them and they all had an interesting oil-like look to them without being quite like an oil painting.

"Sounds like a good idea to me." Daniel held out his hand.

Ryan took his bag and followed Daniel back into the foyer. He put on his boots and his new jacket while Daniel did the same and then took his keys from the key holder next to the front door. Daniel's attention was suddenly on the little window next to the door as he cast a quick look outside. He squinted and frowned as he looked again.

"What's wrong?" Ryan was almost more curious about Daniel's strange reaction than about going to the beach.

"I'm not sure." Daniel turned back to him. "There's this strange dark sedan parked across the street. It's been there since this morning,

but I just have a feeling that it's the same one I thought followed us last night."

"A car followed us last night?" Ryan's stomach lurched.

"I thought I was imagining things because I was so tired. But now I'm not so sure." Daniel frowned. "It certainly would be a weird coincidence."

"I don't think it's a coincidence." Ryan stumbled as he sat down on the lowest step of the staircase, dropping his bag next to him onto the floor. "I think... oh, God. I think my parents are having us followed."

"What?" Daniel put the keys back onto the little table and sat down next to him. "What makes you think that?"

"It's just something my father said at the beginning of the phone call." Ryan sighed. "I forgot to mention it because his other accusations got me so upset, I reacted to them first, and I sort of lost track of the whole thing."

"What did he say?" Daniel put his arm around Ryan's shoulders.

"He said that they knew we'd received the letter." Ryan swallowed. "Now that I think about it, that probably means they were also watching the house yesterday. They must have seen you come out the door to pick up the newspaper with the letter hidden inside."

"Oh shit." Daniel scowled. "That makes me suspect there's another letter outside somewhere—it would explain why the mailbox is open. I'm sure I closed it when I got the mail earlier."

"That might actually be a good thing." Ryan got up and walked toward the door.

"Come again?" Daniel followed him outside.

"Because it means that we'll have something more to show the police." Ryan focused very hard on walking toward the mailbox, trying to hold onto his resolve to get help despite the fact he'd learned not to trust the police.

Yep, there it was—another harmless looking white envelope.

"Hold on." Daniel pulled his hand back from grabbing it. "There may be fingerprints on this."

“Shit, you’re right.” Ryan took the handkerchief Daniel gave him and carefully extracted the envelope. No address, no stamps, no return address.

“Can you see the license plates on that car?” Daniel looked across the street without making it too obvious that he was looking. “I think there’s a guy behind the wheel, so I don’t really want to get closer to check.”

“No, I can’t see anything.” Ryan closed the mailbox. “And you’re right, if there is someone in the car we don’t want to alert him to the fact that we know he’s there.”

“Yeah, we’ll leave that to the police.” Daniel followed him inside and closed the door. “Let’s go to the study, I’ve got a letter opener there. Not that I really want to read more of their accusations but I think we’ll need to know when we call the police.”

Ryan nodded, fighting the fear trying to overwhelm him. This sheet of paper was blood red. The Bible quote at the top was from Acts, verse 3:19: “Therefore repent and return so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” The rest of the text was pretty much the same as the first letter’s, urging Ryan to recognize his mental problems and get help. The mention of this being the second warning and of dire consequences if he didn’t listen was new.

“Huh, I guess this means they’ll come up with something worse after the third warning?” Ryan shuddered. “We always got three warnings before serious punishment when we were kids.”

“What could be worse than this?” Daniel picked up the phone book. “Hold on, I don’t really want to think about that.”

Neither did Ryan. He sat down in one of the leather chairs while Daniel called the police. He’d wanted to do it himself, he really had. But he was too shaken up. This “second warning” brought back memories of the last set of warnings he’d gotten from his parents.

It was in sixth grade when he started having real problems with math. His father had warned him to bring his grades back up to a B or else. When he hadn’t been able to do that by the third warning, the belting he’d received was so bad he hadn’t been able to sit without feeling excruciating pain for a week. Worse than that, his parents hadn’t spoken to him for a month. Literally given him the silent

treatment and had Nicole do the same, at least while they were at home. He'd hated being ignored like that.

Nicole had saved him in the end, like she had so many times. She'd gotten the new kid in the class, Peter Miller, who was really good at math, to tutor Ryan in secret. Not only had Ryan's grades gone back up but he'd gained a very good friend.

"Ryan?" Daniel's voice interrupted his memories.

"Yeah?" Ryan looked up to see Daniel walk toward him.

"Are you okay?" Daniel hunkered down, putting his hands on Ryan's knees. "You look kind of pale."

"Sorry." Ryan swallowed. "I was just thinking about third warnings and what follows them if you don't listen."

"Shit, Ryan. They've really got you scared, haven't they?" Daniel took Ryan's cold hands between his and tried to rub them warm.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm not a kid anymore and I shouldn't be this intimidated. It's just that I know what they're capable of and I'm really scared it'll be worse than ever before." Ryan took a deep breath, trying to relax. "Never mind, I'll get over it. So, what did the police say?"

"They want us to come to the station and make an official statement. Are you okay to do that?" Daniel had stopped rubbing Ryan's now warmer hands.

"Sure." Ryan wanted to get it over with. "Can we go right now?"

"Yeah, let's go." Daniel pulled him up and they were soon on their way.

"**RYAN JOHNSTON?**" The police officer closed the door to the interview room Ryan and Daniel had been sent to as he came in. He was pasty looking and almost bald with big beady eyes. He glanced at Ryan, then Daniel, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, that's me." Ryan stood up to shake the man's hand.

"I'm Officer Gahr. I've been asked to take your statement about some threats you've been receiving?" Gahr shook his hand and turned to Daniel. "And who are you?"

“I’m Daniel Miller, Ryan’s partner.” Daniel held out his hand but Gahr stepped back, bushy eyebrows pulling up.

“His partner?” Gahr snorted. “Why would you need to be here? I thought these were personal threats we’re talking about?”

Ryan didn’t have a good feeling about this and sat down heavily.

“Yes, we’re talking about personal threats.” Daniel pulled back his hand and sat down. “Which is why I’m here to support my fiancé.”

“Your what?” Gahr turned red as a beet and sat down on the chair on the other side of the wobbly little table. “You do know that—that your kind can’t legally get married in this state. Don’t you?”

“Does that mean you won’t listen to what Ryan has to say?” Daniel frowned at him, looking ready to pounce.

“No, I’ll have to take the statement.” Gahr grimaced and deposited his notebook and pen on the table before sitting back and folding his arms across his chest. “It’s not like department policy leaves me a choice.”

Great. It looked like they had a homophobe assigned to their case. And it didn’t get better after this. Gahr did take a few notes as Ryan talked, but he was clearly reluctant.

“You know what I think?” Gahr leaned back after Ryan had finished and handed over today’s letter which they’d wrapped in a transparent plastic sandwich bag. “I think you should listen to your parents. They’re obviously ready to forgive you and get you the help you need. Looks to me like they really care about you.”

Ryan just stared at him, mouth open in shock. Huh?

Chapter 8

DANIEL was still shaking with anger when he unlocked the door to their home. The gall that officer had shown, refusing to let them talk to someone else after he'd made his position clear. According to Gahr, Ryan's parents had been well within their rights to be worried about Ryan's well-being. He told them that they'd wasted enough valuable police time already. This was a family matter as far as he was concerned. Daniel was going to ask Cordell how they could get someone else assigned to their case. This was too ridiculous for words.

At least the dark sedan wasn't parked across the street anymore. So, he was going to focus on bringing Ryan back out of the quiet funk his fiancé had sunk into.

"Sweetheart?" Daniel took Ryan into his arms as soon as they were inside.

"I'm so sorry, Daniel." Ryan hid his face against Daniel's neck.

"What are you sorry for?" Daniel pulled back.

"Everything." Ryan sighed and looked up. "All this crap I've gotten you involved in. I just wish we could forget it all. Going to the police was definitely a mistake."

"Don't say that." Daniel hated to see Ryan blaming himself. He just wished he'd be able to do something to really help protect Ryan from all this negativity. "It wasn't a mistake to go for help. We just got unlucky with this guy who didn't want to listen, but we'll get that sorted out. Cordell is going to find out how to do that, and then we'll get the support we need. And it certainly wasn't your fault!"

“I don’t know. It sure wouldn’t be happening if I’d stayed in Canada. Am I really worth all this trouble?” Ryan blinked slowly.

“How can you even ask that, sweetheart?” Daniel was worried now. “I love you. I want to share my life with you. You’re worth anything, you hear that?”

Ryan just nodded. Somehow Daniel didn’t think his lover was really convinced yet. He’d just have to show him and hope that, over time, Ryan would realize that he was worth anything and everything.

“Look, I think we need a distraction for now. How about we go on our date, like we had planned?” Daniel wanted that more than ever before. They needed to reconnect.

“Yeah.” Ryan smiled slowly and a little bit of light returned to his now dull green eyes. “Yeah, I think I would like that.”

“Let me go get our brunch.” Daniel went into the utility room and returned with a big wicker basket that was covered by a red and white checkered table cloth. “Okay, good to go.”

Ryan picked up his artist bag from the bottom of the stairs and followed him outside. They left through the kitchen door, Daniel carefully locking it behind them. He scanned the yard for good measure, but all seemed in order.

They walked down the path into the small bit of forest that sat between the house and the lake shore. Daniel took a deep breath of the fresh crisp air, smelling falling leaves and the promise of the cold to come. He led the way to his wooden “beach house.” It was little more than a shack, about fifteen-by-fifteen feet with a simple flat roof and a spacious front porch. Evergreen covered the sides and part of the front, and the two Adirondack chairs next to a small table looked inviting. The entrance door sat between two small windows, frames painted in bright red that set them off against the darker oak wood.

“Come on, I’ll show you the inside.” Daniel grinned and walked toward the porch, putting the basket with their food onto the small table before unlocking the door.

Ryan followed him into the main room. It was furnished with a large sofa that converted into a bed; a low coffee table and two easy chairs; and windows to the right and left offered views of the forest.

There was even a small bathroom with a shower at the back to their left and some storage space to the right.

“What a great place. You could even sleep here in summer.” Ryan’s smile finally looked real again.

“Yep, and I have.” Daniel grinned and pulled him back outside, sitting him down onto one of the chairs and starting to unpack the basket he’d brought. “As have the twins when they came for a sleepover a few months ago.”

“That must have been so much fun.” Ryan looked wistful. He stroked the leather bag as he took it off and leaned it against the wall for later.

“It was great fun... a bit chaotic at times, but great fun.” Daniel had taken off his jacket and spread the table cloth. He quickly added plates, napkins and silverware. “I’m sure they’ll be back for more, and we can all have fun together.”

“I would love that.” Ryan helped set everything down after taking off his own jacket. “God, there’s a lot of containers with food here. How many people are you expecting for this brunch?”

Daniel just grinned and continued setting out the delicacies. There was a tub with his father’s potato salad and some of the avocado dip his mother had made for their dinner last night. There were little sandwiches he’d made this morning while Ryan was in the shower. Raw vegetables of all shapes and sizes, little containers with more dips, stuffed baby peppers, quiche, crusty bread, cheese, diced chicken breast, and cocktail sausages made their appearance. All this was followed by fruit salad and some of his pastries.

“I don’t even know where to start.” Ryan sat down and just stared for a bit.

“Just try whatever looks good.” Daniel started dipping various vegetables into the avocado dip, crunching away as they talked. “We can take the rest with us for snacks on our trip to Sudbury.”

“When do you think we can leave?” Ryan frowned as he started stabbing vegetables onto his fork and dunking them into the various dips before eating them.

“Whenever we want, really. With Ben back from holiday, it’s his turn to do most of the work anyhow. And it’s not even like he has to do a lot other than supervise.”

“So what does that actually mean?” Ryan blushed. “I’m sorry, that’s so totally your business, I’m just being curious.”

“Hey, it’s okay, Ryan.” Daniel stopped eating and stroked the other man’s hand. “I’m glad you’re asking questions. I want you to know what’s going on. This is going to be as much your life as mine, if you want that.”

“I just....” Ryan squeezed his fingers and smiled. “I do want to know what’s happening in your life. What you’re working on, what you’re worried about, what you’re planning and thinking. You know... everything.”

“Good.” Daniel let go of Ryan’s hand and leaned back in his chair. “Well, let’s see. We’ve got three restaurants right now. Vittorio Lombardi is running the Emerald Palazzo, which is based on Italian cuisine. Françoise Aubertin is running the Chartreuse Bistro, our French restaurant in Heartside. Wu Quingshan is in charge of the Jade Pagoda, our Asian restaurant in Eastown. Ben and I just spend the occasional few hours in one restaurant or the other to give them some time off. They’re all really competent and reliable people, so, other than occasionally helping out, we tend to leave them to it and focus more on the marketing and PR. Oh, yes, and planning the next restaurant is always fun.”

“You’re going to open another one?” Ryan’s eyebrows rose. “Even with the housing market slump and all the financial problems?”

“Maybe we’ve just been lucky, but we haven’t seen too much of a decline so far.” Daniel shrugged. “I think it’s a combination of great quality food and good locations. Our buildings contribute a lot to the atmosphere so that we offer more of an event, not just an evening out. Anyway, our two new ideas are pretty exciting. One’s almost ready for launch. It’s going to be a seafood restaurant all the way over in Westside, not too far from the Highlands Golf Course. We’re only a few months away from finalizing the details and finding the right manager.”

“What are you going to call it?” Ryan tilted his head.

“It was going to be called the Green Wave, but I think it’ll need a different name now that you’re back in my life.” Daniel winked at his curious lover.

“Huh? What have I got to do with it?” Ryan looked nonplussed.

“Have you noticed what the common element in all the names is?” Daniel’s grin grew wider. “Emerald, chartreuse, jade—”

“Green.” Ryan continued, eyes wide. “Green, all those names are variations on the color green....”

“Like your eyes, sweetheart.” He swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. “I wanted you to be a part of all those enterprises even when you weren’t with me. And your deep green eyes are one of the things I find most attractive about you.”

“Love.” Ryan’s eyes misted over. “That’s beautiful. Thank you so much.”

“You are very welcome.” Daniel looked at Ryan, a grin stealing back. “So, now that we’re together I thought we should change the tradition and pick a name that reflects both of us. So I was thinking about colors that are a mixture between green and blue, representing your eyes and mine.”

“I love that idea.” Ryan smiled.

“Good.” Daniel leaned forward. “So which do you like best? There’s turquoise, teal, cyan, aquamarine, mint and maybe a few more.”

“I kind of like aquamarine. It’s linked to water anyway and it sounds classy, like emerald.” Ryan grinned.

“The Aquamarine Wave it is.” Daniel nodded. “I think you’re right. It does sound classy. I like it.”

“God, Daniel, you’re even more successful than I thought.” Ryan bit his lower lip. “I mean, opening another restaurant with plans for one more. I’ve got nothing comparable to offer at all.”

“God, sweetheart.” How was he going to convince Ryan that money didn’t matter? That he was going to share all his wealth anyway? “I know it may be hard for you to believe, but like I told you when I proposed, it really doesn’t matter to me whether or not you make a financial contribution.”

“But it matters to me.” Ryan blushed and looked away.

Well, there wasn’t anything he could do about that, was there? Daniel sighed. God, he wished relationships weren’t this difficult.

“Sorry.” Ryan looked back up and shook himself. “Let’s get back to planning our trip. You’re sure that they can do without you, especially with the new restaurant and everything?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. And even if anything urgent comes up, I’ll have my cell with me. So, it’s up to us when we leave.” Daniel wasn’t happy about leaving this whole financial issue unresolved. He was going to have to get back to it later. He’d do everything in his power to make sure Ryan was taken care of, even if his lover hadn’t come around to agreeing with him yet.

“I just want to get it over with as quickly as possible.” Ryan swallowed and took a sip of the dark grape juice Daniel had poured for them. “That way it’ll be over and I can close the door on that part of my life.”

“Okay, I guess that means we’ll leave tomorrow.” Daniel started making inroads into the sandwiches as Ryan nodded and followed his example.

They ate in companionable silence until Ryan sat back and took a little break. They focused on digesting their food for a while. He listened to the water lapping against the shore. The birds provided an additional soundtrack and Ryan closed his eyes for a bit.

Daniel quietly cleared the little table, returning everything to the basket. Finally he covered it with the tablecloth and set it aside for later.

“Sorry, I must have fallen asleep.” Ryan suddenly sat up.

“No problem.” Daniel smiled. “I like watching you when you sleep.”

“You really mean that?” Ryan frowned.

“Uh-huh.” Daniel nodded. “I think I’d love watching you do absolutely anything.”

“Oh. Well. Same here, I guess.” Ryan grinned as he turned and opened the bag, pulling out one of the large sketchbooks and some pencils. “Do you mind if I draw you?”

“*Me?*” Daniel’s eyebrows rose. “You’ve got all this beautiful nature around you, and you want to draw *me?*”

“You are the most beautiful thing around here, my Daniel.” Ryan did have the most adorable blush.

“Baby....” Daniel struggled to hold back and had to put pressure on his growing erection to try and keep it in check. “The things you say. I just want to come over there and kiss you breathless.”

“God, just look at you.” Ryan quickly pulled out a light gray pencil and began sketching Daniel’s face. “Just stay like that for a moment, don’t move a muscle.”

Daniel’s eyes flew open in surprise, but he stayed still. Ryan sketched furiously. Finally Daniel had to move. He was just too uncomfortable.

“Sorry, baby, that’s just not an easy pose to hold.” Daniel shifted in his chair again, trying to relieve the pressure at his groin.

“S okay.” Ryan kept going, adding color and a bit of the chair, from what Daniel could see.

“You are so gorgeous when you draw.” Daniel sighed. “You’re totally focused on what you’re doing. You don’t notice anything that’s going on around you, do you?”

“No, well, it’s just very intense when I want to get it right.” Ryan looked almost embarrassed.

“Don’t get me wrong. I really like it.” Daniel wiggled in his chair, still somewhat uncomfortable. “It’s just arousing as hell.”

“Oh....” Ryan’s eyes grew wide.

“Yes... oh.” Daniel winked. “So, when are we going to do something about that?”

“Ehm....” Ryan cast a longing glance at the trees and out over the lake.

“It’s all right.” Daniel chuckled and leaned back, lightly stroking the bulge between his legs. “I know you want to draw some more and I can wait.”

“Are you sure? It really is so beautiful and I haven’t in so long....” Ryan looked ready to drop it all anyway.

"I'm sure." He reached over and caressed Ryan's hand. "Go ahead, sweetheart, I understand. Anticipation will make it even better."

Daniel watched in awe as Ryan produced sheet after sheet of colorful drawings: trees and birds, the little hut, and some more portraits of him that Daniel barely recognized. He didn't really look like that—did he? Ryan switched to charcoal after a while and drew the shadowy world under the trees, including a little hedgehog. Then he used the color pencils again and drew the lake.

Finally Ryan looked up and frowned at the sunset. Daniel grinned. He really had been out of it.

"What time is it?" Ryan stared at the little stack of drawings on the table.

"Time to get you some more paper." Daniel grinned.

"No, I meant...." Ryan shrugged when Daniel laughed. "Oh, you know what I meant. It looks like it's going to be dark soon."

"It'll be another two hours or so." Daniel smiled. "Did you capture what you wanted?"

"I did." Ryan nodded and stretched, putting the depleted sketchbooks back into the bag. "It was great to just let go like that. I hadn't realized how much I needed this. I guess I buried it all inside and now it's all coming out at once."

"That's more than okay." Daniel helped him roll up the drawings. "I loved watching you create some great stuff. We can take some of it with us when we see the boys, right? Show them you made good use of their gift?"

"That's a fantastic idea." Ryan nodded and put the last pencil cases into the bag before closing it. "And now we've got to do something to reward your patience."

"Oh thank God." Daniel heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I was beginning to believe I'd have to learn how to deal with permanently blue balls!"

"Never." Ryan grinned. "I have plans for those balls."

They did end up calling the twins first, though. The little boys were happy to hear from Ryan and were very impressed when Daniel told them exactly how many drawings Ryan had already produced.

They wanted to see them all and Ryan promised they'd come visit after their Canada trip.

When they finally made it to the bedroom Daniel was more than ready to get naked with Ryan. The man had stared at him with such lust in his eyes during the entire phone call that it had almost made him crazy with desire. And he hadn't stopped touching him, either. A brush of soft lips along the back of his neck, a nibble of the earlobe that wasn't pressed against the receiver, an almost constant stroking of his thigh with his free hand. It was frustrating but very arousing.

Clothes flew every which way in their race to get naked, making them both laugh. Daniel made it onto the bed first and stretched his arms wide in a request for Ryan to join him. His lover jumped onto the bed and slid into his embrace with a little squeal of happiness. They exchanged breathless kisses that made their cocks so hard, they bumped and rubbed against each other in a most arousing way.

Ryan was like a man possessed. He pushed Daniel onto his back and started kissing, licking and nibbling every bit of skin he could reach. Daniel's nipples were circled with the pink little tongue, sucked until Daniel groaned. Then Ryan licked his way down Daniel's abdomen, paying special attention to the bellybutton. That made Daniel giggle. Then he kissed and licked the soft skin around Daniel's groin until he whimpered in a most undignified way.

"Please, baby. Please." His voice was at least an octave deeper than normal and he was rocking his hips upward, desperately looking for friction.

Ryan just went for it and swallowed his cock all the way in one go. His eager lover almost gagged, but when Daniel groaned his delight, he pushed even farther down. When Ryan swallowed around his glans, providing the most delicious tight, moist pressure he had ever felt, it was all over.

With a hoarse shout Daniel bucked once and started shooting his semen down Ryan's throat. The heat and pressure was unbelievable. Ryan kept swallowing and started humping Daniel's leg in desperation.

Two jerks later it was all over for him, and he shot his spunk onto Daniel's leg. He kept rubbing as aftershocks made him shudder. Finally he let go of Daniel's softening member. Ryan carefully licked him

clean and rested his head on his stomach. He listened to his lover's rasping breaths while he tried to catch his own.

"Come here, baby." His hand moved to stroke Ryan's head.

His exhausted lover slowly moved up, and he pulled him into a crushing embrace. Daniel looked at him with wide eyes before moving to kiss him. Their tongues danced and tangled, both of them relaxing into the happy kiss. Daniel tasted his own come in Ryan's mouth and that was so hot it made his cock twitch.

"Thank you. That was amazing." Daniel pulled back and smiled. "Is this what we're going to face every time you get into drawing or painting for a few hours?"

"Don't know." Ryan shrugged. "I've never painted with my lover watching."

"I wouldn't mind, you know?" Daniel pulled the covers over them, and Ryan snuggled against his side. "I wouldn't mind at all."

Chapter 9

“WOULD you like to drive for a bit?” Daniel’s voice interrupted Ryan’s dark memories.

“What?” He turned toward his lover. “Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“Thinking is good.” Daniel grinned and turned into a road next to a park. “I was wondering if you’d like to drive for a bit after the break.”

“Drive? You want me to drive your beautiful car?” That made him nervous.

“Sure. You’ve got a driver’s license, right?” Daniel parked next to a picnic spot.

“Yes. I got it just before I was kicked out. But Daniel, I haven’t done any driving in a long time. Are you sure?” He followed Daniel outside.

“You’ll do fine.” Daniel lifted the cooler and thermos containing their provisions from the trunk. “It’ll be fun, you’ll see.”

“Okay.” He looked back at the car, imagining what it would feel like to actually drive it. “I think you’re right. It would be kind of fun.”

After their snack Ryan got in the driver’s seat and carefully adjusted the mirrors. He drove slowly as he headed back toward I-75 but an hour later, he was zipping along.

After a wonderful lunch in Mackinaw City they took a walk along the shore to stretch their legs. They bought some of the famous Mackinaw fudge to nibble on in the car. Ryan had brought his artist bag and they sat on a bench for a while, and he drew the shore, some of the ships, and a few people sat on a bench next to theirs.

“Do you know what this situation reminds me of? The two of us exploring new places?” Ryan looked up from his current drawing feeling dreamy.

“Not really, sweetheart.” Daniel smiled at him.

“It’s just... this feels a lot like one of those trips we took that last summer before I had to leave. The ones where it was just you and me because Peter had baseball practice for the school team?” He was so happy that he didn’t need to hide his feelings any more.

“Of course I remember.” Daniel grinned. “I wasn’t sure that you’d like to spend time with just me. It had always been the three of us and Peter was your best friend, not I. So I finally came up with a visit to the Frederik Meijer Gardens because I thought they’d be a good mix between opportunities to draw for you and art for us to see together.”

“It was so amazing. Not just because the gardens and sculptures were great and I’d never been to a place like that.” Ryan had stopped drawing, fully focused on Daniel. “The real point was the fact that you wanted to spend time with just me.”

“There was no ‘just’ about you.” Daniel chuckled. “You drove me crazy even then. I agonized over the decision for weeks before I got up the courage to ask you.”

“You want to know a secret?” Ryan grinned and held out his hand.

“Always.” Daniel took the offered hand and twined their fingers together.

“I’ve always thought of that excursion as our first date, even though I knew you didn’t intend it to be one.” He dropped his eyes, blushing furiously.

“Sweetheart.” Daniel lifted Ryan’s chin with his free hand. “I *wanted* it to be a date. I just didn’t really dare hope you’d want that too.”

He wanted to kiss Daniel so badly, but they were in too public a place. So they just sat and held hands for a while, staring out across the water and sharing memories.

Ryan was so tired that he fell asleep almost as soon as he'd buckled himself back into the passenger seat. Next thing he knew was the car pulling into a gas station.

"Where are we?" He yawned, trying to bring order to his mess of curls by running his hands through his unruly hair.

"Thessalon." Daniel smiled. "I could do with some coffee."

"Oh." He stretched, seeing a glint appearing in Daniel's deep blue eyes. "Sorry I fell asleep on you, but I feel much better now."

"Good." Daniel grinned. "You look a little more awake too."

He smiled and went to do his business. By the time he returned, Daniel was paying for the gas, and he moved the car to the diner's parking lot while Daniel used the bathroom.

Daniel walked over, and Ryan admired the long legs encased in the well-worn pair of jeans. He just wanted to run his hands all over his lover's body. They hadn't even kissed since this morning. Daniel's eyes were smoldering as he was staring right back.

"What are you looking at?" He tilted his head, enjoying Daniel's attention.

"My future." Daniel smiled and twined their hands together as they walked toward the restaurant, kissing the top of Ryan's knuckles.

"Oh." He blushed and squeezed his fingers, leaning into Daniel so he could whisper into his ear. "I love you, my Daniel."

"Ryan!" Daniel almost stumbled.

They were assigned a table by a perky little brunette waitress. Daniel slid into the booth and pulled Ryan in next to him, pressing their thighs together.

"You can't say stuff like that to me when we're in public. Please." Daniel adjusted himself under the table, but Ryan knew what he was doing. His own erection was pressing against his zipper, desperate to get out.

"Why not?" He tried to look innocent. "It's true."

"God, Ryan." Daniel groaned. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

"I'm sure it's no more than you do to me." He pointed at his own lap under the cover of the menus the waitress had left with them.

Ryan didn't feel so good during the last half-hour of their drive. Being in Sudbury again brought back all the horrid memories. As soon as the car was safely parked, Daniel quickly grabbed their bags and checked them into their room.

Ryan quietly followed him, staring at their surroundings. He hadn't been in a hotel in a long time and the ones his parents had taken them to on their few vacations had been a lot shabbier than this. Even though his parents had lots of money from his mother's side of the family, they'd never spent any for frivolous purposes such as traveling, nice hotels or even a decent family car.

"Are you hungry?" Daniel dropped their bags in a corner near the bathroom.

"Yeah, I could eat." Ryan focused back on the present.

Daniel bent down and pressed his lips to Ryan's. He gasped and opened to his lover's probing tongue, closing his eyes and leaning into him. Daniel tasted so sweet, but with a musky note that really got to him. Daniel moaned and angled his head for better access. Ryan responded with an embarrassing little whimper and pushed into Daniel's arms, pressing their bodies together more tightly.

"Wow." Daniel pulled back. "I love how you respond with your whole body."

"Mmm." He was ready for more and pulled Daniel toward the bed.

"Let's order some food and take a shower first. You said that you're hungry. I know I am." Daniel grabbed the menu and they ordered steaks, baked potatoes with all the trimmings and salads as a main course with frozen yogurt with blueberry sauce for dessert.

"Shower?" Ryan just needed the edge off at this point. He stripped off his clothes, leaving a stunned Daniel behind.

By the time Daniel followed him, the bathroom was nicely steamed up. He stood under the hot spray with his head bent, letting the water massage the back of his neck. This was just what he'd needed after the long drive.

Daniel stepped into the cubicle, quickly closing the door behind him. He went to his knees, sliding between Ryan's legs and the tiled wall.

“Daniel?” Ryan blinked, trying to get the water out of his eyes. “Love, what...?”

That was as far as he made it before Daniel licked a path from the base of his swollen cock right up to his leaking tip.

“Ungh.” His arms shot forward to prop himself up against the wall.

Daniel kissed his way back down Ryan’s painfully stiff organ and took one of his already tingling balls into his mouth. Daniel carefully rolled it around on his tongue, making him shake with desire. When his other ball got the same attention, he couldn’t contain his moans. Daniel stared into his eyes as he brought up a hand and cupped his sac, almost making him scream with delight. Licking his way up and down Ryan’s entire length a few times made Ryan’s hips jerk, desperate for friction.

Daniel opened his mouth and pulled his sensitive glans inside, just holding it for a moment. He slowly licked around the crown, and when he slid his tongue into the slit at the top, Ryan’s thigh muscles went taut, and he started shaking with arousal.

Daniel kept the pressure up and started sucking. Ryan’s legs almost gave out, and with hips snapping, his hot come exploded into Daniel’s mouth.

“Daniel! Love!” Ryan kept coming, and Daniel swallowed pulse after pulse.

Ryan finally sighed and opened his eyes, looking down at his lover with all the heat he’d just felt. Daniel’s eyes widened, and he started coming without a single touch to his cock, splashing heat against Ryan’s leg. That was sexy enough to make Ryan’s cock twitch despite the fact he’d just come so hard that he still hadn’t regained his breath.

When Daniel finally looked up, he held out a hand and pulled him against his body. Their mouths met and their tongues tangled lazily in a gentle kiss.

Just then there was a soft knock on the door. Good. He needed a break.

RYAN woke up slowly, blinking into the bright sunlight that was streaming into the unfamiliar room. He felt disoriented for a few seconds, not quite sure where he was. Shit. He was back in Sudbury and about to confront his awful housemates. His stomach was a knot of nervous energy as he got out of bed to get dressed. He didn't really want to return to the shabby triplex on Kilpatrick Avenue where he'd lived for the last six months. The ugly house was too worn down and his housemates too heartless to consider it a home.

But he had to start standing up for himself at some point. He'd managed the ugly scene with that weird waiter, Acton, fairly well the other day. But that had only been a stranger. Standing up to the people he'd shared a house with—some of whom had terrorized him mercilessly, was a whole different story. If he managed this, maybe he'd be more successful at facing his parents one day.

He wasn't really hungry, so he was quickly done with breakfast. Daniel looked worried the whole time and finally spoke up when they made it to the car.

"This is hard for you, isn't it?" Daniel stowed their bags in the trunk.

"Yeah. I hate having to go back there." He buckled himself into the passenger seat, not feeling like driving. "I just know they'll be nasty, and I hate confrontations. But I really want to get my stuff, you know? It's not valuable or anything but I don't want them to have it or to throw it away."

"Hey, I understand." Daniel programmed the GPS with the address Ryan had given him. "And maybe with me there they'll be less horrible."

"Maybe." He shrugged, not really believing it. And anyway, he needed to do this himself, not let Daniel solve it for him.

The drive only took a few minutes. Seeing the dilapidated beige exterior and the asphalt roof again increased his determination to get in and out as fast as possible. Daniel parked the car in the empty driveway and both got out.

Ryan pulled out his keys and opened the front door. The musty smell of the common living room assaulted him, the drab colors of the brown carpet and beige walls closing in on him, depressing as usual.

“Who’s there?” Nash came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dirty dish towel. His spiky green hair looked greasy and his black clothes scruffy. “Whoa, it’s the elusive artist. What are you doing here? We thought you’d left for good.”

“I’m just here to get my stuff, Nash.” Ryan tried to sound firm.

“Found somewhere better to live, eh?” This came from a sneering Ivan who had followed Nash out of the kitchen. He was taller and bulkier than Nash and had often scared Ryan into giving up what little food he had. His obnoxious girlfriend Page stood next to him dressed in her usual bright pink, chewing gum and looking superior.

Ryan shrugged.

“Hold on.” Nash pulled himself up to his full non-impressive five eight. “You haven’t even paid last month’s rent yet. And you’ve got this month’s to take care of as well before we can even start talking about letting you have your stuff.”

“How much do you think he owes you?” Daniel’s voice was deep and reassuring as he placed a warm hand in the small of Ryan’s back in quiet support. He didn’t really want to have to rely on Daniel’s financial abilities, but he had little choice for now. Shit.

“And who are you?” Ivan took a step toward them, but Daniel didn’t budge.

“That’s none of your business.” Daniel must have sensed that this was not the place or time to talk about their plans to get married. “I’m helping Ryan to move out and I’m prepared to pay the rent he owes.”

“Why would you do a dumb thing like that?” Ivan frowned, and then his eyes widened as he stepped even closer and saw Daniel’s hand at Ryan’s back. “You’re a damned fag? Eeew, that’s just so disgusting. I don’t even want to be in the same room with you.”

Ivan shuddered visibly, took Page’s hand, and pulled her back into the kitchen. Ryan clenched his teeth in anger. He was glad he’d never told these guys he was gay while he lived here.

“Woo hoo. Ryan has found himself a sugar daddy,” Nash cackled with glee. “I always suspected there was something off about our artist here.”

“Just tell me how much money Ryan owes you, Nash.” Daniel tensed behind him but didn’t react otherwise. “All we want to do is collect his things and leave, okay?”

“Sure, sure.” Nash squinted at them and tilted his head, a calculating glitter in his eyes. “I believe two month’s rent comes to four hundred dollars, and the fee for leaving without notice will be another two hundred.”

“But....” Ryan had never heard them mention a fee for leaving.

“That will be acceptable.” Daniel pulled out his wallet and handed Nash three bills of one hundred Canadian dollars each. “We will give you the remainder when we’ve gotten all of Ryan’s belongings.”

Nash’s eyes had widened when he saw the money, and he quickly stuffed the bills into his pocket. He only nodded and waved them into the house.

Ryan led Daniel into the basement where he found his door lock broken and his tiny damp room in disarray. The bed had been slept in, a few unidentifiable stains on the sheet that hadn’t been there before. The little desk was covered in old newspapers and his few clothes had been pulled out of the dresser and thrown onto the floor.

“I guess they thought they’d find something of value in here.” He shrugged and opened the walk-in closet.

“I can’t believe these people.” Daniel stood in the middle of the room looking helpless and incensed. “Were they like this when you lived here?”

“Yeah, most of the time.” Ryan breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his boxes with the stacks of art books and sketches undisturbed. “They just like feeling superior to others, and since I was the weakest in their eyes with no friends to protect me, they all got to pick on me. Especially Ivan, the other guy you met upstairs? His favorite hobby is forcing other people to give him their food so he doesn’t have to buy any himself.”

“That’s unbelievable!” Daniel walked over and helped him pull out boxes.

“Thank God it’s over!” Ryan pulled out the last one and stepped back. “You know, this is actually more stuff than I remember. I’m not sure it’ll even fit into your car.”

“Not a problem.” Daniel grinned and pulled out his cell. “Do you have yellow pages somewhere? We’ll just call a courier and have them delivered.”

“Huh?” Ryan really shouldn’t have been surprised by Daniel’s ability to solve the problem by organizing his way out of it. “I think there’s one upstairs. I’ll go get it.”

“I’ll go with you.” Daniel followed him. “I’m not sure facing those idiots on your own is a good idea. This Nash looked like he was ready to rob us. And who knows what that Ivan is going to get up to if he recovers?”

They found Nash sitting on the sofa, picking his nails with a fork. Thankfully Ivan was nowhere to be seen. Ryan found the yellow pages lying on the coffee table and quickly grabbed them. Nash glowered at them as Daniel made the call. Turned out there was a courier with an emergency service. They promised to arrive within thirty minutes.

Even that seemed too long. They spent the time carrying the boxes upstairs, stacking them onto the driveway. When they were done Nash followed them outside, demanding the remaining money from Daniel. As if they were going to escape!

“Keys as well,” Nash grumbled as he pocketed the remainder of the rent.

“Here you go.” Ryan handed him the keychain, glad to be rid of it.

“Good riddance.” Nash spit on the floor, turned on his heels and closed the flimsy front door with a bang.

“You can say that again.” Daniel looked a little pale.

Ryan couldn’t even speak. He was so relieved. He was finally free to start his new life with Daniel.

Chapter 10

ONCE the boxes were safely loaded into the courier's van, Daniel wiped his forehead. He'd called his mother asking her to take delivery on Friday.

"Thanks for handling that." Ryan was leaning on the car, looking dazed. "I wish I could have done it myself. You're just so much better at organizational stuff than I am."

"No problem." Daniel stepped closer. "I've just got more practice than you. And I was happy to help making sure all your treasures make it home safely."

"Treasures?" Ryan frowned.

"Yeah, I think they are." He took Ryan's hands in his and squeezed gently. "I saw some of those black and white sketches when we were sealing the boxes. They looked amazing. I can't wait until we can unpack them and have a closer look."

"They're just impressions of people and scenes I liked or found fascinating for some reason." Ryan shrugged. "I haven't looked at them in a long time."

"Good." Daniel smiled and kissed Ryan's nose. "Then we can re-discover them together. It'll be great to get some glimpses of the bits of your life that I missed."

"Okay, I can see how that'll be fun." Ryan finally smiled.

They stopped at a quaint little restaurant in Elliot Lake, a few miles away from the highway. The waterfront view was worth the detour. Once they'd ordered lunch Daniel sat back and watched Ryan

sketch. Just like the other day at the lake shore, Ryan looked younger and relaxed, intent and happy all at the same time.

“Do you know what day it is today?” Daniel asked while their after-lunch coffee was being served, and Ryan’s attention was on him for a while.

“Huh?” Ryan looked so adorable when he was confused. “It’s Wednesday, right?”

“Yes. Aaand...?” This was fun.

“And... what?” Ryan frowned, then his eyes widened, and he blushed a deep pink. “Oh! We can call in for our test results, right?”

“Got it.” Daniel grew hard just thinking about tonight. “You want to go first?”

Ryan shook his head, blushing furiously. So Daniel used the number on his card and got his okay as expected.

“Your turn.” He handed the phone and the second card to Ryan.

“Okay.” Ryan dialed with shaking hands, entering his id-number when prompted.

He slumped in relief after less than a minute and cast a shy smile in Daniel’s direction when he handed back the phone.

“We all clear?” Daniel finished his coffee as Ryan nodded.

The drive to the hotel where he’d made reservations when first planning the trip, seemed to take forever. When they got to the Wild Deer Lodge it was nestled between maples and pine trees and looked like a grand log cabin in the fading light.

“Wow.” Ryan stretched, turning around full circle. “This place is amazing.”

“I had no idea it was going to be this magnificent.” Daniel took several deep breaths of the crisp forest air as he got their bags and locked the car.

He took Ryan’s hand, enjoying the feel of his warm skin against his own as they walked up to reception. A friendly hotel employee checked them in and showed them to their suite on the upper floor at one end of the building. Log furniture and a few colorful throws gave the large room a rustic appeal. The fireplace had already been lit and

the deep burgundy sofa in front of it was almost buried in a pile of pillows.

Daniel gave the porter a tip. Then he called room service, asking them to leave the food outside their door. He put the “do not disturb” sign out and locked the door.

“Daniel, you’ve got to come see this.” Ryan had wandered off to inspect the bathroom and had apparently found something of interest.

Daniel followed him. Floor to ceiling windows formed the two outside walls of the corner room and gave a view of the autumnal forest with its mixed gold and green. A large marble indoor hot tub sat in the corner between the glass panes. Ryan stood next to it, his eyes moving between the outside and the tub. He was rocking up and down on the balls of his feet. Whether he was eager to paint the view or to get into the tub, Daniel wasn’t sure.

Stepping closer, he pulled Ryan into his arms and nuzzled his neck. Ryan moaned and turned into his embrace, pressing closer and wrapping his arms around Daniel’s neck.

“Hey, you.” Daniel pressed a chaste kiss onto the pink lips. He wanted more, but he was going to take his time, make it last.

“Oh love,” Ryan sighed, his mouth close enough for Daniel to feel the hot exhale on his skin. “This place is beautiful.”

“Not half as beautiful as you are, baby.” Daniel smiled when Ryan blushed.

“You’re the gorgeous one, Daniel.” Ryan lifted his hand and caressed the side of Daniel’s face. Sparks of desire traveled down his spine and settled in his tightening groin.

“Okay, we’re both handsome,” Daniel chuckled. “But you know what? I think we’d look and feel even more handsome if we were naked and in that tub.”

“God, yes.” Ryan laughed. “That would make us super-handsome.”

They stripped, and Ryan ran the water while Daniel took their clothes to the bedroom. He turned back the bed and put the lube he’d bought under a pillow. When he returned to the bathroom the sight of Ryan stretched out in the tub made his mouth water and his cock stiffen. Ryan smiled up at him when he slid in. Daniel frowned.

“What?” Ryan lifted his brows but couldn’t stop his laughter.

“You’re too far away.” Daniel opened his arms.

Seconds later a laughing Ryan pressed their naked bodies together, chest to groin, making them both moan. Daniel slid down a little farther to make sure they were both covered by the water. Comfortably settled, they made out like teenagers. Kiss after hot kiss soon had him so hot that he thought he might explode. He got them up and out of the tub and when they were both dry, Daniel took Ryan’s hand, and they walked into the bedroom.

The king-size bed with its green sheets looked inviting. He stopped and turned toward Ryan, taking both his hands into his own. This was an important moment. Seeing the love and trust in the other man’s eyes almost made his knees buckle with emotion.

“I love you, Ryan.” Daniel smiled. “I will always love you, no matter what. I can’t wait for you to become my husband. It’ll take a while to get the ‘official’ part sorted, so tonight I want to confirm my promise by merging our bodies. I want you to enter me so you can truly become a part of me. Are you ready for that?”

“I love you, too, so much.” Ryan squeezed Daniel’s fingers, and his eyes shimmered with emotion. “I want to share my life and my body with you. I look forward to becoming your husband officially, with vows and rings and everything. But in my heart you’re already mine, have always been the only one for me. I want you inside me as well so we can become a part of each other. I’m ready.”

They sank onto the bed side by side, arms around each other, softly kissing and caressing. All the earlier urgency was gone. They were focused on enjoying the slow build.

Daniel stroked the back of Ryan’s neck, making his lover moan. Ryan kissed the side of Daniel’s throat, just under the ear, eliciting an almost embarrassing whimper. Daniel moved his hand down and stroked Ryan’s nipples until they were stiff and sensitive to each touch. He bent down to suck them, tugged at them with his teeth until Ryan writhed with pleasure. Ryan reciprocated by twisting and twirling Daniel’s nipples between his fingers, making currents of desire race straight to his balls.

They returned to kissing, hot mouths and lips touching, tongues dueling. Daniel held Ryan’s head between his hands and deepened their

kisses until soft sighs and low moans became his entire world. As slow as the buildup was, the pressure had almost become unbearable when Ryan pulled back a little.

“I want you to go first, please.” Ryan’s voice was whisper-soft, breath hot against Daniel’s cheek. “I’ve dreamed about this forever. Please make my dream come true?”

“God, Baby.” Daniel’s voice hitched. “Of course I will.”

He pulled the lube from under the pillow and Ryan turned onto his back, looking up at him with lust glazed eyes. He opened the lube and squirted a generous dollop onto his fingers. He slid his slick fingers along Ryan’s skin, caressing the tiny hole until the tight muscle was a little loser. He got more lube and slid one finger inside to the first knuckle.

“Deeper.” Ryan was panting and pressed back against the finger inside him.

Daniel gritted his teeth to help him hold back. Moving slowly enough to drive them both crazy with desire, he got more and more lube past the loosening muscle.

“More, Daniel.” Ryan groaned as he threw his head back. “I need more, love.”

Adding yet more lube, Daniel inserted two fingers this time. When he found the small bump inside, Ryan’s eyes flew open.

“Daniel!” Ryan started shaking. “What-what was that?”

“Your prostate.” Daniel grinned and kept stroking.

“Holy....” Ryan thrust his hips against Daniel’s groin. “D-don’t stop.”

“No stopping.” Daniel massaged the gland, soon making Ryan squirm with need.

By the time he had three fingers moving in and out comfortably, Ryan was slick and loose enough that he was willing to risk trying his cock. He was so hard that he was afraid he’d come before he was even all the way inside.

Ryan’s eyes were closed, his face the picture of bliss. Daniel pushed a soft pillow under his hips and knelt between his knees as he

slicked his throbbing cock with more lube and aimed the tip at Ryan's opening.

"Ryan, baby, look at me." Daniel was shaking with the effort of holding back.

"Please, love." Ryan slowly opened his emerald eyes, bucking his hips in an attempt to get Daniel inside. "Please, I need you so much."

"I love you, Ryan." Daniel slowly started pushing into the tight heat.

"Daniel...." Ryan's eyes widened, and he pushed upward to help him slide in.

Daniel moved slowly and steadily, feeling Ryan open up around him as though it was the most natural thing in the world. When he was buried balls-deep, he rested for a moment, letting them both adjust. Love was just pouring from Ryan's eyes, and his own heart overflowed with his feelings for this man.

"Baby...." Daniel had no words as he started rocking in and out of Ryan's tight heat. He supported himself on his elbows and cradled Ryan's head in his hands so he could keep looking into his lover's deep emerald eyes as the passion rose inside him.

"Love...." Ryan brought his hands up around Daniel's back and slowly pulled him into a kiss. Their bodies fused together, Ryan's hard erection was pressed tightly between their bellies, sliding back and forth in copious amounts of his precome.

Daniel moved in and out of Ryan's body with deep thrusts, pouring all his love into the kiss. Ryan met every movement. They never stopped looking at each other, their souls connecting as well as their bodies.

When their orgasms finally came they were intense, simultaneous, and completely overwhelming. His eyes closed and his body shook as he emptied himself into Ryan's welcoming channel. Ryan's heat splashed up between their sweaty bodies, and they both screamed their pleasure into the other's mouth.

He tried to pull out to avoid crushing his lover but Ryan held on.

"Please." Ryan was breathing hard. "Stay."

He nodded and relaxed into Ryan's welcoming embrace.

"I love you, baby." He nuzzled Ryan's neck.

"Love you, too, Daniel." Ryan's voice was soft as he drifted into sleep.

RYAN woke up tightly held in Daniel's arms. They were on their sides, chests touching and legs tangled. Hot breaths caressed the crook of his neck and hair tickled his cheek. He smiled as he remembered the passionate way Daniel had made love to him. He stretched a little, feeling the stickiness between their bodies and down his thighs. There was a delicious soreness inside his ass, proof that Daniel had finally made him completely his.

He opened his eyes to take a look at his sleeping lover. The room was almost dark, twilight quickly giving way to full night. The fire must have gone out, there wasn't really enough light to see much. Instead, he focused on all the places where their bodies touched and soon a new wave of desire made his cock twitch.

He softly pushed his groin into Daniel's, slowly rubbing.

"Mmm." Daniel tightened his arms, burrowing his face deeply into Ryan's neck.

"Good. Love you, my Daniel." Ryan idly slid his hands across Daniel's back, enjoying the feel of muscles rippling against his fingertips.

Their stomachs chose that moment to make their needs known, softly rumbling almost simultaneously. They laughed. At least it wasn't just him this time.

"There should be food outside." Daniel stretched and lifted his head, his face and mane of hair a dark silhouette against the ambient light.

"Right." Ryan tangled his hand in Daniel's tousled hair and pulled him closer for a kiss, lips barely brushing before he let go and started un-sticking himself from his lover.

"Why don't you clean up a little while I get our meal?" Daniel sat up.

“Okay.” Ryan watched Daniel grab a towel from the bathroom and wrap it around his slim hips, showcasing the man’s tight ass in a most attractive way.

Tearing himself away from the delicious view, he got up and walked toward the bathroom. Oh. Every step made him tingle inside, reminding him of how Daniel had made love to him. He smiled. He could get used to this.

Having done his business, washing his hands and using a washcloth to clean his belly, he returned to the bedroom with another one for Daniel. His lover had pulled the pillows off the sofa to make a nest right in front of the fireplace, a couple of fluffy blankets on top. A food-laden tray sat within reaching distance on the coffee table.

Daniel added twigs to the red glow inside the fireplace and then some logs, until the fire was burning brightly. The resulting play of shadows on his well-muscled body was fascinating, and Ryan couldn’t wait to draw him like this.

“That’s better.” Daniel wiped his hands on the towel and looked up, his blue eyes sparkling in the firelight.

“Here.” Ryan handed him the washcloth. “I think you’ll have to lose the towel, though, if you want to get really clean.”

“Yeah?” Daniel grinned but complied, sliding it off slowly so he could dry his sculpted abdomen and his hands after using the washcloth. “I guess it’s only fair... seeing as you’re not wearing anything either.”

“Exactly.” Ryan nodded and watched those muscles play under Daniel’s skin.

“Here, all clean for you.” Daniel chucked the towel and washcloth under the sofa and crawled toward the nest of pillows.

Daniel’s movements were slow, seductive, making him look like a lazy jungle cat as he positioned himself feet to the fire, never losing eye contact. He wriggled until he’d found a comfortable position on his side, angling an arm to support his head with a hand and lifted the other arm in obvious invitation. Ryan lay down next to him, mirroring his position and resting his free hand on Daniel’s hip. It was warm enough not to need a blanket which worked well in the “admiring all that naked skin” department.

"I like this." Ryan grinned. "We're toasty warm, have soft pillows to rest against, and there's a great view."

"And that's not all." Daniel grinned.

"There's more?" Ryan let his eyes widen in mock surprise.

"Oh yes." Daniel chuckled and pointed to the covered tray. "There's food."

"You are too good to me." Ryan smiled and stroked Daniel's hip.

"No, I'm just selfish." A mischievous twinkle appeared in Daniel's eyes.

"You are?" Ryan was willing to play along.

"Mmm hmm. I need to make sure you keep your energy up." Daniel leaned close and nibbled on Ryan's earlobe. "I want you inside me, baby, as soon as possible."

"Daniel!" Ryan's cock stiffened in a hurry, making him jerk his hips and bump into Daniel's erection. They both groaned. "The things you say. You make me crazy with just a few words."

"Good." Daniel pulled back and looked at him, love and desire burning in his eyes. "You do the same to me, you know?"

Ryan's stomach rumbled again, and they took turns feeding each other, working their way through the various sandwiches, canapés, and cut up vegetables.

"That was really good." He licked his fingers clean with Daniel staring at him, following his every move.

"Mhm." Daniel got up and put the tray next to the door.

When he returned he moved close again and snuggled, staring into the flames between hot kisses, whispered endearments, and an occasional caress of each others' growing erections. Finally Daniel sighed and lay back down.

"I want you to make love to me, Ryan." Daniel stroked Ryan's cheek. "Please."

"Daniel." His breath hitched as he looked at the beautiful man in front of him, all stretched out, just waiting for his touch.

He started by caressing Daniel's face. Forehead, cheekbones, the sensuous lips, and the slightly stubby cheeks and chin felt good under his fingertips. Trailing his hand down Daniel's throat and across his

pectorals to reach for an already-stiff nipple, he bent down for a deep, slow kiss. His fingers alternated between nipples while he kissed Daniel as if their lives depended on it, and he soon had his lover moaning and twisting with pleasure.

“Yes. Ryan. God.” Daniel’s hips bucked upward, his stiff erection bobbing.

Moaning with need, Ryan moved his mouth farther down Daniel’s body, kissing his way down across his chest and along his flat belly to his bellybutton. Carefully moving his lover’s stiff cock out of the way, he licked a line along the faint line of dark hair leading down to Daniel’s dark pubes. Pressing his nose into the crinkly hair he sniffed his way around the base of the swollen penis, moving his body at the same time so that he ended up between Daniel’s now bent and splayed legs. Blindly he groped for a pillow and pushed it under the other man’s behind so that he was lifted up at just the right angle.

Kissing and sucking each ball in turn, he worked his way farther down until he was able to nudge the heavy sack up and push his nose into that space where Daniel’s scent was so intense he almost fainted from his increased arousal.

Daniel tried to thrust upward, but Ryan held him down with one hand so he could kiss and lick and suckle the soft skin to his heart’s content. The fingers of his other hand softly squeezed Daniel’s balls, making the other man alternately groan and purr.

“Baby, please.” Daniel’s voice was rough, desperate. “You’re killing me. I need you inside me. Please.”

Ryan lifted his head, dizzy with his own need to get into Daniel’s body. Lube. He needed lube. Daniel’s hand was trying to dig itself under one of the pillows, the tube of lube appearing miraculously. God, his lover was prepared for everything. Maybe he’d been a boy scout when he was a kid?

“Thanks, love.” Ryan grabbed the lube, slicked his fingers and put it within easy reach so he wouldn’t have to look for it later. There. He could do prepared too.

He gently stroked Daniel’s thighs and buttocks before moving his dry hand lower to spread the cheeks wide between his thumb and index finger. Moaning at the sight of the small wrinkled hole he bent down

and gave it a quick kiss. Daniel purred, grabbed his right leg behind the knee and pulled up, tilting his hips for easier access.

Ryan moaned and pressed a slick finger against the tight ring of muscles. Moving in small circles, he slowly made the whole area slippery. Daniel was moving with him, trying to get Ryan's finger inside. Ryan got more lube and pressed inward, exploring and stroking the silky heat inside Daniel's clenching hole. When his finger had been completely swallowed by Daniel's body, he started wriggling it in tiny circles, sliding it back and forth at the same time. Then his second knuckle hit the soft bump on the upper wall of the tight channel. There it was.

"Gahhh! Ryan!" Daniel's stomach went tight, and he curled up, lifting his shoulders clear of the floor. His deep blue eyes burned with intense arousal as he fell back onto the pillows. "No wonder you went crazy. Again, baby. Do that again."

"What?" Ryan kept nudging the little bump, watching Daniel writhe in ecstasy.

"Ungh." Daniel was incoherent with pleasure, clenching and unclenching his fists and turning his head from side to side, gasping for breath.

It made Ryan so hard that he was sure he'd come before making it inside Daniel. He needed to speed things up, or lose it in a most undignified way. He quickly squirted more lube onto his fingers with his free hand and nudged a second finger into the relaxed hole. He scissored them to open Daniel up for him.

"Baby. I-I'm... gonna..." Daniel's head snapped back, tendons standing out along his neck from the strain.

"Oh, no, not yet." Ryan pulled his fingers out of Daniel's stretched hole and scooted up along his lover's well-muscled body. "Want to be inside you when you come."

Daniel nodded and tilted his hips up so that the tip of Ryan's cock touched the slick hole. Placing his hands next to Daniel's face, Ryan supported himself on his arms and looked into dark blue eyes that were almost black with emotion.

"Now, baby." Daniel lifted a hand and cupped Ryan's cheek. "Make me yours."

Ryan moaned and pushed in. There was some resistance at first, and he stopped, afraid of hurting Daniel. But his lover smiled and pushed back, pulling him in as he sank deep into the unbelievably soft tightness. His balls ached with his need to come.

Ryan remained still for a moment, fighting his orgasm with everything he had. Daniel continued to look at him, his thumb stroking Ryan's cheek. When he had a little more control he pulled back, making them both groan.

"Yes, baby. Like that." Daniel's other hand moved to Ryan's ass, stroking and squeezing his buttocks.

It was too much. With a low cry he pushed back in, reveling in the sight of Daniel's eyes widening. He started thrusting in earnest, making both of them pant. Daniel moved his hand from Ryan's face to his own cock, stroking it in the rhythm Ryan was setting.

That was it. The sight of Daniel's hand around his magnificent erection was so erotic that Ryan completely lost it. His thrusts became deeper and faster, his rhythm gone as he pounded into Daniel, completely focused on making them both come. His lover met him thrust for thrust until they both tensed before they cried out their pleasure.

"Daniel! Love!" Ryan emptied his balls into Daniel's clenching channel in spurt after spurt of pure bliss.

Daniel sprayed his seed all over his chest and abdomen, his face a study of ecstasy and bliss. Ryan was shaking so hard that he collapsed onto his lover's chest, nuzzling his head against Daniel's neck.

"Love you, my Ryan." Daniel's voice was low and gravelly in his ear as he slid his arms around Ryan's waist and held on.

"Love. You." Ryan was still trying to catch his breath. He might never recover, but what a way to go.

Chapter 11

DANIEL sat at the table in the Wild Deer Lodge's breakfast room and watched Ryan collect more food from the buffet. He grinned. It had taken them all day yesterday and last night to make it outside their room. He was a little sore but it was a very welcome feeling. It reminded him of Ryan taking him again and again with so much love that he'd never wanted to stop.

"I love this place." Ryan sat down and put a plate heaped with cut fruit between them. "Just look at all that healthy freshness."

"Well, we do need to keep up our strength." Daniel grinned and snagged himself some strawberries. "Considering all the activity we've been up to...."

"Um...." Ryan blushed a deep rose, almost dropping the grapes he was eating. "Too much?"

"Never, baby." Daniel took Ryan's hand and squeezed. "I love how open you are about showing me how much you want me. Makes me feel better about being pretty much insatiable where you are concerned."

"Yeah, it would kind of suck if it wasn't mutual." Ryan winked and picked up some pieces of mango. "And not in the good tingly way...."

"Ryan!" Daniel threw his head back and laughed. Seeing Ryan open up and become more relaxed was an adventure in its own right.

When they'd finished eating, they got their bags, checked out, and started the drive home. It was only a little over three hours later when Ryan pulled the car into the garage and turned off the engine.

Everything looked normal. No extra vehicles were in sight. Good, Richfoot Construction had finished on time. Daniel couldn't wait to see Ryan's reaction to the painting studio. Hell, he couldn't wait to see the studio!

"It's good to be home." Ryan smiled shyly as they took their bags from the trunk and walked into the house, dropping them at the bottom of the stairs for now.

"I'm glad you think of it as home." Daniel walked toward the little table in the foyer, looking for the mail and any messages that his mother might have left him. He looked up from his inspection to make eye contact. Ryan needed to see how serious he was. "It's important to me that you feel like this is really *our* home, not just mine. If there is anything you want to change or add, don't hesitate. All right?"

"Oh... well... I guess." Ryan shrugged. "But it's so perfect, why would I want to change anything?"

"I don't know. Maybe the colors in some of the rooms aren't right, the carpet isn't soft enough, or you would prefer wooden floors." Daniel waved his hand in an all-encompassing circle. "After all, you're the artist in this relationship, right?"

"Okay, okay, I get it." Ryan grinned. "But I'd still talk to you about it first. I wouldn't want you to come home one day and not recognize your house."

"Fair enough. Which reminds me...." Daniel picked up the extra set of keys he'd asked his mom to have made. "Here, these are yours."

"What?" Ryan's eyebrows went up as he took the key ring and stared at it, a happy grin slowly spreading his lips. "You mean...."

"Well, yeah." God, it was so much fun seeing Ryan's joy at being given something new, at being included. "You do live here now, don't you?"

Ryan nodded as he enclosed the bunch of keys in a fist.

"And as soon as my lawyer can make it over here to collect the necessary signatures from both of us, half of this house will officially belong to you. So I guess you're entitled to a set of keys." Daniel grinned, anticipating his lover's reaction.

"Daniel?" Ryan's eyes were huge, and he went pale.

“Yes, sweetheart?” Daniel took a step, ready to catch his lover if needed.

“Daniel... you....” Ryan swallowed and stood straighter. “What did you do?”

“Only what I had to because the law won’t recognize our marriage in this state.” Daniel stepped closer and pulled his trembling lover into his arms. “If we were a man and a woman getting married you’d automatically own half of everything I have and the other way around, right?”

“I... I guess.” Ryan still looked dazed. “I hadn’t thought about that at all.”

“Since the law isn’t in our favor, I’ve asked Cordell, my lawyer, to draw up the necessary papers. So we can become partners in the legal sense. He’s also going to look into the name change you wanted. It’ll all take a while to make it through the system, I’m sure, but at least we’ve started the process.” Daniel stroked Ryan’s back, trying to calm him down a little.

“Oh. Oh, love. Thank you.” Ryan leaned into Daniel, and he tightened his embrace. Color slowly returned to his lover’s cheeks as they stood and held each other.

“All right?” Daniel kissed Ryan on the forehead.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It was just a bit of a shock.” Ryan took a deep breath.

“A nice shock I hope?” Daniel wanted Ryan to enjoy this merging of their lives.

“Sort of.” Ryan smiled hesitantly. “Yeah, I guess it is. It’ll just take some getting used to, you know?”

“No problem.” Daniel picked up the mail from the little table and took Ryan’s hand. “Let’s sit down in the study and go through the mail together, okay? I’d like to get that done before lunch if it’s okay with you?”

“Sure if you want me to go through it with you?” Ryan put his keys in a pocket and followed him into the study and they sat down on the couch near the window.

“Of course I do. We share a life now, and you need to know what’s going on. At least until we decide we want some sort of

separation of tasks, I think we'll both need to do stuff together." Daniel started sorting the mail into little stacks on the coffee table. "Bills, junk mail, letters from friends, magazine subscription—"

The white unmarked envelope without a stamp or an address was in the middle of the stack and made Daniel's heart beat faster with anger.

"Shit." Ryan shuddered next to him and gripped Daniel's hand. "Shit, I hate this. Will they never stop?"

"It doesn't look like it." Daniel shook his head, the letter feeling much heavier in his hand than it should. "What worries me, though, is that this looks like they were watching the house and knew we were gone because there is only one more letter. Right amongst the other mail."

"God, I'm so sorry." Ryan looked pale as a sheet.

"Sorry? What do you mean you're sorry?" Daniel was distracted from trying to figure out what to do about this.

"Well, they're my parents. If I wasn't here...." Ryan looked down.

"Hold it right there." Daniel couldn't let Ryan blame himself for this. "I've said this before, and I will say it again: this is *not* your fault. Do you hear me, Ryan?"

"But...." Ryan looked up, eyes glistening.

"No buts. Please, sweetheart. I'm serious." Daniel really needed Ryan to understand this. "I'll keep repeating this until you get it. You didn't cause this. It isn't your fault. They're the ones who are sick in the head."

"Yeah, they are." Ryan sniffled. "But they're intruding into our lives because I'm here with you instead of back in Canada where they want me."

"Well, that's their problem, not ours, isn't it? You have a right to be here as much as the next person, even if they don't like it." Daniel tilted his head in thought. "In fact I think this could be considered harassment, and I'm sure Cordell can do something about that. He replied to my e-mail saying he was going to look into getting a detective assigned to our case. Hopefully they'll be more helpful than Officer Gahr."

“It sure would be nice to be able to fight back.” Ryan looked hopeful. “I just hate sitting here waiting for the next disaster to happen.”

“Good, that’s settled then.” Daniel held up the white envelope, not really wanting to know what was inside. It was sure to be in the same ballpark as the last one. “You want to read this?”

“No, not really.” Ryan shuddered. “But I think we probably should find out what it says anyway. I mean the detective or whoever Cordell’s going to get to have a look at this will want to know, right?”

“Yes, I think he will.” Daniel wished he could make all of this go away. “Do you want me to read it for you?”

“Oh. Oh, that’s very tempting.” Ryan closed his eyes for a moment and then looked back up at him. “But I think I need to at least face their threats, even if I can’t face them.”

That was brave, even if a little dramatic. But he wasn’t going to interfere with Ryan trying to stand up for himself, even if he’d really rather protect him. So he nodded and handed Ryan the envelope with the opener.

Ryan’s hands shook as he pulled out a dark purple sheet, holding it at its edges to avoid smudging any fingerprints. They both read the pasted-on text. Another Bible quote, sounding even more ominous than the last two, was at the top:

He heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning. His blood will be on himself. But had he taken warning, he would have delivered his life. Ezekiel 33:5.

This was followed by pleas for Ryan to save his immortal soul by repenting his abominable acts before it was too late. Offers for help and therapy were repeated, and a phone number for the clinic they wanted Ryan to voluntarily commit himself into was included. Then the tone changed and the last paragraph had Daniel dreading what was next. He no longer had any doubts that there would be another stage to this, and it wasn’t going to consist of just letters. It read:

This is your third and last warning, Ryan. You know the consequences of not listening to the third warning. This time it will be far worse, because if you don't come to us for the help you so desperately need, your fate will be out of our hands. We will not be the ones to punish you this time. Your transgressions are too serious for that. The Lord's punishment will be upon you, and it will be dire, for you will have lost your chance at forgiveness. Remember that!

"Shit." Ryan's voice was very quiet, and his shaking hands let go of the letter. "This is even worse than I thought."

"Yeah, I don't like the sound of this 'punishment being out of our hands' very much." Daniel was shaking with anger. "That sounds like a far more substantial threat than trying to make you go into therapy."

Ryan just nodded and leaned against him as his arm came around the other man's shoulders.

"In a way I'm glad we opened the envelope, though." Daniel placed a soft kiss on Ryan's temple. "Anyone reading this can see that the threat has escalated. I'm sure Cordell will be able to do something with it."

"Yeah, you're right." Ryan sat back up. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see, because I'm sure not going to go to this stupid clinic. Some of the stuff they do there can be very damaging. I mean pastoral care and psychoanalysis sound bad enough, but electric shock and nausea-inducing drugs? And I don't even want to know what sex therapy and fantasy modification means to them. What century is this, anyway?"

"You looked this up on the Internet?" Shit, he'd hoped Ryan wouldn't burden himself with finding out more about this archaic form of so-called treatment.

"I just couldn't resist. In a way I'm sorry I did it because now I can't stop thinking about all those poor people who have to go through stuff like that." Ryan shook himself. "But on the other hand it's helped me to become more determined to resist, I guess."

"Yeah, I can see that." Daniel nodded. "Knowing what your parents are planning for you and how little that means they care will do that for you."

“All right, that’s enough of that.” Ryan put the letter back in its envelope and handed it to him. “Let’s just put this somewhere safe so we can show it to a police person who actually takes us seriously, once your friend Cordell gets it all sorted.”

“Sure. And then we’ll work on forgetting all this mess for now.” Daniel took the envelope and put it in an empty space on the shelves next to the desk.

“Yes. Yes, please, love.” Ryan eyed the envelope one last time and got up, taking Daniel’s hand. “I just want to get back to normal.”

AFTER lunch they’d cuddled on the couch, trying to reconnect. They’d even fallen asleep for a while. Now it was time to show Ryan his studio. It might help him focus on something outside the continuing harassment from his parents.

“Sweetheart?” Daniel stroked his lover’s back.

“Yes, love?” Ryan looked up, blond locks tousled.

“Are you up for a little surprise? There’s something I want to show you.” Boy, he couldn’t wait.

“Sure.” Ryan smiled and kissed him on the mouth, almost distracting him into staying right where he was.

“We’ll need to move.” Daniel brushed his lips against that hot welcoming mouth one last time and groaned when Ryan’s tongue came out to lick into his mouth.

“We’re moving.” Ryan’s hands stroked Daniel’s arms.

“No, not that kind of moving.” Daniel laughed.

“No?” Ryan grinned but didn’t stop kissing him.

“No.” Daniel groaned. “I mean we need to move our whole bodies. Upstairs.”

“Okay, upstairs is good.” Ryan’s grin took on an impish quality. “The bedroom’s upstairs, right?”

“You are developing a one-track mind, baby.” Daniel grinned and goosed Ryan’s ass. “Not that I mind in the least, but there’s something else I want to show you before we inspect the bedroom.”

“Okay.” Ryan got up and offered a hand to help him, still grinning madly.

Daniel took the offered hand and pulled himself up. He led Ryan up the stairs and stopped before the closed door to the back bedroom.

“Daniel?” Ryan lifted his nose and sniffed. “Smells like paint.”

“Uh-huh.” Daniel nodded and took the doorknob into his free hand, ready to open the door. “As well it should.”

“Huh?” Ryan looked at him, eyebrows up.

“I’ve had a few changes made to this room while we were gone.” Daniel opened the door and softly pushed Ryan inside. “I thought you’d need a studio so you could paint to your heart’s content.”

Ryan took two steps and stopped, staring at the totally changed room with his mouth open. The windows on the garden side in front of them had been enlarged so that now almost the entire surface consisted of glass. An additional window on the outside wall to their left added even more daylight. Cloth blinds had been attached to the ceiling above each window, ready to be pulled down when Ryan wanted a more muted type of light.

The ceiling lamps had been replaced with a number of halogen spots that imitated different types of light. A large easel stood to the left, a smaller travel-sized one was leaning against the left wall. Ryan’s boxes were stacked in the corner to their left. A number of different sized linen canvasses were leaning against the inside wall to the right. Next to them stood a large wooden table with a couple of palettes, a whole range of brushes, and numerous tubes of oil paints. There was even a set of watercolors.

In the corner to their right, where the small en suite bathroom used to be, a wooden sink unit with a dark granite worktop provided access to water and a storage space for cleaning supplies such as rags and towels. Against the wall, between the sink unit on the far end and the door, was a leather recliner, a couple of wooden stools, and a stack of different color cloths. A pristine painter’s smock lay across the recliner.

Daniel was quite satisfied. They’d followed his instructions to the letter and had even cleaned up after themselves. He grinned. Actually, that was more likely his mother’s influence.

“D-Daniel.” Ryan turned his head as he took everything in. “This is... this is just... you... when... amazing.”

“You like it?” Daniel stepped up behind his lover and slid his arms around Ryan’s middle, feeling him lean against his chest immediately.

“Like it?” Ryan turned around and hugged Daniel. “This is so much more than I could have possibly imagined. I can’t believe you did this just for me?”

“I did. I want you to have your own space to work and create when you need it.” Daniel smiled. “Doesn’t mean you have to go here when you want to paint or draw, but I thought you might like to have the ability to retreat to somewhere that’s just yours.”

“Daniel, love. Thank you. Thank you so much. God, how I love you.” Ryan kissed him deeply, tongue sliding into his open mouth and caressing it tenderly for a long time.

“It’s all right then?” Daniel pulled away to try and catch his breath. “I wasn’t sure, so I got Mom to ask a painter friend of hers for advice. If there’s anything you need to change, we’ll get it done.”

“It’s perfect.” Ryan turned around again and walked up to the big floor to ceiling windows. “Look at this, the room is so perfect, it’s even facing north.”

“It is.” Daniel was quite proud of himself. The stuff you can learn on the Internet these days. “I know. I picked it for exactly that reason.”

“You picked it—Daniel, how did you know that northern light is the best light for painting?” Ryan had turned back around and was staring at him.

“I did a little research on the Internet.” Daniel didn’t even try to suppress his smile. “Found something called the *Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*. It contains lots of ideas about the best conditions for painting. Figured the guy must have known what he was talking about and took it from there.”

Ryan was shaking his head, a funny grin on his gorgeous face.

“What?” Daniel was enjoying himself immensely.

“You are something else, you know that?” Ryan hugged him again. “Thank you.”

“You are very welcome.” Daniel kissed him on the nose and stepped back. “Do you want to give it a go straight away?”

“Can I?” Ryan’s eyes lit up, turning a very light green. “You won’t mind?”

“Hey, I wouldn’t have offered if I did. Anyway, I imagine this room is to you what a new and perfectly equipped kitchen would be for me. There’s very little that could stop me from exploring that.” Daniel waved at the room. “Go right ahead. I’ll be in the kitchen experimenting with some new ideas for the Aquamarine Wave opening dinner.”

“Okay.” Ryan grinned and walked over to the canvasses, eyes sizing them up. “I’ll see you later.”

And that was it. Daniel watched his lover for a while as he chose a canvas, carried it over to the easel. Looked around and found the smock. Put it on and walked to the table, hefting one of the palettes, then the other, deciding to go with the second one. Hands slowly caressing the tubes of oil paint he made his choices and started squeezing little dollops of various colors onto the palette.

Daniel decided to leave him to it and softly pulled the door closed behind him. Who knew when he’d get to see Ryan again? He just hoped his lover would be as horny after painting in oil as he’d been after spending that afternoon at the lake doing pencil drawings.

Chapter 12

RYAN frowned and took a step back from the easel, softly moaning at the pain in his back and almost stumbling because his legs had gone stiff. He'd obviously stood in one place for too long. There was no point in going on. He was losing the daylight and still hadn't gotten the big old tree he'd chosen as his first subject quite right. He sighed. He'd have to get back to it tomorrow. He needed a break.

He stretched and moaned some more as he slowly walked over to the table on the other wall. He put down his palette, took off his smock, and turned toward the sink unit to clean his brushes and then his hands with a soft cloth dunked in turpentine. When the bristles of the brushes he'd used were wrapped in tissue so the paper would pull them back into shape when it dried, he washed his hands and applied some of the lotion which had thoughtfully been supplied. It was fragrance free and easily absorbed into his dry skin. Mom's painter friend had truly thought of everything.

When Ryan walked into the kitchen, he found Daniel standing at the center island, cutting and slicing vegetables. Several pots were sitting on the stove, contents simmering away and emitting wonderful scents. He took an audible breath that made Daniel smile.

"Hey, sweetheart." Daniel looked up. "Is the studio working out for you? Maybe more importantly, did your muse like it?"

"Oh, love, the studio is great. And yes, my muse liked it too." Ryan grinned and started nibbling on a carrot. "Except I didn't quite accomplish what I wanted. I just couldn't get the tree to look like it should."

"Maybe trees aren't your thing?" Daniel winked.

“Huh.” Ryan ate a little cherry tomato and shook his head. “Naw. The trees at the lake the other day came out okay.”

“But you were using pencils then, right?” Daniel stopped cutting for a moment, looking thoughtful. “I mean, I don’t really understand much about the different techniques, but it seems to me that using pencils is very different from using brushes and oil paint.”

“You’re right.” Ryan nodded. “Doesn’t really matter. All I really wanted was a bit of practice to get back into things. I guess I got that. What I really want to paint though will be a lot more difficult.”

“Maybe it won’t be so difficult if you really want it.” Daniel smiled and pulled a wok from one of the cupboards. “Seems to be everything is easier when you’re motivated.”

“I guess that’s true.” Ryan watched Daniel put oil into the wok.

“So, what do you really want to paint?” Daniel tilted his head, watching the oil heat before adding cubes of chicken from a big bowl next to the stove.

“I... you.” Ryan felt himself flush. “I want to paint you.”

“Me?” Daniel stirred the chicken. “Again? Didn’t you just draw me at the lake?”

“Yeah, but this is different.” Ryan started pulling plates, glasses and silverware from cupboards and drawers since the table hadn’t been set yet.

“How’s it different?” Daniel added the vegetables to the wok and making the stir-fry sputter and hiss. “It’s not that I have a problem with you painting me, I’m just curious.”

“Well, I got the idea for this painting the other morning in the bathroom. The light was so glorious, and it made your skin just glow in the reflections from those glass blocks. I have *got* to paint you in that light.” Ryan sat down at the little table, not sure he’d explained himself all that well.

“Okay.” Daniel strained noodles from one of the pots on the stove and added them to the wok, stirring everything some more. “If you’ve got to paint me, then you’ve got to paint me. Do you want me to model for you?”

Ryan just nodded. God, did he ever. His breath came in quick little gasps from thinking about a nude Daniel in that light—long legs

extended, the muscles of his flat abdomen, his broad, well-defined chest, and blue eyes shining.

“Sweetheart?” Daniel was staring at him, and then a small smile appeared on his lips. “Are you thinking about painting me in the nude?”

“Yeah.” Ryan was getting hard now.

“God, you’re something else. Just thinking about it has got me horny as hell. We’re going to have to do something about that after dinner.” Daniel laughed and shook his head as he brought the wok and a large set of serving tongs over to the table. He set the wok onto the thick cork trivet in the middle, handing the serving tongs to Ryan. He took the pot holder back to the center island and then opened the fridge. “What would you like to drink?”

“Ice water would be good.” Ryan needed to cool down, or he’d never make it through dinner. He watched Daniel bend down to pull a glass carafe from a lower shelf, showing off that fine ass in those tight jeans of his while he was at it.

“Lots of ice, huh?” Daniel winked as he brought the carafe to the table and sat down. “It’ll help us cool down a little before we go upstairs and re-acquaint ourselves with our bedroom, right?”

It was a good thing the stir-fry was excellent, enabling Ryan to focus on eating for a while. But it didn’t take long for Daniel’s smoldering looks from across the table to have an effect. When he started touching and caressing Ryan’s free hand with his long fingers Ryan swallowed. And then there suddenly was a foot traveling up and down his calf in a most suggestive manner. Daniel must have slipped out of his loafer. The foot moved higher and higher, caressing his thighs and occasionally bumping against his rock-hard erection. Daniel was looking at him with such lust in his eyes that Ryan was squirming in his seat by the time they were finished.

“Dessert?” Daniel’s eyes twinkled with mischief as they cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher.

“Yeah, you.” Ryan had had enough. The man was driving him to distraction.

“Me?” Daniel’s exclamation ended in something awfully close to a squeal as Ryan took his hand and pulled him upstairs, almost running to the bedroom.

“Naked. Now.” Ryan started tearing off his own clothes, helping a chuckling Daniel with his jeans when the man wasn’t quite fast enough.

He pulled Daniel down with him as he let himself fall backward onto the bed. Finally naked skin touched naked skin chest to groin and Ryan sighed, rubbing himself against his lover’s hard muscles.

“Better?” Daniel grinned and bent down to plant a soul-searing kiss on Ryan’s lips.

God, but the man could kiss. Ryan sank into the feelings and let his hands roam over Daniel’s naked back as their tongues danced in an increasingly heated exchange of need. His hips started bucking of their own accord, seeking friction. But it wasn’t enough. He wanted Daniel inside him, stretching him and loving him.

With a moan he rolled them over and reached for the tube of lube on the nightstand. Reaching back with slick fingers he quickly shoved two inside his hole, making it burn with the desire for more.

“Baby! God, Ryan.” Daniel had let go of his lips for a moment and stared at him with wide, lust-dazed eyes.

“Need you, love.” Ryan was panting, pushing more lube and three fingers into his spasming hole. He was so close already. “In me. Please.”

Daniel nodded, sweat beading on his forehead. He canted his hips to line himself up with Ryan’s waiting entrance. Ryan found Daniel’s cock, gave it a quick stroke to distribute the rest of the lube onto it and pushed back.

“Ungh.” Ryan took the entire length of the thick cock into himself in one long movement, sitting up slightly to get it all the way inside, as deep as it would go.

“Ryan!” Daniel’s eyes were wide, his mouth gaped, and he gripped Ryan’s hips to steady him as Ryan started moving up and down.

“God, this feels good.” Ryan angled himself so that Daniel’s swollen glans hit his prostrate on every stroke. In and out, a little faster and harder each time. His arousal rose higher and higher until he thought his head was going to come off. “Fuck! I’m gonna....”

Daniel just nodded, sweat streaming down his temples, and started pounding up into Ryan’s rippling channel on every down stroke.

The effect was devastating. Currents of bliss raced from his prostate straight into his balls, making them throb for release with even more urgency. When Daniel lifted one hand and enclosed Ryan's engorged penis, squeezing slightly, it was finally too much.

"Daniel!" Ryan shuddered. His ass muscles clenched rhythmically as come poured out of him in long pearly streaks, coating Daniel's chest and stomach muscles.

"Ryan! Baby!" Daniel stiffened and lost his rhythm. Hips bucking, he sprayed heat deep inside Ryan, setting him off again in a second, shorter orgasm that made him see stars. His hips jerked once more before he collapsed, head resting in the sweaty crook of Daniel's neck.

Breathing deeply he tried to focus on coming back to himself. After a few minutes, Daniel's softening cock slipped from him, and he moaned with the loss. Daniel's arms came around his shoulder and waist and they turned onto their sides, snuggling into each other with deep sighs of contentment.

"Love you, baby." Daniel lazily kissed his ear before burying his nose in his fiancé's hair and sliding one of his legs between Ryan's.

"I love you, too, my Daniel." Ryan rubbed their cheeks together, hugged his lover more tightly and pulled the edge of the comforter over them so they wouldn't get cold during their nap.

WHEN Ryan awoke on Saturday morning, the light told him it was still early. He grinned, remembering their activities last night after dinner. And that hadn't been the last time they'd made love. Somewhere around midnight he'd awoken to find Daniel sucking his cock and balls with abandon, sliding two fingers into his still loose hole, and making him come so hard he'd almost blacked out. He'd returned the favor, making Daniel scream by the time he'd let his lover come. They'd taken a much needed shower before crawling into bed properly and falling into a deep restful sleep.

Now it was time to get up and paint. He slowly extracted himself from Daniel's arms, hoping the man would stay asleep for a while longer. Ryan did his business and washed his hands in the bathroom, basking in the brilliant light. Then he retrieved his sketchbook, pencils,

and one of the small stools before sitting down next to the bed to sketch his sleep-tousled lover.

He'd filled quite a few pages when one of Daniel's eyes slowly opened.

"Is it okay to move?" Daniel grinned.

"Sure." Ryan got up and kissed Daniel on the mouth, long and deep. "Morning, love. Hope I didn't wake you."

"Hey, it's not exactly that early anymore, is it?" Daniel glanced at the alarm clock, and his eyes widened. "In fact it's even later than I thought. How long have you been up?"

"A while." Ryan grinned and sat down on the side of the bed, watching his lover stretch himself the rest of the way awake. "I just couldn't resist your beautiful body. Had to draw it, you know? It'll be good material to use in the oil painting."

"Yeah?" Daniel sat up. "Can we have coffee and breakfast before I start seriously modeling for you?"

"Of course!" Ryan laughed, putting the sketchbook on the dresser and starting to pull on some clothes. "These will just help me fill in some of the detail later."

After a breakfast of apple cinnamon oatmeal pancakes, coffee, and fruit juice, Ryan set to work in the bathroom. He knew exactly what he wanted. He got the smaller easel from the studio set up and picked a medium sized canvass. Daniel helped him build a comfortable mattress out of sofa cushions, several blankets and comforters, topping it off with a few pillows. Covering everything with a large dark blue silk cloth from the painting studio, he directed Daniel to lie down on his side, legs just so, supporting his head with a hand, resting his elbow on a pillow.

"Comfortable?" Ryan stepped back and looked at his composition. Light was pouring in through the glass bricks and Daniel looked magnificent.

"Yep. Paint away." Daniel smiled.

Ryan got to work. First he sketched Daniel's outline onto the canvas with pencil, paying special attention to his face, the long lines of his arms and legs and the tension in his muscles. When he had that done, he let his lover get up and take a break. He'd finish painting him once he'd completed the light effects around him.

He got his palette and used greens, blues, and purples first to put down the basic layer. Adding gold, yellows, and a touch of orange, he continued layering until he was happy with the overall effect. All too soon the morning light had morphed into that of early afternoon, but he'd gotten a lot accomplished.

Ready to take a break he turned toward the door. He almost jumped with shock when he saw Daniel stand there, staring at the canvas.

"Wow." Daniel smiled. "That looks amazing."

"You think so?" Ryan tilted his head, looking at it from a greater distance.

"Absolutely." Daniel nodded. "The colors look really alive."

"Just wait till I finish you. It'll provide a nice contrast to make the whole effect even more stunning." Ryan shrugged. "I hope."

"Looks like you're ready for a break though." Daniel took his hand and led him into the bedroom. "I thought we could have a light snack and then go for a run around the lake before having lunch. We can't let our exercise schedule become too one-sided."

"No, that would be bad. I haven't gone running in so long it's about time I got back into the habit." Ryan started changing into the painfully skimpy running shorts Daniel had picked for him. "Are you sure these are even decent?"

"Most certainly." Daniel nodded, eyes ablaze with appreciation.

"Well, if you say so." Ryan had a feeling the man just wanted to ogle his ass while they were running. Not that that was a problem. Ryan was planning on ogling right back. Daniel filled out his running shorts most attractively.

When they returned from their run, Ryan was panting and gasping for breath. He hadn't realized how out of shape he had become. A shared shower was just what he needed to recover. Washing Daniel and getting washed in return was strong motivation indeed. Sliding and slippery skin soon led to passionate kisses and frantic rubbing. They both came with small groans of utter satisfaction.

"Better." Daniel kissed him. "I missed our morning loving today."

"I did too." Ryan grinned and started pulling clothes out of drawers. "Painting tends to make me forget everything."

“We can’t have that!” Daniel looked indignant. “I’m going to have to remind you of what’s really important.”

“Yes please, love.” Ryan pulled on the comfortable light gray sweatpants he’d found and a teal T-shirt. “Although I can’t really see how I could forget about you. It’s just so new right now, you know—being able to just immerse myself in painting any time I want. I’m sure I’ll get used to it eventually....”

“Let’s hope so.” Daniel had followed his example and wore navy sweatpants and a cornflower blue T-shirt. He heaved an exaggerated sigh. “I might die of blue balls if you forget me.”

“Daniel! Really.” Ryan grinned and slipped into comfortable soft moccasins. It was amazing to be so wanted.

“What?” Daniel opened the door and started walking downstairs. “You want to drive me crazy, and then you’re not going to help me out?”

“Never.” Ryan was enjoying the light teasing. “I’m just thinking that you might be overstating my effect on you just a little.”

“Oh yeah?” Daniel suddenly turned around and pointed at his own groin where the sweatpants showed a definite tent. “And what’s this, hmm? My imagination?”

“Oh.” Ryan blinked. “I did that? But I haven’t even touched you!”

“I rest my case!” Daniel grinned, took him into his arms and kissed him. Ryan’s response was immediate, and he ground his own hard erection into Daniel’s. Jeez, it was almost as if they hadn’t just come.

Rumbling stomachs made them laugh, and they pulled apart.

“What would you like to eat, sweetheart?” Daniel pulled Ryan into the kitchen and sat him down at the window table. “I’ve thawed some salmon we could either grill for lunch and have with a baked potato and salad or have for dinner in a wine sauce. Then there are sandwiches, or I could throw us some burgers on the BBQ.”

“Ooo, can we have the salmon, please?” Ryan’s mouth was watering. “I haven’t had any in ages.”

“Okay, salmon it is.” Daniel started pulling ingredients and cooking implements from shelves and drawers all over the kitchen.

“Can I help you?” Ryan wasn’t going to just sit there and have Daniel serve him. Again. He needed to start pulling his weight. “And I don’t just mean setting the table. I’ll do that anyway. I’d like to learn to cook a little too.”

“Sure.” Daniel’s eyes lit up with enthusiasm. “I’d love to teach you.”

The next half hour was spent preparing and cooking the food. The potatoes went in the microwave for speed and Ryan was put in charge of the salad. Daniel explained how the salmon was prepared and showed Ryan how the grill worked.

“That was fun.” Ryan carried the plates they had decorated as if this was an expensive restaurant to the table while Daniel got them some grape juice. “I like cooking with you.”

“Good.” Daniel sat down and poured them each a glass. “I liked it too. It’s a fun activity to do together. Who knows, I might turn you into a chef yet.”

Ryan laughed and they dug in.

“I almost forgot to tell you, Cordell is going to come by this afternoon.” Daniel had finished his plate and leaned back, watching Ryan eat.

“Cordell?” Ryan swallowed his last bite and sighed. It had been another great meal. “Oh yeah, I remember. Your lawyer.”

“Well, he was actually my roommate in college, and we’ve remained good friends.” Daniel grinned. “He likes this house, so he tries to come over here as often as possible. Sometimes he just comes around and hangs out at the lake. He called earlier when you were painting and said he’s got some papers for us to sign. I thought you might like to meet him somewhere more relaxed, rather than in an office.”

“Good thinking,” Ryan stated, clearing the table. “Do we need to change?”

“Nah, we’ll be all right.” Daniel finished loading the dishwasher and pulled some great looking chocolate pudding in two small glass bowls from the fridge. “He’ll probably wear scruffy jeans, the oldest sneakers you have ever seen, and a faded sweatshirt. You’d never guess he actually has a job, never mind a well paid one, from just looking at him.”

They'd just finished eating the yummy pudding and cleaning up the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Ryan followed Daniel into the foyer, curious to meet yet another of Daniel's friends.

Daniel opened the door to the biggest, most muscular black man Ryan had ever seen. He was probably half a foot taller than Daniel's six-three and a lot wider in the chest and shoulders. He was indeed dressed as scruffily as Daniel had predicted. His short black curls framed a friendly face and twinkling black eyes, and his white teeth gleamed when he smiled a greeting.

"Cordell, welcome." Daniel smiled back. "Glad you could make it."

"Daniel!" Cordell pulled Daniel into a bear hug and squeezed. Ryan started to fear for his lover's life. "As if I would miss an opportunity to visit your beautiful house. Not to mention meeting your gorgeous boyfriend."

"Way more than boyfriend, Cordell." Daniel stepped back and pulled Ryan closer. "This is Ryan Johnston, my fiancé. Just remember, he's taken."

"Hi, Cordell." Ryan held out his hand, hoping he'd get it back in one piece.

"Hey, Ryan, nice to meet you." Cordell took Ryan's hand and pulled him into a bear hug of his own.

Cordell picked up his briefcase and they sat down in the dining room so there was enough space for all the papers. Daniel brought coffee and sat down as well.

"Shall I give you the bad news first?" Cordell leaned back once he had arranged the papers into a few neat little stacks and put an expensive looking pen next to them.

Daniel nodded, taking Ryan's hand for support. God, this didn't sound good.

"Well, it seems the name change won't go through as quickly as you might have hoped." Cordell shrugged. "There's a requirement for you to have been a resident of the county for one year before you can apply. And since you've been away for four years...."

Ryan's heart sank. He had so hoped for this to be faster.

"How do we establish residency?" Daniel was frowning. "Quickly?"

“Don’t worry, that one’s easy.” Cordell pointed at the first stack of papers. “Once we get Ryan added to your bank accounts, which will be effective immediately, they’ll send the joint statements to this address. That will establish residency, as would any bills or other official documents mailed to Ryan at this address.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” Daniel turned to him. “I had hoped this would be faster.”

“It’s okay, love.” Ryan shrugged, trying hard to fight his disappointment. The name change had been the only really important issue to him. He couldn’t care less about all the financial stuff. In fact it scared him a little. “I know it’ll happen eventually.”

“It definitely will.” Daniel turned back to Cordell. “You’ll make sure the forms and whatever else is needed are ready to go the day Ryan’s fulfilled the requirement?”

“Sure, I’ll do that. I’ll even go and file them with the court in person, how’s that?” Cordell looked apologetic, even though it wasn’t his fault.

The rest of the paperwork was read and signed without a hitch. Ryan was stunned by the speed of it all. Half an hour later, he was ready to be joint account holder on all of Daniel’s bank and investment accounts with ATM, credit, and other cards promised in the mail within a week. His name had been added to the property deed for the house and Cordell was going to file that on Monday. Daniel had even changed his will.

Daniel’s level of commitment and trust had him in total awe. And he had absolutely nothing to offer. Well, not yet. There was his art, now that he had a studio. He’d thought about it for a while now. Talking to a gallery was way beyond his comfort level. Instead he was going to talk to Daniel about exhibiting his paintings in the restaurant as a first step. All he needed now was to find the courage to actually talk to his fiancé about it.

Chapter 13

DANIEL lay on his comfortable bed of cushions in the bathroom for the second morning in a row. It was difficult to stay still, but he was determined to hold his pose as long as possible to let Ryan finish the painting. The weather had played along nicely, presenting them with another gloriously sunny October morning.

He closed his eyes and let his mind wander. They'd had a fun evening barbequing burgers at the lake shore. Over a glass of wine Cordell had told them about his latest unsuccessful attempts at finding Mr. Right, making Ryan blush when he retold some of the more outrageous details. It had made Ryan and Daniel so horny that, as soon as Cordell had finally left, they'd sucked each other off before they even made it to the bedroom. A quick shower later Ryan had made slow and sensuous love to him until they both came a second time and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

Daniel blinked and returned to watching his lover paint. Ryan had the cutest look of concentration on his face. Occasionally he tilted his head and squinted at the canvass critically. Or his pink tongue would dart out between his lips, wetting them to a glistening sheen. Or there would be a shake of the head and a change of brush. It was intimate and arousing. Daniel had given up fighting his erection. Ryan was painting in the nude and just as hard. Daniel sighed and hoped they'd be able to do something about it soon.

"I think that's it." Ryan stepped back and looked at Daniel, then at the painting and nodded slowly. "Yeah, I think I've got it the way I want it."

"Good." Daniel stretched and sat up. "Can I see?"

“Sure.” Ryan looked up and held out his hand for Daniel to take, pulling him into a half-embrace in front of the easel.

“Wow.” Daniel just stared.

The light effects were startling, little sparks looking as if they were about to bounce off the surface. The contrast between the light streaming through the glass blocks and Daniel’s softer skin tones and black hair was amazing. His body was shown in remarkable clarity. Daniel’s eyes had been painted a deep blue and seemed to glow with love. The smile Ryan had painted Daniel with made him look like a movie star.

“*That’s* how you see me?” Daniel was stunned.

“One of the many ways.” Ryan nodded and smiled shyly.

“This is spectacular. Does the painting have a name?” Daniel wasn’t keen on having it exhibited, but it would be nice to have something to refer to.

“Yeah, it sort of does.” Ryan ducked his head. “It came to me that first morning when I saw you stand there in that light. It sums up how I feel about you.”

“It does?” Daniel slid his hand under Ryan’s chin and slowly pushed upward so he could see his lover’s gorgeous eyes.

“Yeah.” Ryan blinked, his eyes suspiciously moist, but he was smiling. “I call it ‘Light of my Life.’”

“Oh. Oh baby.” Daniel felt a surge of tenderness overtake his heart and soul, his knees almost buckling with emotion. “Come here.”

He wrapped his arms around Ryan, tugging him closer until their bodies were touching. He leaned his forehead against Ryan’s and looked into the green pools of light that showed his lover’s deep feelings without any limits or hesitation.

“I love you so much, Ryan.” Daniel smiled, speaking through the lump in his throat with some effort. “I can’t paint you to show how deeply I love you. There are no words to describe how much I feel for you. So I’ll gladly spend the rest of my life trying to show you how profound my love for you is.”

“Daniel, oh my love.” Ryan choked down a sob, the smile that followed brilliant and unrestrained. “How I adore you. I totally and

completely worship you. I'll devote the rest of my life to making you happy, ensuring you see that I return all your feelings."

They moved at the same time and their mouths met in the softest and most gentle kiss they had yet shared. Their breathing deep and synchronized they kissed long and so deeply that Daniel didn't know where he stopped and Ryan began. Bodies pressed as tightly together as possible, Ryan's heart beating against his chest, breathing the same air, Daniel's slow but intense orgasm took him completely by surprise. The answering heat flowing from Ryan's cock elicited a quiet gasp of delight from both of them as they came with more emotional intensity than Daniel had ever thought possible.

Holding each other up, they recovered for a few minutes before wiping themselves clean and slowly moving to the bedroom for a much needed nap.

DANIEL woke with his arms full of a softly snoring Ryan. His puffs of breath were hot against Daniel's chest, Ryan's nose pressed tightly in between his pectorals. Their arms and legs were entangled making them look as if they'd been trying to crawl into each other's skins. Daniel smiled. This was one of the best ways of waking up.

A little while later, Ryan blinked up at him with his radiant green eyes.

"Hey." Daniel kissed him, lips touching tenderly.

"Hey." Ryan smiled and cuddled even closer. "Love you."

"Love you too." Daniel tightened his grip and deeply breathed in his lover's scent.

"It's Sunday today, right?" Ryan moved his head so he looked into Daniel's eyes.

"Yep." Daniel grinned. "I bet you want to know when Nicole's going to be back."

"Yeah. I was just wondering if you'd like to go and see her and Peter?" Ryan shrugged. "I know I'd like to spend more than the five minutes I got with her just before the wedding. There wasn't really any opportunity to catch up at the reception either, what with all the

dancing. And you probably want to hear what your little brother has to report about their trip to Hawaii.”

“Sure, I’d love to go and see them. They landed around nine twenty this morning, so we can call them and see if they’re up for a visit. We could always tempt them by promising to bring lunch.” Daniel kissed Ryan on the forehead.

“That’s a great idea.” Ryan grinned. “It’s not too late for lunch, is it?”

Daniel checked the alarm clock. It was only just after noon. He shook his head.

“That’s good.” Ryan yawned and stretched.

“We’ve got some pretty big news to share with them as well, don’t we?” Daniel couldn’t wait to tell Peter about their wedding plans.

“That’s right, I almost forgot.” Ryan’s eyes lit up. “They’d already left for their trip when you proposed to me on our way home after the party.”

“So, why don’t we get dressed, I’ll give them a call and see what they say, and we’ll take it from there?” Daniel took one last kiss when Ryan nodded before they got up.

DANIEL took the always-useful wicker basket he’d packed the lunch supplies into and walked out into the foyer to find Ryan. He’d heard his lover come downstairs a while earlier but the other man hadn’t made it into the kitchen. Ryan was standing next to the little table where he’d put the Sunday newspaper he must have retrieved from outside. His eyes were red rimmed. He was holding another of those horrible white envelopes in his right hand, just staring at it. This one had a huge black cross on the front.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Daniel put down his basket and embraced Ryan to give him what comfort he could. He just wished they’d accept Ryan’s refusal to go for therapy and leave them alone.

“I’m sorry.” Ryan’s voice was soft. “I didn’t really think there’d be a fourth letter. I don’t know why, but getting these is almost worse than something actually happening. I feel like during those last few

seconds before my father's belt would hit me for the first time. The anticipation of the pain makes it all so much worse."

"What?" He barely held back from shouting. "Your father did what?"

"Shit." Ryan shrunk into himself. "I didn't mean to tell you that."

"Why not?" Daniel was livid. If he ever ran into Mr. Johnston again he wasn't sure he was going to be able to hold himself back from doing physical harm.

"Don't know. Didn't want to make it worse." Ryan tried to pull back but he wouldn't let him.

"How could you telling me make it worse?" Daniel took a deep breath. "Jesus, he actually used his belt on you? How old were you when—when he did that?"

"Last time was in sixth grade." Ryan was whispering, still not looking at him.

"Sixth grade?" Shit, that was about the same time he'd moved to Grand Rapids. "You mean this was going on, and Peter and I never knew?"

"No." Ryan finally looked up and shook his head, worry in his eyes. "No, the last time was just before Peter started tutoring me in math."

"Yeah, I remember that." Daniel had loved the fact that Ryan had spent so much time at their house. Now that he knew why, he felt slightly nauseous about it. "God, Ryan, I can't believe that was because your father hit you."

"Well, that *was* the last time." Ryan smiled. "It was usually over some school issue anyway. And when Peter started helping me, that problem stopped."

"Thank God for that." Daniel didn't think he could have forgiven himself if this had been going on, and he hadn't noticed. "Do you still want to open the fourth letter?"

"No, I don't want to." Ryan shrugged, left Daniel's embrace, and walked into the study to get the letter opener. "But I think I have to."

This sheet was black. It contained only a Bible quote in big letters that took up the whole page:

Grievous punishment is for him who forsakes the way.

Proverbs 15:10.

There was no signature this time.

“I guess they’ve given up on forgiving me.” Ryan folded the sheet back into its envelope. “I don’t know what to do with this. Maybe the police can figure it out. All I know is that I’ve had enough for now. Let me just put it on the shelf with the other one and we can go.”

Daniel nodded, not sure what to say, and watched Ryan walk into the study. Cordell better find a way of making someone take this seriously before it was too late. He hated seeing Ryan depressed like this, constantly reminded of his awful past and hateful parents. If only there was something he could do to stop the harassment.

When Ryan came back they put on their jackets and pocketed their keys. Ryan walked toward the garage, and Daniel grinned, waiting for his lover to find out Daniel wasn’t following him.

“Daniel?” Ryan turned around a moment later. “Aren’t you coming?”

“We don’t need to take the car.” Daniel opened the front door.

“We don’t?” Ryan returned and followed him outside.

“No.” Daniel locked the house and took Ryan’s hand.

“They live close by?” Ryan’s eyes widened, and he started bouncing on his toes. “Close enough so we can walk?”

“Yep.” Daniel loved this.

“Man, that’s great.” Ryan looked excited enough for the two of them as they walked along the driveway and onto the sidewalk. “So, how far is it?”

“Not far at all.” Daniel grinned and turned right, into the neighboring plot.

“What?” Ryan stopped in his tracks and stared at the Victorian two-story house at the end of the straight driveway. “They’re our neighbors?”

“Indeed they are.” Daniel quietly enjoyed the happy shock on Ryan’s face.

“Man, that’s too good to be true.” Ryan threw his arms around Daniel and hugged him tightly.

“When the house came up for sale a year after I’d moved in, I told Peter about it. After talking it over with Nicole, they agreed that they’d love to become my neighbors.” Daniel laughed. “I’ve never enjoyed it so much as just now, though. That look on your face is just priceless.”

“This is brilliant.” Ryan squeezed Daniel and stepped back. “To be this close to my twin sister and best friend after so long is just perfect.”

“Good, I’m glad you agree.” Daniel started walking down the driveway toward the green house with its gray slate roof and bright white window frames and entrance door.

“Just look at this—they’ve even got a wrap-around porch. How cool is that?” Ryan studied everything with wide eyes. “And look at all those raspberry bushes surrounding the house—you can just sit on the porch, stretch your arm and stuff yourself with them.”

“We’ve done exactly that a few times already—but I think there’s enough left for a few more sessions.” Daniel rang the old fashioned doorbell.

A little squeal sounded from inside and the door flew open. Nicole had her arms around Ryan before Daniel could blink. He put down his basket and hugged Peter when he made it to the door just a few seconds behind Nicole.

“So little brother, how was your honeymoon?” Daniel stepped back so he could hug Nicole and let Ryan hug Peter.

“Totally amazing.” Peter grinned and waved them inside. “Come in, and we’ll tell you all about it.”

Daniel picked up the lunch goodies and entered the cozy foyer. It opened onto the staircase that formed the center of the house. The study and laundry room were to the left, the kitchen and morning room in the back of the house. Nicole led them to the right, into the large living room.

“You’ve got a great place.” Ryan looked around himself, taking in the fireplace to the right, the two huge stuffed burgundy sofas and the easy chair surrounding the sandstone coffee table in the middle. The

TV was in the right-hand corner, next to the large window with a view onto the front part of the porch.

“Yeah, we really liked it from the very first time we came to see it.” Nicole sat down on one of the sofas, pulling Ryan down next to her. “Look, you can see the dining room through the back of here, it connects to the kitchen in the back of the house and then you can walk past the utility room and the study and come back around to the foyer.”

“I can’t wait for our kids to grow old enough to chase each other around and around.” Peter grinned and sat down next to Daniel on the other sofa. “I’m sure they’ll drive us nuts in no time.”

“Is there something we should know?” Daniel couldn’t wait to be an uncle again. True, he’d been “adopted” as an honorary uncle by Ben’s twins, Eric and Edward, but having nieces or nephews right next door was sure to be a whole new challenge.

“Not yet.” Nicole blushed.

“But we’re working on it.” Peter winked, which made Nicole blush a deeper pink.

“Good.” Daniel laughed. “I could do with some more nieces or nephews.”

“Those boys of Ben’s don’t keep you busy enough, do they?” Peter smiled.

“That’s not it. I just think you can never have enough nieces and nephews. Can you, Ryan?” Daniel raised his eyebrows.

“I agree.” Ryan smiled. “I just love those boys. The more the merrier, as far as I’m concerned.”

“So you’ve met them?” Nicole smiled and took Ryan’s hand.

“Yep. When we went to see Ben at the restaurant last week.” Ryan squeezed his sister’s fingers. “The boys were great. I made a drawing for them and they loved it so much they sent me some great art supplies as a thank you. The next day!”

“That’s wonderful.” Nicole looked up at her brother and lifted Ryan’s hand, eyes pointing at the ring on his finger. “And might your visit to see Ben have something to do with this?”

Ryan nodded and was pulled into another hug by a squealing Nicole who clapped him on the back and rocked them back and forth as they embraced.

“What?” Peter looked clueless.

Ryan emerged from his hug, Nicole still holding onto his hand, a wide happy grin on her face.

“Peter, I have a question for you.” Ryan waited till Peter looked at him. “How would you like to be my best man?”

“Your... what... you...” Peter swallowed, eyes wide. “Ryan?”

“Your brother proposed to me on the way home from your party.” Ryan held out the hand with the ring for Peter to see. “And I said yes.”

“That’s great! Congratulations, you two!” Peter turned to Daniel, his blue eyes searching Daniel’s face. “You certainly don’t believe in letting dust settle over anything, do you?”

“No.” Daniel shook his head, having been “accused” of being a man of action more than once. “Actually, I was scared to death that Ryan would run away again if I didn’t give him a real reason to stay.”

“But he’d already promised me not to run again.” Nicole looked at Ryan’s ring with admiration in her eyes.

“I didn’t know that, though.” Daniel shrugged. “I’d asked him to stay until after the wedding so that we could talk. I just felt he needed to really believe I was serious.”

“Be that as it may, I think it’s a really good thing that you finally found each other again after all these years.” Peter grinned and got up from the sofa to hug Ryan. “I’d be honored to be your best man, Ryan.”

“So, when’s the wedding? And where?” Nicole smiled when Peter sat down next to her, taking her hand.

Ryan sat down next to Daniel. He took his lover’s hand and kissed it, eliciting another gorgeous smile from Ryan.

“Well, we’d like to get married as soon as possible. We’ve already waited for so long.” Daniel sighed. “But as you know gay marriage isn’t legal in Michigan. So Ryan suggested Canada—Vancouver, in fact. There shouldn’t be any legal problems. It just might take a little longer to organize.”

“Just let us know when, and we’ll be there.” Nicole tilted her head. “What sort of date are you thinking about?”

“Nothing specific, yet.” Ryan smiled and looked at Daniel. “I’ve been thinking, though. I kind of like the idea of getting married on New Year’s Day. To start the year off right, you know?”

“That’s a great idea, sweetheart.” Daniel kissed Ryan right on the lips. “We’ll have to wait a little longer, but that’ll give us time to organize it all. It’ll give our potential guests more time as well.”

“It’s not like we need to rush because we’re pregnant either.” Ryan made everyone laugh. “So, do you guys have any plans for New Year’s Day 2008?”

“We do now.” Nicole smiled.

“Yep, the best plans since our own wedding.” Peter grinned and winked. “Seeing the two of you follow us on the path into matrimony will surely make our year!”

Chapter 14

“ARE you sure you’ve got your passport?” Ryan had rarely been this excited or nervous in his life. He was actually going to go on an airplane today. He’d checked his pockets and artist bag several times and still felt like he’d forgotten something.

“Yes, sweetheart, I’m sure.” Daniel smiled at him, putting his carryon next to Ryan’s near the front door.

“I’m sorry. I’m probably way too nervous.” Ryan shook his head at his edginess.

They had, after all, carefully planned the whole trip on Monday. They’d found a wedding planner on the Internet and had made an appointment for Thursday. Stephen and Jack, the proprietors, had promised to take care of everything for them once they’d talked through their preferences. They’d even recommended a hotel for Daniel and Ryan to stay at during their three-day exploratory visit. Daniel had shown him how to book flights online, and they’d decided which tourist attractions to visit.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be okay.” Daniel hugged him. “I’ll be right next to you the whole time.”

“Thank God for that.” Ryan leaned into Daniel’s warmth and closed his eyes for a moment. He was a little more relaxed when the doorbell rang a few minutes later.

“That’ll be the cab.” Daniel picked up their suitcases and Ryan followed with his precious artist bag, locking the door securely.

The drive to the airport only took about twenty-five minutes, and once there, they were quickly checked in by a friendly clerk. They

needed to put his carryon in the hold because he was only allowed one piece of luggage, and Ryan was not going to let go of his artist bag. After wandering around the food court and gift shop for a while they went through the somewhat scary security checks. Ryan knew he wasn't a criminal, but he sure felt like one by the time the grim-looking guards had searched his artist bag and asked what felt like a thousand questions.

By the time their flight was called, Ryan was desperate for Daniel's touch, but he was too scared other people would react badly. Luckily Daniel put his hand into the small of his back once they were inside the plane and looking for their seats. Ryan shuddered. They'd have to go through all of this again when they changed planes in Chicago.

Ryan took a deep breath as he sank into his window seat in the third row. As soon as they were buckled in, he took Daniel's hand and entwined their fingers. Ryan didn't care if the flight attendant got an eyeful. He needed reassurance.

"You okay, baby?" Daniel leaned over, letting Ryan hide behind his body.

"Yeah, love. I'm better now." Ryan's smile still felt a little wobbly. "I just can't believe how nervous I was to start with. And then those security guys threw me completely off track with all their questions. They made me feel worse than useless."

"They can go a bit overboard when confronted with an unusual situation such as a bag full of drawing supplies." Daniel gave him a quick reassuring kiss.

God, at that moment Ryan wanted to sink into Daniel's arms and forget the whole trip. But he was also looking forward to visiting a new city, so he was going to get through this one way or another.

THE rest of their travel time had flown by, much to Ryan's amazement. He hadn't even minded the security questions at O'Hare that much, now that he knew what to expect. His carryon had magically reappeared at Vancouver Airport and half an hour's cab ride later they were in front of the hotel Daniel said was theirs.

“Are you sure we’re at the right place?” Ryan was in total awe of the white marble exterior, glass doors, and the two good-looking valets in dark blue uniforms.

“Yep, Hotel Le Soleil.” Daniel grinned and paid their fare. “Stephen and Jack did recommend this as one of only three truly gay friendly top hotels in the city. I thought it would be nice to stay at a boutique hotel, and this one comes recommended by quite a few travel organizations that know what they’re doing.”

“Yeah, but... but this looks like something from a fairytale.” Ryan followed Daniel out of the cab, holding onto his artist bag and watching as one of the valets got their carry-ons from the trunk.

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Daniel took his hand, and they followed the valet inside.

The lobby with its thirty-foot-high vaulted and gilded ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and fluted columns took Ryan’s breath away. He was glad he’d worn his good light navy pants and a white button down shirt under his new woolen coat.

“Good evening, sirs.” The receptionist wore a dark suit, white shirt, golden tie, and a friendly smile. “Welcome to Le Soleil. My name is Henry, what may I do for you?”

“Good evening, Henry.” Daniel’s smile was just as friendly. “We’d like to check in, please. We have a reservation for four nights in the name of Miller.”

“Certainly, sir.” Henry tapped something into a computer and handed Daniel a sheet that had their address already filled in. “If I might check your passports, please?”

Ryan added his passport to Daniel’s while Daniel checked and signed the form, handing it back to Henry in exchange for their passports back.

“Everything seems in order.” Henry pulled two keys from below the counter and handed one to each of them. “Your suite is on the second floor, room number 215. Your luggage is being brought there as we speak. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Not right now, thank you, Henry.” Daniel took Ryan’s hand. “We might order room service later.”

“Certainly, sir. Enjoy your stay.” Henry smiled as they went to the elevators.

One trip in a gleaming elevator later, they exited on their floor and walked to the end of the corridor. Daniel let them inside and Ryan just stopped, his mouth falling open. Sumptuous didn’t even begin to describe the décor. The living area had a black marble fireplace and was furnished with a large burgundy satin covered sofa. A low coffee table had a big bowl of fruit on it, and there was a flat screen TV. Carpet and walls were a light cream tone, and the high ceiling had stucco molding. A crystal chandelier in the middle provided sparkling light effects.

Daniel quietly took his hand and walked them through to the bedroom. Their suitcases sat next to the walk-in closet. The king-size maple bed had been turned. The dark green silk brocade coverlets and plump white pillows looked as inviting as the sheets felt when Ryan stroked his hand along the edge.

“Wow.” Ryan sat down on the bed, suddenly very tired.

“You like it?” Daniel grinned and sat down next to him, putting an arm around his shoulder so he could lean in.

“It’s amazing.” Ryan put his head on Daniel’s shoulder and yawned. “I’m not sure I’d want this sort of luxury all the time, but it sure makes for a nice short break.”

“I know what you mean.” Daniel kissed his cheek. “Are you as tired as you look?”

“I’m sorry.” Ryan yawned again. “It’s been a long day. I know it’s only 9:00 p.m. or so here, but that means it’s midnight at home, and all that flying sure took it out of me.”

“No need to apologize, sweetheart.” Daniel stroked Ryan’s cheek with his free hand. “Do you want to eat or go straight to bed?”

“I’m not really hungry. Maybe I’ll just have some fruit from the bowl, if that’s okay. I would like to have a shower, though.” Ryan looked up.

“Sounds good.” Daniel nodded. “I hear their bathrooms are really nice too.”

“Really nice is probably the understatement of the year, knowing this place.” Ryan grinned. “Truly extravagant might come closer to the truth.”

It turned out he was right. They’d each had an apple and a banana and shared some peaches and raspberries before they made their way to the bathroom. Even here there was marble to be found, along with spotless mirrors, fluffy towels and a walk-in shower that could have fit four people easily.

The hot water was glorious and all that wet, slick skin led to enough slippery friction for both of them to stroke each other to quick, yet satisfying orgasms. A completely melted Ryan made his way to the bed and cuddled into the cotton bed sheets, snuggling into Daniel as close as possible. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

RYAN opened his eyes to brilliant sunlight and a warm body spooned up against him. He frowned at the eight on the alarm clock. The colors of the room weren’t quite right—oh yes, they were in Vancouver. He couldn’t wait to explore the city and meet their wedding planners. But first he had an armful of lightly snoring Daniel to take care of. He kissed the back of his lover’s neck, nuzzling into the tousled mane of dark curls and breathing in Daniel’s scent. His morning erection got harder, rubbing against the backs of Daniel’s thighs. Daniel stopped snoring.

“I guess that means you’re awake.” Daniel laughed, wiggling his ass into Ryan’s groin, making him moan.

“Good guess.” Ryan grinned, moving his hands down Daniel’s abdomen in slow circles until he reached his lover’s leaking erection, making him moan in response.

“Oh baby. Yes.” Daniel strained forward to follow Ryan’s stroking hand. “Love your touch on me.”

“Love touching you.” Ryan caressed Daniel’s cock slowly with one hand, drawing out the pleasure.

He moved his other hand up Daniel’s chest and found a nipple to stroke and tweak. Daniel started to grind his hips backward, making Ryan’s stiff penis throb. God, where was the lube when you needed it?

He wasn't going to get up and dig it out of their bags, though. But Daniel seemed to understand his problem because he held still for a moment and parted his legs, letting Ryan's cock slip between them. Daniel groaned when Ryan's hard shaft bumped into his balls from behind and then slid past.

"Like that?" Ryan barely got the words out when Daniel tightened his legs, providing a warm, tight tunnel for Ryan's cock to slide in and out of.

"Fuck, yes. Love the friction against my balls." Daniel jerked his hips back and forth and they soon found a rhythm where Ryan thrust forward as Daniel moved back.

Tightening his fist every time Daniel pushed into it and tweaking both his lover's nipples alternately, he soon had Daniel sweating and panting for completion. Ryan was in no better shape himself. The friction around his swollen penis was incredibly arousing.

"Gonna." Daniel grunted and started shaking, his cock spurting semen over Ryan's hand in short, hard pulses.

"Daniel!" Ryan's movements frantic now, he sawed back and forth a few more times before following his lover over the edge and shooting his spunk onto the sheet.

"Wow." Daniel laughed and turned to cuddle in Ryan's arms. "That was different."

"Nice, though." Ryan cuddled right back and planted a kiss on Daniel's lips.

"Mmmhmm." Daniel's tongue caressed Ryan's mouth and tongue for a long time, making both their cocks twitch again.

"You think we could get breakfast downstairs for a change?" Ryan pulled back and smiled at the dreamy look in his lover's eyes. "I'm really hungry and I bet their restaurant is a dream."

STEPHEN and Jack turned out to be as nice in person as they'd sounded on the phone. Their big cluttered office on Hornby Street was walking distance from the hotel and proclaimed Rainbow Unions in bold letters on the big brass doorknocker.

While Jack organized the drinks, Stephen told Ryan and Daniel their story. They'd been married since gay marriage became legal in July 2005 but had been together for more than twenty years before that.

Now both in their fifties they still looked about a decade younger. Stephen was as tall as Daniel's six-three with muscles everywhere and had light brown hair, deep brown eyes, a big nose, and a smile that could probably melt steel. Jack was the complete opposite: five-eight at the most, slender and delicate-looking with short red hair, freckles covering his face and light blue eyes that twinkled constantly. His smile was no less powerful but a lot more frequent.

After they all sat around the coffee table on two plush sofas, Jack and Stephen's first concern was the date. They were relieved to hear that they'd have a couple of months to "plan everything properly." They then chatted about what Ryan and Daniel wanted in a wedding ceremony, explaining that they'd put together a proposal with a few options for them to look at the next day.

"So, let's start with the venue. What does your ideal location look like?" Stephen leaned back, completely focused on them.

"Um..." Ryan looked at Daniel.

"You go ahead, sweetheart." Daniel suddenly looked overwhelmed. "As long as you're there it doesn't much matter to me where we are."

"Well..." Ryan had hoped for more enthusiastic input.

"May I make a suggestion?" Jack dropped the notebook he was holding onto his legs and looked back and forth between Ryan and Daniel, a little worried frown on his freckled forehead.

"Sure." Ryan nodded, glad for the support.

"Lots of couples find planning their weddings pretty traumatic." Jack smiled.

"We'd be out of a job if they didn't." Stephen had a devilish grin on his face.

"Hush, you." But Jack smiled as he slapped his partner playfully on the knee. "Usually one partner is more outspoken than the other but doesn't want to push ahead. Sometimes the other partner might want something different but doesn't feel it's important enough to bring up. That can lead to a lot of frustration and misunderstandings."

“I want this to be fun.” Ryan was horrified and looked at Daniel for support. “I don’t want to fight, love.”

“Neither do I, sweetheart.” Daniel took Ryan’s hand and held fast. “We’re in this together, right?”

Ryan nodded.

“So we’ll make the decision together, okay?” Daniel smiled. “But you’ve got to promise me that you’ll be honest and tell us what you truly want, not just go along with what I say.”

“Okay.” Ryan smiled. “If you promise to do the same?”

“Sure.” Daniel kissed him and they turned back to a grinning Jack and Stephen.

“Better.” Jack nodded and put pen to notebook again. “So, we were just about to hear about your ideal venue?”

“Outside the city.” Ryan spoke at the same time as Daniel and they both laughed.

The tension was suddenly gone and the process became fun. They quickly agreed to have a spiritual rather than a religious ceremony. They discussed the marriage license, transport, rings, clothing, and accommodations. The list went on and on. Regarding the honeymoon Daniel insisted that it was his surprise and they decided to each write their own vows.

“I never knew weddings were this much work.” Ryan was exhausted when Stephen told them he’d finally run out of questions.

“That’s why we’re here, to help you get through it without wanting a divorce by the time you’re supposed to turn up for the ceremony.” Jack smiled. “Believe me... the more effort you put into it now, the easier the day itself will go.”

“Well, looking at the effort we put in just today, the wedding will be no less than brilliant.” Ryan smiled. That being exactly what he’d been dreaming of ever since Daniel had proposed.

Chapter 15

“SWEETHEART, do you need help in there?” Daniel grinned. He couldn’t wait to see his somewhat shy lover wearing the very sexy clothing they’d bought this morning. Going out to explore the famous Vancouver gay nightlife on their last evening here had required some additions to their normal wardrobe.

“I... I don’t know about this, Daniel.” Ryan’s voice was muffled by the closed bathroom door and sounded adorably desperate.

“Come on, at least let me have a look.” Daniel fisted his hands to stop himself from charging into the hotel’s bathroom.

“Okay, but just you. I don’t think I can go outside like this without getting arrested for indecent exposure.” Ryan opened the door, still hiding his body, just his head sticking out. His eyes widened. “Shit! Daniel. Man, you look good enough to eat.”

“I do?” Daniel tried to look innocent, knowing full well that his fitted black leather pants and black muscle shirt didn’t leave much to the imagination.

“You do.” Ryan nodded, still not moving from behind the door. “Shit, that shirt is so tight I can see every muscle on your chest and abdomen. Not to mention your nipples. And God, those pants....”

Daniel turned around to show off his behind, even giving his lover a little wiggle. A low gurgling sound was his reward, and when he came full circle, Ryan’s mouth had dropped open. His lover’s grip on the door was white-knuckle tight.

“Okay, baby, it’s your turn now.” Daniel held out his hand. “Come here. I really, really want to see.”

Ryan blushed, finally left the cover of the door and took a few hesitant steps into the bedroom. Fuck! Daniel went painfully hard in about three seconds flat. Ryan's deep brown leather pants were so tight, they looked like they'd been painted on, outlining his lover's considerable erection. His silky gold mesh shirt was almost transparent and revealed tantalizing glimpses of his lover's well-defined chest and tight little pink nipples. Ryan's face was flushed a light shade of pink, his eyes were luminous, and his blond locks looked adorably tousled.

Daniel took a deep breath to try and calm down. His pants were way too tight to even think about moving. God, but Ryan looked sexy.

"Daniel?" Ryan took another step toward him until their hands touched. "It's too much, isn't it?"

"God. No. Jesus baby, you take my breath away." Daniel took Ryan's hand and moved it to his throbbing groin. "Can you feel what you do to me? You're unbelievably sexy like this."

"You like it?" Ryan smiled hesitantly.

Daniel swallowed and emphatically nodded yes.

"Well, I like your outfit, too, so I guess we're even." Ryan moved his hand so he cupped Daniel's cock through the leather, making him groan. "I'm just not sure we're fit to go out in this sort of state."

"No." Daniel's breathing sped up even more, his hips starting to jerk "Can't... can't come in these pants."

"But I think you can." Ryan grinned and rubbed harder.

"Mess-messy." Daniel really wanted to come now, needed to maybe.

"Got it." Ryan finally seemed to understand and used his free hand to open Daniel's button, groaning when his trembling fingers touched naked skin.

Ryan let go of Daniel's cock long enough to slide his fingers inside the tight pants to protect sensitive skin from zipper teeth. He fell to his knees and took Daniel's cock into his hot mouth, just sucking him inside.

"Ryan!" Daniel started thrusting his hips in and out of Ryan's mouth, trying his best not to hurt his lover.

Ryan seemed to be enjoying himself, though, green eyes glittering with lust as he looked up at Daniel. Once he'd fumbled his own pants open and freed his flushed penis he lifted one hand to gently squeeze Daniel's balls while he used his other to furiously jack himself off.

"Hot." Daniel was panting, hips jerking, totally lost in a haze of lust and need. "So hot, baby."

Ryan kept looking at him, pupils dilated. Daniel gripped his lover's head for support, entirely focused on Ryan's hot throat muscles relaxing, taking him all the way inside. The pressure was too much, and Daniel came in fast jerks, feeling his hot come pour straight down Ryan's throat.

Ryan groaned and closed his eyes, hips pushing his own cock into his fist. He let go of Daniel's still half hard dick a few seconds later and erupted with a deep groan, white spunk coating his hand and splattering the floor.

"Damn, that was hot." Daniel had recovered enough to move, so he knelt down next to Ryan and took him in his arms.

"Ungh." Ryan's eyes were still wide and his lips swollen, breaths coming fast.

Daniel bent forward and kissed him. With his tongue caressing the lips and delving into the mouth that had given him so much pleasure, Daniel sank into the kiss. He could taste himself on Ryan's tongue, and that drove him wild. Ryan responded with little moans and sighs, his lover's hands coming up to hold onto Daniel's sides.

"I'm not sure we'll make it to the clubs at this rate." Daniel pulled back and smiled at his disheveled lover.

"Not sure I care." Ryan snuggled closer to him. "Nothing there could possibly be half as sexy as you are."

DANIEL smiled as he leaned back into the cab's back seat, his fingers twined with Ryan's. They'd eventually made it to the clubs last night, but nothing and nobody there had been half as sexy or hot as his Ryan. They'd had a couple of beers, danced for a while and then made it back to the hotel for a night of very inspired lovemaking. Those outfits were

going into the permanent collection. After all, nobody said you could only wear them to go out to a club.

The return flights had been uneventful but the almost nine hour trip had them both tired. Ryan's head was leaning against his shoulder, his lover already half asleep. It had been a great trip, but returning to their own bed definitely had its good points.

Having paid the cabdriver Daniel turned to get their bags only to find that Ryan had already gotten them and was walking toward the house. He quickly followed and unlocked the front door for them.

A strange smell hit him when he entered. He switched on the lights and looked around but nothing was out of place. A stack of mail sat on the little table next to the door. Good, Peter or Nicole had been in to check the house while they were gone.

"Daniel? What is that smell?" Ryan had dropped the bags at the bottom of the stairs and looked around, nose wrinkling from the sharp, pungent stench.

"I don't know—it's really foul." Daniel frowned and went to check out the kitchen and utility room, while Ryan went to check the study.

"Nothing down here." Ryan walked into the living room and shrugged.

"Okay, let's check upstairs." Daniel took his lover's hand, more than a bit worried. He tilted his head for a moment, checking for any weird sounds and heard nothing. He switched on the hallway light upstairs so they'd be able to see.

They walked to the second floor and as soon as they were at the top of the stairs the reek got so strong, Daniel was close to retching. It came from the studio whose door was slightly ajar.

With a few large steps Daniel was at the door, pulling Ryan with him. He reached around the doorframe and flipped the light switch, pushing the door wide open with a foot.

The sight that greeted him was devastating. Both easels had been overturned, wooden legs broken. The boxes with Ryan's old sketches that had been neatly stacked in a corner when they left had been pushed over, content spilling all over the place. They'd never even had time to

look at those. Some of the sketches looked torn but others seemed intact.

Other than the cloths and pillows, now shredded and looking wet, nothing was left. Canvasses, the new sketches and paintings, all the art supplies, everything was gone. Daniel sent a quick prayer of thanks to whoever would listen that he'd had the one that Ryan called "Light of my Life" sent for framing on Tuesday.

The words "we don't want you here," "faggot go home," "abomination," and other derogatory terms marked the walls, red spray paint making the words look like they'd been written in blood.

Ryan made a strangled sound next to him and dropped to his knees, face pale as a sheet, eyes wide, just staring at what little was left.

"Fuck!" Daniel was still shocked but anger was quickly gaining the upper hand. It was pretty clear to him who'd done this. "Shit. I can't believe they went this far."

Daniel knew he needed to call 911 but his lover's health came first. He went to his knees next to Ryan and pulled the man into his arms, pushing his lover's head against his shoulder to shield his eyes from the mess. Ryan was way too quiet for his taste, his heart hammering against Daniel's chest, his breathing fast and shallow. His skin felt clammy and his lips looked gray. Ryan was going into shock.

"Ryan, baby, stay with me." Daniel got scared when Ryan didn't even respond. "Ryan?"

Daniel quickly slid one arm under Ryan's legs, the other behind his shoulders and lifted him up. He needed to get him out of this stench and lay him down. Fear giving him more strength than he thought possible he carried Ryan to their bedroom, laying his feet up on their pillows, keeping his head low. He opened his pants and unbuttoned his shirt to let him breathe more easily.

"Ryan?" Daniel shook his shoulder carefully, caressing his cheek with his other hand. "Ryan, please baby. Just look at me, let me know you can hear me."

Ryan blinked, a lone tear running down the side of his face and wetting his hair. He started shaking violently. Daniel found a warm blanket and covered him with it, stroking his head to try and keep his

attention. He took the cordless phone from the night stand with his other hand and dialed 911.

When he'd answered all the operator's questions, given her all the details, he lay down next to Ryan and slid his arms around his lover's shaking body. One leg over Ryan's hip pulled them as close together as possible. Daniel buried his nose in the crook of Ryan's neck and focused on breathing. God, he wanted to cry himself but there was no time for that now. He needed to be strong for both of them.

THE paramedics arrived first, much to Daniel's relief. They checked Ryan's condition, explaining that psychological shock such as he had suffered was not generally life-threatening. Ryan would probably recover on his own, and the best thing for now would be a good night's sleep.

When Ryan softly gurgled a quiet "How?" Daniel's relief was immense. At least his lover was reacting to the outside world again. The paramedics gave Daniel a light sedative for both of them with instructions to take it later if needed. He let them out, wondering why the police hadn't arrived yet. Then he went back upstairs to make sure Ryan was okay.

"Ryan? You feeling better?" Daniel bent over his lover who was still stretched out on their bed, feet the wrong way up, nicely elevated to help with his circulation.

Ryan nodded weakly.

"Thank God." Daniel kissed his forehead. "You scared me."

"Sorry." Ryan closed his eyes and swallowed.

"Hey, it's all right." Daniel slid his hand under Ryan's head and caressed his neck in slow circles, noticing that his skin color had almost returned to normal. "You want to go to sleep now?"

"Please." Ryan nodded.

Daniel turned the cover and duvet back on the other side of the bed. Then he got Ryan undressed and turned around before rolling him onto the sheet and covering him up. Ryan's eyes were closed, his breathing deep and regular by the time Daniel was done. No need for a

sedative. He kissed Ryan on the forehead, switched on the little lamp on the nightstand on the other side of the bed, and quietly left the room.

Daniel went downstairs to wait for the police. His knees were so weak he had to sit down on the couch. Shit. He wasn't going to get through this alone. He picked up the phone and called Peter.

"Peter Miller." Peter sounded sleepy.

"It's Daniel. I really need you. Can you please come over?" Daniel choked a sob. They'd really hurt Ryan by going after his art and he'd been powerless to protect him. Fuck.

"Daniel? What's going on?" Peter sounded worried. "Is Ryan okay?"

"Just, please...." Daniel took a deep breath. "Please, just get over here. I know it's late, and I'm sorry, but I can't deal with this on my own."

"It's not that late, barely 10:00 p.m. Just trying to get an early night for once." Peter snorted. "Looks unlikely now. You want Nicole to come over as well?"

"No. Yes. Oh, I don't know." Daniel closed his eyes and sank back into the sofa, hands shaking.

"Hey, hold on. We'll be right there." Peter hung up and the dial tone sounded a lot louder than it should have.

Under a minute later there was a brief knock on the door, a key turned the lock and Peter walked in, a wide-eyed Nicole in tow.

"Daniel—what is that stench?" Nicole wrinkled her nose just like Ryan had earlier.

"Damn, you look like shit." Peter sat down next to Daniel and pulled him into a hug. "What the hell happened here?"

"They... they got into the house while we were gone. They didn't even break in, all the locks were untouched." Daniel could feel his anger rising again. He hated feeling helpless. "They touched nothing in the house except Ryan's studio. Most of it is gone, including all his new sketches and paintings. Some of his older stuff looks like it's still there but may be damaged as well. On top of all of that, whoever did this urinated on some of the cloths and pillows, which explains the odor."

“What?” Nicole covered her mouth with a hand and sank onto the sofa next to Peter, eyes widening in shock.

“Oh, shit, no.” Peter frowned. “That sounds like a pretty targeted attack, almost professional. You’re thinking it was the Johnstons, aren’t you?”

“Either them or more likely someone they paid to do this. Like you say, it looks too professional for them to have done it themselves.” Daniel shrugged. “The paramedics have been and gone, but I’m still waiting for the police to turn up.”

“Paramedics?” Nicole’s eyes widened even more.

“Yeah, it was too much for Ryan, and he went into shock. Don’t worry. He’s fine now, sleeping it off.” Daniel wished he could really believe that Ryan was fine.

“Oh my God.” Nicole breathed a sigh of relief. “What can we do?”

“Just be here for moral support?” Daniel was suddenly very tired. “I’m sorry I pulled you out of bed. I just didn’t want to face all this on my own.”

“No problem, big brother.” Peter managed a trembling smile and let go of Daniel with one arm, grabbing one of Nicole’s trembling hands. “We’ll stay with you as long as you need us.”

Nicole nodded and cuddled into Peter’s side.

Daniel would have given anything to have Ryan with him at that moment. But his lover needed to sleep. He’d probably be devastated for quite some time to come, so Daniel needed to be strong for both of them. Thank God, Peter and Nicole were here.

Moments later the doorbell finally rang, and Daniel went to open the door. Two police officers, one a younger male with brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard, the other a slightly older female of Hispanic descent held up their badges for him to see. Several police cars and more men crowded the driveway.

“Mr. Miller?” The female officer pocketed her badge when Daniel nodded. “I’m Detective Marta Barrios. This is Detective Hank Eldrige. Sorry it took so long, there was a bit of a mix-up at the station. You reported a break-in?”

“More like a targeted attack.” Daniel stepped back and waved the detectives inside. Mix-up, huh? Cordell’s official complaint about Gahr must have had some sort of effect. “Only one room was touched, and there was no sign of forced entry.”

“Is this related to the two letters your partner reported last week?” Barrios pulled a notebook from her pants pocket, a pen from her jacket.

“Yes, we think it is.” Daniel nodded. “We’ve received two more since then. One was the ‘third warning,’ the last one just contained a threat of ‘grievous punishment.’ Nothing specific that would have made us believe something like this might happen.”

“More letters?” Eldrige spoke up, frowning. “There was nothing in the file about more letters, was there Barrios?”

“No there wasn’t.” Barrios looked at Daniel, eyebrows raised.

“Well, after the reception we received from Officer Gahr, we didn’t think there was any point.” Daniel was still angry when he let himself think back to that day.

“Yes, well.” Barrios cleared her throat. “We would like to apologize about that. We’ve had an official complaint about the officer’s behavior from a Mr. Cordell Finley. I believe he’s your lawyer?”

“Yes, he is.” Daniel felt a sense of satisfaction that someone had apparently listened to his friend.

“Mr. Finley alerted us to what’s been going on.” Barrios kept a straight face, but her deep brown eyes spoke volumes. “The officer’s behavior was totally against department policy, and he has not only been severely reprimanded but also been made aware of the fact that adhering to the letter of the policy is not enough. The fact that he took the statement, as policy demands, is not enough. The *way* he goes about doing this is just as important. The fact that he’s never received a complaint before doesn’t mean he can treat people with such disrespect. Meanwhile, my colleague and I have been assigned to the case and we assure you that we will handle it with the urgency it deserves.”

“Thank you. We appreciate that.” Daniel found a smile for them.

“Now, before we go on, could you please tell me where that stench is coming from?” Barrios wrinkled her nose.

“It was actually part of the attack. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you.” Daniel led the way upstairs. “They not only sprayed insults onto the walls but emptied my partner’s painting studio and urinated on some of the items as well.”

“God, that’s disgusting.” Eldrige held his nose with his slender fingers and looked like he was about to turn around and leave the house.

“It is. Let’s have a look, then.” Barrios grimaced but followed Daniel without hesitation.

When they’d reached the studio door Daniel stepped back to let the officers enter.

“That’s....” Barrios shook her head, looking sad. “That’s just awful.”

“You said that his parents sent those letters?” Eldrige took a few steps into the room, careful not to touch anything.

Daniel nodded.

“Do you think they did this as well?” Eldrige returned to the door after a brief walk around the room.

“It sure seems like something they would do.” Daniel shrugged. “I mean, they kept saying that they wanted Ryan to accept ‘treatment’ so he could stop being gay. But on the other hand they also made it clear that there would be ‘dire consequences’ if he didn’t listen. Attacking him and his attempt to make a life for himself qualifies, I think. God, he’s only just moved in, and I had the studio set up for him last week. We went on a trip and returned a few hours ago to find this mess.”

“I can see how thinking it was his parents, especially after those letters, has a certain logic to it. We’ll definitely talk to them.” Barrios nodded. “However, we’ll still need to obtain some evidence before we can draw any official conclusions. Including those additional letters—if you still have them?”

“I understand you need additional evidence. And I’ll get those letters for you. They’re downstairs in the study.” Daniel felt frustrated, but he’d sort of seen this delay and the need for obtaining “official” evidence coming.

“Okay.” Barrios stepped back into the hallway and turned to her colleague. “Eldrige, why don’t you go downstairs and let the forensic team know what they need to do, then lead them up here? I’ll go with Mr. Miller to collect the letters.”

Daniel handed over the letters and Barrios left to join her colleagues. He was suddenly exhausted. He collapsed onto the couch in the study and buried his face in his hands. Warm hands massaging his neck had him sit up in shock. He sighed in relief when it was Peter.

When the detectives and the forensics team were done almost two hours later, he was so beat that all he could do was meekly follow his brother into the bedroom, let him help him get undressed and into bed. Nicole was checking on Ryan.

“Clean up.” Daniel mumbled as he was moving toward Ryan to take him into his arms. He was already half asleep. “Need to get rid of that stench.”

“Don’t worry, Daniel.” Peter stroked his cheek. “We’ll take care of it.”

Chapter 16

RYAN was numb. He knew it was morning because his eyes were open, but he couldn't focus. He'd woken up a while ago and was lying in Daniel's arms but for the first time he couldn't feel happy about that. He couldn't feel anything.

Staring at the ceiling like this wasn't great but it was better than closing his eyes and seeing the devastation in his studio. The beautiful new studio that Daniel had made for him, equipped with everything his artist's heart had ever dreamed of. All of that was gone, including the paintings and drawings he had made that had given him such joy. Daniel had been so proud of him.

Those paintings had been the beginning of showing what he could do. There hadn't been many yet, but they'd given him hope. Hope to do something that was uniquely his, like Daniel's restaurants were uniquely his fiancé's. His idea of exhibiting and selling them would have given him a chance to eventually start contributing to his and Daniel's life financially. It might have taken a while to establish himself as an artist and he might never have received a lot of money for them, but at least it would have been something. And now they were all gone, including the supplies he needed to make more.

His parents had done it again. All this stuff about "forgiving" him had been very short lived, if it had ever been real. They'd probably just used that time to have him watched and to figure out what to do to hurt him most. Beat him back down into nothing again, get him to leave. And he wanted to. God, did he want to just get away from it all, stop having to fight. The lump in his throat made it difficult to breathe.

Realizing that he wasn't as worthy a partner for Daniel as he wanted to be got him all tied up in knots inside. That was much worse than the dashed hope for a financial contribution, as important as that was. It was better to go back to feeling nothing. He just couldn't bear the pain of thinking about it, couldn't take the disappointment of losing all his future chances, maybe again and again.

"Ryan? Are you awake?" Daniel lifted his head and looked at him.

He nodded, not really able to get himself to speak.

"God, baby, you worried me last night." Daniel kissed him on the cheek and squeezed him, nuzzling his neck, starting to place hot kisses along his jaw.

Ryan had worried himself last night. In fact he was still worried. Would he ever feel like a human being again?

"Ryan? What's wrong?" Daniel pulled back and supported his head on a hand, looking down at Ryan with a deep frown on his forehead.

He shrugged. He didn't really want to talk about it.

"Ryan, baby, can you please say something? You're scaring me." Daniel's eyes were wide and moist.

"I'm sorry." Ryan swallowed and tried to turn his head away but Daniel cupped his cheek and stopped him.

"Why? You've got absolutely nothing to be sorry for." Daniel stroked his cheek with his free hand. God, that almost felt good.

"I do... do have something to be sorry for." Ryan was struggling to stop himself from feeling now. Daniel just got to him.

"What?" Daniel just kept stroking his cheek. "You didn't do anything."

"Oh, but I did." Ryan was suddenly overwhelmed with intense regret. "I've ruined your life. They entered your home and made such an awful mess. And I brought this down on you. I'm so useless—"

"No!" Daniel's voice sounded raw, anguished. "You're *not* useless. God, how I hate that they can still make you feel that way. Can't you see how much joy you have brought me? How happy you have made me over these last two weeks? Taking trips together,

exploring new places? Making love and getting to know each other again?"

"But is that enough?" Ryan's feelings had returned with a vengeance, as though a dam inside him had broken, and the fear was almost too much. "I had hoped that I could at least contribute to our lives by selling some of my paintings but I can't even seem to do that now. And when something bad happens I just collapse instead of being there for you as much as you're there for me."

"What are you saying, Ryan?" Daniel whispered, eyes shocked.

Ryan closed his eyes for a moment. This was his biggest fear. That Daniel would reject him once he realized how weak Ryan really was. Was he going to be able to actually say it out loud? What if Daniel agreed once he'd heard it? Well, better now than a few months or years down the road.

"Sweetheart? Talk to me?" Daniel moved closer, enveloping Ryan in his strong arms and holding on.

"I'm not going to be an equal partner in our lives financially. Ever." Ryan felt a tear run down his cheek. "That would be bad enough. But I'm also weak emotionally. How can you possibly love me when I can't support you like a partner should?"

"Get it all out." Daniel was trembling, but he still held on, his blue eyes blazing with an intense emotional fire. "Why don't you tell me what you're really afraid of?"

"I'm afraid...." Ryan closed his eyes. He couldn't bear looking at the man he loved so much while he said this. "I'm afraid that sooner or later you'll reject me because I can't be the partner you want me to be in any way that counts. The partner you need and deserve. Someone to stand by you no matter what."

Daniel was silent. He didn't even move a muscle.

Ryan held still as long as he could. Eventually he opened his eyes to the most shocking sight he could imagine. Tears were streaming down Daniel's cheeks, his eyes full of such pain and agony that it stabbed Ryan straight in his heart.

"Daniel?" Ryan's voice broke when Daniel didn't even react.

Shit. What was he going to do now? He finally slid his hand behind Daniel's head and pulled him against his chest, rocking them

both back and forth. All he could do was hope that Daniel would recover and tell him what had him so upset.

Eventually the flood slowed down, and then it stopped, and Daniel took a few deep breaths. He wiped his eyes and face with a sleeve and pulled back.

"I'm so sorry that I haven't been able to show you how much you mean to me, how much my happiness depends on you." Daniel smiled, lips still trembling. "I told you that I love you, and I thought that was enough."

"That is so very, very much. It's everything I ever dreamed about." Ryan kissed the trembling lips, making Daniel's smile bigger, more certain. Good.

"And yet somehow I have failed to convince you that I—I need you." Daniel swallowed. "Like I need air to breathe and food to eat for my body, I need you to be there for my heart and my soul to feel whole. It isn't about money or being strong all the time. That's not how my heart and soul work. They feed on love and happiness, on how we make each other feel."

"You really believe that, don't you?" Ryan was still a little hesitant. It all sounded too good to be true.

"Building a life together is about more than having a good time or taking trips." Daniel frowned. "For me it's about a lot more than making money. We'll figure all that out together. You just need to paint. I've seen you come alive when you do. And your paintings are so wonderful I can't imagine them not selling. But even if they didn't sell it wouldn't matter to me. I just feel such joy when I look at you painting. I would miss that terribly."

That seemed to make sense. It certainly fit with everything else Daniel had told him. Why hadn't he seen that? Or maybe he had, but he just hadn't truly believed it.

"It's even more than that, though." Daniel sighed. "Imagining life without you is impossible. My empty, meaningless existence over the past four years was horrible. Waking up every morning next to you, watching you enjoy my food, or try new things has spoiled me. Now that I know what it's like, I don't ever want to go back to living without you."

“You really mean that, don’t you?” Ryan was stunned. Daniel really wanted, even needed him? Just like he craved Daniel? Sharing their lives and their love was that important to him?

“Yes!” Daniel nodded so hard, Ryan was afraid his lover’s head might fly off. “Having you around makes me feel whole, free to be who I am. Seeing your compassion and how open you are with other people despite everything you’ve been through is truly inspiring. You make me focus on the important things in life. And that’s not making money. It’s about family and that one special person who can make your heart beat faster every single time he looks at you.”

“I think I see what you mean now. It may take me a while to really believe it because it just sounds too good to be true.” Ryan snuggled into Daniel’s warm body. This was worth fighting for. “But at least I’m beginning to see what you mean.”

“Good.” Daniel chuckled. “And I’ll know to remind you if you ever forget again.”

“I love you, my Daniel.” Ryan tilted his head, begging for a kiss.

“I love you, too, my Ryan.” Daniel moved his mouth closer, and when their lips and tongues met, the rest of the world just vanished. All that existed was the love and heat between them.

Daniel’s hands started roaming across Ryan’s back, stroking and caressing. One slowly moved lower while the other stayed on his nape, making little circles that sent shivers of delight down his spine. The kisses grew more passionate. Ryan slipped his leg up above Daniel’s hip, opening himself for his lover’s probing fingers. For the longest time, Daniel stroked slowly from the top of his cleft, across his hole and perineum, ending with a soft squeeze to the back of Ryan’s ball sac. Tendrils of fire raced straight from Daniel’s touches into Ryan’s balls, making them ache for release.

“Lube.” Ryan was panting with the need to feel Daniel inside him.

Daniel chuckled but moved back toward the nightstand to grab the lube. When he returned he lay on his left side and pushed Ryan onto his back next to him. Then he slid an arm under the knee of Ryan’s right leg and lifted it so that he was open to the probing fingers from below. Wet and slick, one finger slid right in. Ryan sighed. He was so ready for this his anus relaxed almost immediately.

“More.” Ryan tried to push into Daniel but it was difficult with one leg stretched out on the bed and the other lifted in the air and resting on Daniel’s strong upper arm.

The second finger was quickly joined by a third, and Ryan yelped when Daniel started poking his prostate.

“God. Yes! Right there.” Ryan gasped. “Please, Daniel. In me. Now.”

Daniel grinned and slicked up his engorged penis before pushing it against Ryan’s ready hole. Slowly, much too slowly, he slid inside, filling Ryan up so full that he couldn’t feel anything else. When Daniel was almost all the way inside he moved his hand away, lifted Ryan’s leg farther up his hip and brought his arm around to the front to take hold of Ryan’s desperately leaking cock. Wow, this had possibilities.

Daniel started thrusting slowly, making Ryan see stars because he hit his prostate every single time.

“Daniel! Fuck!” Ryan was losing it fast.

He lifted his right arm so he could grip Daniel’s neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Deep kissing while Daniel thrust into him like this, made him completely his, made him feel more alive and accepted than he’d ever been. The emotions grew so overwhelming so quickly that he was jerking into Daniel’s fist, desperate for release in no time. Daniel’s thrusts were deep and fast now, still hitting his prostate every single time.

It was too much. Ryan poured out his release in long spasms, screaming Daniel’s name as Daniel stiffened beside him and filled Ryan’s contracting channel with his hot come. Shaking and gasping for air Daniel withdrew carefully and pulled him around so they were facing each other as they kept kissing. Legs entwined, their cocks were still twitching, releasing a few small dribbles of come with every aftershock.

“God, baby.” Daniel pulled back, eyes bright blue and happy. “I love doing this with you. Never want to lose you.”

“I know.” Ryan smiled. He got it now. “I love you too.”

RYAN sighed. He was about to face reality again. They'd taken a shower together, just enjoying washing each other, too exhausted to do more. They'd gotten dressed and were ready to go downstairs for breakfast. He stood there, bedroom door knob in his hand, suddenly unable to move.

Daniel walked up behind him and put his hands on Ryan's shoulders, just quietly standing there. Taking a deep breath, Ryan turned the knob.

"Well done." Daniel followed him onto the landing.

"Hey, the smell's gone." Ryan refused to look in the direction of the studio as they went past it and down the stairs, but the lack of stench was remarkable.

"Peter must have gotten the cleanup organized like he promised." Daniel started pulling cereal and bowl from the cupboards, following up with milk and fruit from the fridge.

"Peter was here?" Ryan got the coffeemaker going and started setting the table while Daniel washed and cut some apples, pears, and destined the cherries.

"Yeah, I called him last night." Daniel shrugged. "I just didn't want to face the police on my own. But it wasn't Gahr who came. They sent two new officers who even apologized about Gahr's behavior."

"They did?" Ryan stopped setting the table and stared at Daniel.

"They did indeed." Daniel grinned. "Seems Gahr's in a bit of well-deserved trouble for the way he treated us. The detectives took the new letters and made the forensics team gather more evidence. They listened to what I told them and promised to look into it."

"Wow." Ryan sat down, the sudden relief too much.

The doorbell interrupted them.

"I wonder who that is." Daniel got up and went to the front door.

Ryan followed him more slowly. A uniformed delivery man was standing outside, a huge wrapped up flat object leaning against his leg.

"Great!" Daniel grinned and signed the papers before pulling the thing inside. "Perfect timing."

The delivery man left and Daniel closed the door.

"Daniel? What is that?" Ryan stared at it. It looked almost like....

“Let’s take this to the living room and unwrap it. It’s all good. You’ll see.” Daniel did as he’d said and soon had what must surely be a painting on the sofa, unwrapping it with quick, efficient movements.

Ryan stood in the foyer, unable to move. He could only see it from the back, but when a gilded frame appeared his heart started beating furiously.

“Come here, baby.” Daniel stretched out a hand and looked at Ryan with so much love he just had to move. “Come here and look.”

Ryan walked toward Daniel, still not daring to look at the picture. Daniel slipped an arm around his middle, supporting him and turning him around so that he was leaning against his lover’s strong chest when he looked up.

It was the nude he’d done of Daniel in the bathroom. His knees buckled and he sank against Daniel’s strength, his lover catching him effortlessly.

“Daniel... how... what?” Ryan had tears of joy in his eyes. “You saved it.... The one painting that meant more to me than all the others combined—and you saved it.”

“It was pure luck.” Daniel’s voice sounded like he was fighting tears as well. “I knew how much it meant to you, so I sent it to get it framed before we left for Vancouver. I just wish I’d sent all of them.”

“Oh love. Thank you.” Ryan turned around and kissed his man with all he had. “This means everything to me. It means they didn’t really get to you.”

“They could never really get to me.” Daniel smiled and kissed him back. “But it’s good to see that it’s made you a little happier than you were.”

“It’s good to focus on what we still have, isn’t it?” Ryan smiled with the realization. He was going to do more of that.

“You’re right.” Daniel nodded. “In fact I think we should spend today going through all your stuff, including those boxes with your old sketches that I can’t wait to see. That way we can discover together what we have, and that’ll help us get over all the rest. What do you think?”

“I think that’s a great idea.” Ryan hesitated. “I’m just not sure I’m ready to go back into the studio....”

“If I know my little brother and his wife, they made sure that everything looked spotless before they left last night.” Daniel grinned. “Why don’t I give him a call to check, and we only go in there if he gives the green light.”

“Okay.” Ryan nodded. That sounded promising.

Peter gave his okay, but it was still hard to go upstairs and open that door. Daniel stood next to him, their hands joined on the door knob. They turned it together and walked in hand in hand.

That made all the difference.

Peter and Nicole had done an amazing job. They must have been up all night. The walls had been cleaned, not a trace of spray paint left. In fact they looked like a layer of new white paint had been applied as well. The smell seemed to confirm that.

The boxes had been stacked neatly, all that had fallen out in a separate heap, ready for sorting. The broken easels were gone, as were the ruined cloths and pillows. The wooden table sink unit was empty but clean, as were the recliner and the wooden stools.

It made the place look a little stark and empty, but there was a huge piece of paper with Peter’s distinctive scrawl on it, telling them that he’d put a replacement order in with their mother’s help and everything would be delivered by this afternoon. Ryan was touched by his best friend’s thoroughness.

Ryan spent the next few hours with Daniel going through his old drawings. Daniel seemed fascinated with them and asked lots of questions. It was a great way to share what had happened in his life.

Their morning was interrupted by the locksmith who had apparently been asked by the police to come and change all the locks. Just in case. Ryan was impressed.

They had soup and sandwiches for lunch and by then most of the torn up stuff had been dealt with. Some drawings Ryan would repair, some he’d keep to try and replicate them, some he just let go.

The early afternoon found them engrossed in some of the older sketches, and Ryan found he enjoyed looking at his earlier work. He’d made visible progress since then and was quite ready to ditch some of it, but Daniel wouldn’t let him. So they just boxed up the older stuff with the pieces they weren’t going to frame and put them in the attic.

When the new easels, canvasses, cloths, paints and other paraphernalia were delivered and had been set up, things were almost back to normal. Ryan took a deep breath of relief. He was going to get another chance at making paintings, at making a name for himself. At being more independent than he was.

That's when the doorbell rang yet again.

"What now?" Daniel raised his eyebrows. "I can't think of anything that might still be missing."

Ryan shrugged and followed Daniel downstairs.

It was a security company with instructions to install an updated alarm. Daniel just laughed, and Ryan joined him. Peter really had thought of absolutely everything.

Chapter 17

WHEN Daniel opened his eyes the light in the bedroom was still low. He checked the alarm clock and smiled. He rarely slept till eight, even on a Sunday. Ever since he'd started sharing his life with Ryan, though, a lot had changed.

He grinned. He liked sharing his home with Ryan, having meals together, and not having to go to bed or wake up alone anymore. That was the easy part. What he still needed to work on was being more sensitive to Ryan's fears and feelings. He hadn't even noticed how insecure Ryan could be until his lover had told him how afraid he was of Daniel not accepting him as an equal partner.

How could someone who had survived so much have such low self-esteem? Ryan apparently didn't even see how strong he really was. Had his parents and past experiences had that much of a negative impact?

He'd already been more open about his own emotions and needs than ever before. Only time would tell if it had been enough.

His lover was still breathing deeply next to him, one of his long arms slung across Daniel's chest as if to hold him in place. Ryan needn't have worried. He wasn't going to go anywhere. He was warm and comfortable under the covers, with Ryan's naked body pressed up against his left side, and his lover's morning erection poking him in the thigh. He might just have to do something to help with that.

He turned his head and started covering Ryan's face with little kisses while bringing his right hand up to caress Ryan's nape. The other man sighed and tightened his grip around Daniel's chest while sliding

one leg between his, giving Daniel's equally eager morning wood something to rub against. His eyes stayed closed.

Was Ryan even awake yet? Only one way to find out. Daniel moved his lips across the stubbly jaw. When he finally touched Ryan's mouth, he felt his lover smile as he opened to him, soft tongue welcoming his in a gentle caress. The kiss was slow and tender, and Daniel put everything he felt for Ryan into it. He wriggled until he had both arms around Ryan's middle and pulled his lover on top of him, never once stopping the kiss.

He couldn't get enough of Ryan. Kiss after kiss soon had him breathing more quickly, his cock stiffening against Ryan's groin. He moaned deeply and started rubbing his hard erection against Ryan's in response. It felt too good to stop, so he just went with it for a while.

"God, baby, want you so much." He groaned into Ryan's mouth, arousal and the need to be as close to Ryan as humanly possible making him crazy.

"Hmmm. How do you want me?" Ryan moved his mouth away and started nibbling along his jaw and down his neck.

"Just..." How was he supposed to think like this?

"You want me to do you?" Ryan pulled back, desire darkening his eyes.

"Oh please." He felt his hole clench in anticipation and slid his hands down to Ryan's ass, caressing the taut cheeks to encourage him.

"Daniel!" Ryan moaned and pulled back farther. "It'll be over before I begin if you don't stop driving me nuts."

"Please, just hurry. I need to feel you inside me." He pushed up and pressed a searing kiss onto Ryan's swollen lips.

He lay back, leaving Ryan gasping for breath and fumbled for the lube. There, under the pillow where it was supposed to be. Pulling it out he passed it to Ryan. But Ryan shook his head.

"I want to see you do it." Ryan's eyes were brighter than normal as he blushed. "I saw the look on your face when you watched me the other day. I want to find out what it's like to watch."

"Kinky, huh?" Daniel finally got the tube open and slicked his fingers.

“Well....” Ryan blushed even more as he slid back and sat on his haunches.

“Hey, nothing wrong with a little kink between lovers.” Daniel spread his legs as far as they would go and reached between them.

Ryan’s eyes followed his hand, focused as if he were going to paint the scene. Daniel moaned as his fingers slid along his crack and touched his hole. He let his head fall back and focused on the sensations as he slid one finger and then another into himself, stroking in and out slowly.

A small whimper from Ryan was his only warning before he felt one of his lover’s fingers join his own, making him burn just right.

“Shit. Ryan.” Daniel’s eyes flew open. “That is so good.”

Ryan grinned as he moved with him, never losing eye contact. Daniel’s whole body tingled with the intensity of what they were sharing.

Finally he pulled out.

“Need you.” He was panting, feeling empty. “Please.”

Ryan nodded. His eyes were as big as saucers as he drew back his hand and moved over Daniel, supporting himself on his arms and lining up his engorged penis with Daniel’s hole.

“You’ve got me, love.” Ryan pushed forward carefully, breaching his trembling entrance much too slowly. “You’ve so got me.”

Daniel pushed up and felt the delicious stretch as Ryan filled him and filled him until he bottomed out, crinkly pubes tickling his balls. He took a deep breath and nodded.

“Go, baby. Move.” He slid his hands up between their bodies and tweaked Ryan’s nipples, making the other man shake. At least it got him moving.

Ryan pulled back slowly, paused, and pushed back in all the way, hitting his prostate both times. Then did it again, a little faster this time. And again.

“Yes, God yes. That’s it, baby. Just like that.” Daniel thought he was going to explode from the intensity of the feelings.

Ryan never let up. He moved faster and faster, never looking away, sharing himself completely as he stroked them both closer to fulfillment.

“Ryan, oh God, don’t stop.” He was frantic, sparks of desire were chasing up and down his spine. The slight pressure against his balls as he was pushing up against Ryan’s groin on every one of his lover’s down strokes was making him ache to come.

“Not... not stopping.” Ryan panted, sweat appearing on his forehead. “Love... love you, Daniel.”

That did it. Daniel almost howled as his balls contracted, the orgasm totally overwhelming. His hole clenched around Ryan’s cock, and he pumped semen all over his chest and stomach as he came.

“Daniel... love!” Ryan’s entire body shook as wave after wave of release pulsed through him, his hot semen filling up Daniel’s still spasming channel.

Ryan looked stunned as he sank down onto his chest. Daniel brought his arms around his exhausted lover and held him as they both struggled for breath.

Pleasure continued rippling through him as they came down from their shared high. Much too soon, Ryan pulled out and slid to his side.

“Wow.” He grinned, feeling happy and sated. “What a way to start the day.”

“Yeah. Almost better than breakfast.” Ryan winked at him.

“Almost.” He laughed, delighted with Ryan’s playfulness. “Shower?”

Ryan nodded but snuggled closer instead. Yeah, the shower could wait.

DANIEL turned into the quiet bit of Onekama Drive, looking forward to seeing Ben and his family at their home instead of the restaurant this week. Ryan was sitting next to him, quietly admiring the old trees and varied houses that lined the street. Peter and Nicole were right behind them. A planning session for the wedding was just the excuse they’d all

needed to get together and spend some time forgetting the awful events of the last week.

The colonial style house with the green woodwork and shutters came up on the left, and he took a turn into the driveway that led to the double garage, parking the car in front. They got out and walked around to the front door, just to be polite. It flew open before they even rang the doorbell.

“Uncle Daniel!” Eric ran down the two steps and flew into his arms. “We’ve been waiting for you *forever*.”

“Uncle Ryan!” Edward squealed and jumped into Ryan’s wide open arms. “I’m glad you came.”

“And what are we—chopped liver?” But Peter was grinning.

“Eew, chopped liver. No way would we like you then.” Eric let go of Daniel but went to Ryan first, before hugging “Uncle Peter” and “Aunt Nicole.”

“Thank you for making Ryan our uncle.” Edward hugged Daniel quietly. “He’s really nice, and I love his sketch.”

“I’ll tell you a secret.” Daniel was whispering loud enough for all to hear, including Karen and Ben who had appeared on the porch just after the twins’ first squeals. “I’m also very glad he agreed to marry me and become your uncle.”

More hugs followed until everyone had greeted everyone else. What a production. Daniel loved to see Ryan happy and relaxed, fitting right in. Finally they all piled into the family room to admire the framed sketch in its place of honor above the fireplace.

“Wow, Ryan, that’s really good. It’s like they’re alive and about to jump off the page.” Nicole turned around to study her brother. “You’ve gotten even better than before.”

Ryan bent his head and blushed.

“Did you bring more?” Eric looked up at Ryan. “Can we see the others you did? The ones you told us about on the phone?”

“I... no.” Ryan sank into the overstuffed dark green couch, head in his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” Edward knelt next to Ryan on the couch and put his arms around his shoulders, closely followed by Eric on Ryan’s

other side. "Don't be sad. It's okay if you forgot. You can always bring them next time, right?"

"Yeah." Eric nodded. "We forget stuff all the time, we understand."

"You guys." Ryan looked up and took a boy in each arm, leaning back to make them all comfortable. "I wouldn't forget something you wanted to see this much. It's just... well... they got stolen."

"Stolen?" Eric's eyes were wide. "Did you call the police? Like they do on TV?"

"Yes, we called the police." Ryan smiled down at Eric. "But they need some time to find out who did it."

"Why did the thieves steal your sketches?" Edward frowned. "Didn't they have enough money to buy them from you?"

Ryan looked so helpless, Daniel just couldn't resist helping out.

"Actually, Edward, we don't think money was the problem." Daniel sat down next to Ryan and kissed Edward on the head. "They didn't really want the sketches. Sometimes people take stuff away from others to hurt them or to make them angry."

"Like when someone in kindergarten takes my favorite toy?" Eric's eyes narrowed. "But Mrs. Brown says that's not a very grown up thing to do."

"And anyway, who would want to hurt Uncle Ryan?" Edward chimed in.

"We think the people who did this don't want your uncle Ryan to stay here and marry me." How else did you explain homophobia to a five-year-old?

"Huh?" Eric looked puzzled. "You mean they want you to marry someone else?"

"No, no." Daniel almost laughed.

But then he remembered the strange way Acton had stared at him a couple of weeks ago, and when he looked up at Ben, his friend was frowning in thought.

"So why do they want you to leave? Don't they like you?" Edward looked up at Ryan and cuddled into his lap, looking like he wanted to stay for a while.

“No, they don’t like me very much.” Ryan’s voice was soft as his arms went around the little boy.

“I get it.” Eric, not to be outdone, wormed his way onto Ryan’s lap and into his arms from the other side. “They’re jealous because they can’t paint as good as you do.”

“No.” Ryan’s lips twitched at this demonstration of a five-year-old’s logic. “No, we don’t think it’s that.”

“But you’re a nice guy.” Eric sounded exasperated. “What’s not to like?”

“It’s because I’m a man.” Ryan sighed. “Some people think that it’s not right for a man to love another man. And they think it’s even worse for two men to get married.”

“But that’s stupid.” Eric snorted with all the disdain he could muster. “You can’t help who you love, right? At least, that’s what Mrs. Brown said when she explained why Jennifer has two mummies.”

“Mrs. Brown is right, Eric. And she sounds like a very clever woman.” Ryan smiled and squeezed the little boys. “But not everyone had a Mrs. Brown to explain things to them when they were young.”

“Maybe we should ask Mrs. Brown to explain things to these thieves when the police find them?” Edward smiled. “And if they won’t listen, they’ll go to prison, right?”

“If we can prove it was them and if a jury agrees, a judge can send them to prison.” Daniel sighed. It sounded a lot easier than it was going to be.

“Good.” Eric nodded. “That’s where they belong if they’re that stupid.”

“Now that we have clarified that, why doesn’t everyone look for a seat and let me know what they want to drink?” Karen smiled. “And then we can talk about Daniel’s and Ryan’s wedding, which is why we’re all here after all.”

After everyone was settled, got their drinks sorted and had quieted down again they got started by taking them through their meeting with Stephen and Jack, including the basics of the ceremony they’d chosen. Both Ben and Peter took copious notes.

“After all, we *are* going to be your best men.” Ben rubbed his hands. “Personally, I can’t wait for the speech part of the evening.”

“No embarrassing stories, please.” Daniel rolled his eyes. He knew what his best friend was capable of when left to his own devices.

“Don’t worry, big brother, I’ll keep him under control.” Peter winked.

“Um—not sure how reassuring *that* is.” Daniel shrugged. Nothing he could do about it, so he’d have to grin and bear whatever these two rascals came up with.

“So, are you both going to walk down the aisle together?” Karen was smiling. “I’ve always liked the symbolism of that.”

“Actually....” Ryan looked at him for confirmation, and he nodded which made Ryan smile and turn to Nicole. “I’d like you to give me away, please, Nicole. You were the one who most helped me become who I am today. I was thinking you could walk down half the aisle with me, then I’d walk the rest alone. Sort of reflecting what happened....”

“I would love to give you away.” Nicole had tears in her eyes as she walked over to hug her brother. “And I wish you wouldn’t have to walk the rest of the way alone, but I love the symbolism. So the answer is yes.”

“Thank you.” Ryan hugged her back and buried his face in her hair for a few moments. “Thank you for everything.”

When Nicole had sat back down next to Peter, Daniel looked around the room as if he was missing something. He rested his eyes first on Edward, then on Eric.

“No. No. No.” Eric shook his head.

“What?” Daniel tried to look harmless.

“You’re not going to make us flower boys, are you?” Eric frowned.

“Flower boys?” Daniel pretended to think about it. “Not a bad idea.”

“But—I can’t do that job.” Eric looked indignant.

“Why not?” Edward grinned at him. “These are two guys getting married, right? And a woman is giving one of them away? Why not flower boys?”

"I get that." Eric managed to look down his nose at his brother. "I'm not stupid. I'm just worried about my allergies!"

"And anyway...." Karen's grin almost split her face. "I've always wanted to be a flower girl. So—I kind of wanted to apply for the job."

"You did?" Daniel was flabbergasted, and Ryan just stared at her.

"I did." Karen sat up straight. "Don't tell me you're going to disqualify me just because I'm a little older?"

"No." Ryan giggled and looked at Daniel. "No, we wouldn't want to be accused of ageism, would we, love?"

"Huh—uh." What was he going to say to that? "Actually, I think it's a great idea, Karen. We hadn't thought of having a flower girl, but if you want the job, you have it."

"Goodie." It was Karen's turn to rub her hands in glee as Ben made a note of it.

"Are there any jobs left?" Eric looked hopeful.

"Yeah, we'd love to help!" Edward nodded.

"There is one very important job left." Ryan's lip twitched. "Actually, it's two very important jobs. Hm. I wonder whether you'd be able to do those?"

"Anything." Eric bounced in his seat.

"We'll be good, we promise." Edward took his brother's hand to calm him down.

"Well, in that case...." Daniel moved forward on the couch, gazing on the twins. "Do you think you could be the ring bearers?"

"You mean—carry your wedding rings?" Eric's eyes widened.

"That's important!" Edward nodded.

"You think you can do that?" Daniel was having such fun. "I mean, you can't lose them, or Ryan and I can't get married. So it's really, really important you get this right."

Eric looked at Edward who nodded, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Yes, we think we can do it." Eric smiled. "We *want* you to get married, so we'll do it right."

WHEN the twins were finally asleep upstairs, after four bedtime stories, one each from their three uncles and their aunt, Nicole went to help Karen clean up the kitchen, relieving Ben who joined the three other men in the family room to get comfortable. Ryan didn't sit down next to Daniel though, instead taking one of the easy chairs opposite the sofa. He was very pale.

"Is something wrong, sweetheart?" Daniel didn't like the distance Ryan had put between them one bit.

"No." Ryan swallowed. "Nothing is wrong. But I have a really important question for you, actually, for you and Ben."

"And that means you can't sit next to me?" Shit, what was going on in his fiancé's brain now?

"I—I don't know. But I can't think straight when you sit next to me." Ryan blushed. "And it's really important I get this right."

"Okay." Was he as distracting for Ryan as Ryan was for him? Cool.

"Right. Well." Ryan crossed his legs and folded his hands atop his knees. "I've been thinking about this for a while now. I just wasn't sure whether it's the right thing to do, but I've realized that I need to do something to start contributing to our partnership, Daniel. I can't go on just living off your money like I've done so far."

Crap, Ryan was still worried about that? But Daniel just nodded, wanting to give his lover a chance to speak his mind.

"So, when we sat in the restaurant two weeks ago, and Ben asked me if I was going to do an exhibition, I was really surprised. I mean, I'd never really thought about it. Sure, I'd sold a few sketches and smaller portraits here and there to get some much needed cash, but an exhibition? I really didn't think I was good enough, you know?" Ryan's hands were shaking. "But I've been thinking about it. I'm still not sure my stuff will be good enough, once I get a few pieces painted again, but I've thought of a way of giving it a try."

"That's great!" Daniel was excited. He knew how difficult this was going to be for Ryan, so he was going to do his best to support him.

“This is where I need both of you.” Ryan looked back and forth between Ben and Daniel. “Because I—I would like to ask your permission to put a few paintings in some of your restaurants so people can look at them, and if they like them, buy them. If not, it’ll just look like art and nobody will be the wiser.”

Shit. Not what Daniel had expected. Ben wasn’t going to like that, and he wasn’t too sure what he thought about it himself.

“In our restaurants? I don’t know, Ryan. I really don’t know.” Ben shook his head. “I mean, I’d really like to help you out, but I can’t see us using them as “marketplaces” to sell stuff. Even if they’re very good paintings, don’t get me wrong. But I just don’t think we should commercialize the restaurants like that.”

Ryan looked so dejected Daniel could have kicked Ben. Never mind that he actually agreed with his friend, their business proposition just wasn’t about pushing stuff on people. But it was so hard on Ryan.

Ryan turned hopeful eyes on him and his heart broke. But he was not going to compromise his business principles for his lover’s sake, was he? Fuck!

“I’m sorry Ryan.” Daniel wanted to embrace Ryan so badly when he saw how Ryan winced at the implied no. “I’m afraid I’ve got to agree with Ben on this one.”

“Why don’t you try a gallery?” Ben sounded way too cheerful.

“I doubt very much they’d take my paintings.” Ryan was even paler than before. “Even if I knew who I’d need to talk to, which I don’t. I mean, I know you like them, but these are professionals we’re talking about. They see great stuff all the time, and I’m just not sure my work would be good enough in that sort of context.”

“Okay, so it might take a while to find out who to talk to and who to convince that your work is good enough.” Daniel shrugged. “But you’re not in a rush, are you? I mean, I promised to take care of you, and I will. It’s not like you need the money, right?”

Ryan closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Then he sat up straight, pulling himself together.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Ryan raked his blond locks with a hand. “I need to do this. Painting is important for me. Hell, I used to skip meals to buy my supplies. The last few days have shown me just

how huge it can get, given the opportunity to do more. It makes me happier than I can say when others can see my vision. It's impossible to know if I'll make it, but this is my best chance to give something back to you. I mean, I appreciate everything you've done for me, I really do. I just can't keep on living off your money for the rest of our lives, Daniel. I'm sorry, I just can't."

And with that Ryan got up and walked to the large patio door, staring out into the gathering darkness, his shoulders slumped.

What was Daniel going to do? This was the second time Ryan mentioned outright how important it was to him to contribute to their partnership financially. Why was this so important for him? Didn't he understand that true partners share everything? Didn't he trust Daniel to keep his word?

It made him all the more determined to start talking to Ben about transferring half his share of the business to Ryan. Not that Ben would stop him, but at least he should know that Daniel intended to do it, whether Ryan wanted it or not!

Chapter 18

RYAN stepped back from the painting he was working on. He'd been drawn to the studio before the sun was even up, unable to sleep after last night's rejection of his suggestion of exhibiting his paintings in Daniel's and Ben's restaurants. In the mood for a dark subject he'd decided to paint one of his ex-roommates. Now Ivan's ugly scowl looked so lifelike it was almost frightening. Maybe he could do a whole series like this? He even had the perfect name for it: *thugs*.

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to try and make himself relax as he took a seat in the recliner. He needed a break, just for a moment.

He was frustrated that he couldn't seem to get through to Daniel. His lover *said* that he understood his need to paint. He *said* that Ryan's art gave him joy. And yet he didn't seem to see that it was an important part of Ryan's proving that he was more than just a young man who'd gone through a hard time. Ryan couldn't help wondering if Daniel was helping him out of pity.

He shook his head. He had to stop thinking like that. It wasn't what Daniel was about at all. He *knew* that Daniel didn't mean his offers of financial support to be insulting. It was just... Ryan's parents had never supported his art and had ultimately kicked him out. Daniel was never going to kick him out, and he supported his painting, but when it had come right down to it, he didn't want to go as far as exhibiting Ryan's work in the restaurants. Daniel had said there were important business reasons for it, but Ryan just didn't get those. And even knowing that his lover had a reason, didn't take away the pain of being rejected like that.

He was going to have to find a different way of exhibiting and selling his paintings. But where would he even start? He didn't know the first thing about the art scene in Grand Rapids these days. Would he need a minimum number of paintings? Would they need to be a certain style? Who did he approach about this?

When inspiration hit, he grinned. He would do what Daniel always seemed to do: research on the Internet. At least it would give him a place to start.

When a warm hand touched his shoulder, he startled awake.

"Sweetheart? What are you doing here?" Daniel kneeled next to the recliner, already dressed in jeans and soft-looking blue sweater. "You haven't been here all night, have you?"

"No." Ryan stretched and yawned, blinking into the daylight. "I just couldn't sleep, so I came here to paint."

"Must have been the middle of the night." Daniel smiled and looked around, his eyes widening when he saw the new painting.

"Na, it was just really early." Ryan sat up. "You like the painting?"

"Well, like may be a strong word." Daniel shook his head. "It's unbelievably lifelike, though. But then, all your portraits are."

"Hmm, I think you're right." Ryan chuckled. "Looks like I'll be specializing in the human face."

"Not a bad area to specialize in, right?" Daniel took his hand. "Look, about last night... I'm really sorry we had to turn you down."

"It's okay." Ryan looked down, not wanting to show Daniel how disappointed he really was.

"No, it's not okay." Daniel stroked his knuckles. "I know that you're disappointed, but I really think selling paintings would not be a good fit with the image we're trying to achieve for the restaurants."

"I know what you think." Ryan sighed and looked up. "I get that you believe that. I'm still disappointed, though. It's just going to make it more difficult for me to start making a name for myself. Hell, I don't even know any galleries, how to approach them, or what they're looking for."

“Hey, I can help you find....” Daniel’s eyes widened when Ryan put his fingers across his lips.

“Shhh. I know you can.” Ryan moved his hand to Daniel’s cheek for a slow caress. “But I think I need to do this on my own. It may take a little longer, but it’s important to me that I learn to stand up for myself, you know?”

“Okay.” Daniel nodded. “Okay, I can see that. But you let me know if you change your mind or if you run into difficulties, right?”

“I will.” Ryan smiled and bent his head to kiss his lover.

Warm lips touched his and opened to him immediately. With a sigh he dove into the welcoming warmth of Daniel’s mouth, exploring and caressing to his heart’s content. He pulled Daniel into the recliner with him until the other man was laying half on top of him. His scent enveloped him. It was a heady mix of soap and the citrusy aftershave his lover used with an underlying dose of Daniel. Ryan couldn’t get enough.

They exchanged kiss after kiss, hands wandering under clothing to find naked skin. They made out like teenagers for long minutes. This closeness, this intimacy was what it was all about. He’d work hard for the rest of his life if he could only keep this wonderful man in his arms.

When both their stomachs rumbled at the same time, they broke the kiss and grinned. At least Ran wasn’t the only hungry one this time.

THE ugly yellow skull on a black background, blood dripping from empty eye sockets, came as a total surprise. When Ryan had gone to get the mail while Daniel prepared breakfast, he’d been on the lookout for another white envelope. This—this was almost more malicious. He turned the postcard around to see “faggot go home” written on the back in red ink, some of the letters crooked and made to look like they were bleeding into the puddle of blood at the bottom.

“Shit.” Ryan’s knees almost buckled as he started walking back.

When he closed the front door he looked around to check for the dark sedan they’d seen lurking across the street last week, but there was nothing now. This had just become officially creepy. Threats from his

parents were one thing, but this felt like it was someone else—someone more willing to intimidate him than even his parents.

He walked into the kitchen and put the mail onto the counter.

“Anything interesting today?” Daniel closed the fridge, a bowl of fruit salad in one hand. “Ryan, what’s wrong?”

The bowl was on the center island, and Daniel had his arms around him before Ryan could answer.

“It’s a postcard this time.” He leaned into Daniel, resting his head on his lover’s shoulder for just a moment.

“A postcard?” Daniel reached for the ugly thing, not letting go of him with his other arm. “Jeez, that’s just foul.”

“That’s not the worst of it.” Ryan lifted his head and brought his arms around Daniel’s middle, holding on. “Turn it around.”

“Shit.” Daniel closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at the letters a second time and dropped the card back onto the counter. “Fuck, that’s just evil.”

“I’ll call Detective Barrios.” Ryan was determined to do it himself this time. “After breakfast. I need some coffee first.”

“Sure. It’s not like they need to get here to catch whoever did this—or did you see someone outside?” Daniel went to get them coffee.

“No, there was no car or anything out of the ordinary that I could see.” Ryan took the bowl of fruit salad and the bread from the center island and carried it over to their breakfast nook. “Whoever did this is long gone.”

TWO hours later, the detectives bagged the postcard and took Daniel’s and his statements while being treated to fresh coffee.

“Let me give you an update on our investigation before we leave.” Barrios emptied her mug and put it on the coffee table. “We’ve spoken to Mr. and Mrs. Johnston about the letters to establish whether they’d written them. They admitted that they were the originators, saying they were very worried about their son’s mental health and well-being. They did not admit to delivering them, though and did not

disclose who did. This probably means they hired someone, possibly a professional, since the delivery was very stealthy.”

“So how do we stop them?” Ryan frowned.

“Since there were no specific threats made in the letters they admitted to sending, unfortunately there isn’t much we can do.” Eldrige frowned. “When we mentioned the fourth letter, the one without a signature, they denied being the originators. If it’s true that they didn’t personally deliver the earlier letters and that the unsigned letter was not theirs, this confirms that at least one other person is involved in this.”

“Finding out who this is or who they are, will be our first priority.” Barrios held up a hand when Ryan opened his mouth. “I’m not saying we’ve decided they’re innocent, we just need to follow other leads as well, especially since they also denied stealing from your studio.”

“What other leads?” Ryan felt nauseated by the whole thing. More people involved in this? Who else hated him this much?

“Well, our first hypothesis is that whoever put the fourth letter into your mailbox must have organized the theft from your house.” Barrios pulled her notepad and a pen from her pants pocket. “We’ll need to speak to the workmen who constructed the studio while you were in Vancouver. They may have seen someone watch the house. Or, worst case, one of them may have been involved. Can you give us the name of the company you used, Mr. Miller?”

Daniel nodded and gave her what she needed.

“For now we’re going to assume that whoever delivered the fourth letter and organized the theft is now mad and has sent the postcard as well.” Barrios closed her notebook. “Do you have any questions, gentlemen?”

“Other than how long it will take to stop this person? No.” Daniel looked frustrated, his cheeks red with anger.

“I’m sorry.” Barrios got up and Eldrige followed her lead.

“I know it’s not your fault.” Daniel led them to the door. “It’s just frustrating to see that they’re still out there and are actually stepping up the campaign.”

“Believe me, Mr. Miller, it’s just as frustrating for us.” Eldrige tightened his lips into thin lines. “We’ll keep you posted on any developments.”

THERE had been another two postcards—one on Wednesday and one on Friday morning. Both mysteriously delivered with the normal mail. None of the neighbors had seen anyone unusual in the area. The studio thief had not been found, and the police still didn’t have any leads since the interviews of the workmen had been unproductive.

Ryan was very tempted to give up and leave. He hadn’t even had the energy to approach the Grand Rapids Gallery Association that he’d found on the Internet quite quickly. They looked like a promising place to start collecting information about places to sell his paintings to, but he just couldn’t get himself to feel positive and confident enough to go and see them.

Instead he’d thrown himself into painting with a vengeance, and the distraction had worked to a degree. But he hadn’t slept enough and the exhaustion was beginning to take its toll. He’d spent the morning trying to capture his anger and frustration in oil. Too upset to focus on his series of *thugs*, he’d ended up painting indistinct shapes. An interesting experiment since abstract art had never been a strength of his.

He took a step back and looked at the angry swirls of dark colors with a critical eye. Not his most delightful piece of work, but it did the job of reflecting his impotent fury and increasing fear of unavoidable doom.

“Ryan?” Daniel’s voice was low and came from behind him. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed and put down the brush and palette before turning to see his lover stare at the painting, eyes wide and eyebrows up.

“Looking at your newest piece I would say ‘don’t know’ is the optimistic version.” Daniel shook his head and tore his gaze away to focus on Ryan. “Seriously, I came in here to ask you if you need a break. Somehow I think I no longer need to ask the question.”

“A break would be good.” And not just from painting. A break from the threats he was convinced still somehow originated with his parents was what he really needed. “I am kind of hungry, now that I think about it.”

Daniel threw another glance at the painting, shook his head and took him downstairs. Delicious smells came from the kitchen, and Ryan’s mouth watered as he took a deep breath.

“I put the casserole in the oven earlier.” Daniel grinned as he put some crusty bread on the table, adding a salad from the fridge. “I had a feeling we might need to be flexible around when we eat when you vanished into the studio without a word.”

“It smells wonderful.” Ryan put water and juice on the table and then sat down, watching his lover bend low to get to the oven. “What is it?”

“Lamb casserole with potatoes and garlic.” Daniel used a pair of pot holders to pull the glass casserole dish from the oven and put it onto the thick cork trivet in the middle of the table. “It’s my grandmother’s recipe.”

By the time they were done eating, Ryan felt a lot better. Once the kitchen was set back to rights, Daniel took him by the hand and started walking them upstairs.

“I don’t know about you, but I think we need to spend some quality time together.” Daniel sat down on the bed and pulled Ryan onto his lap. “I know that you’ve been busy painting but I’ve missed you.”

“Oh, Daniel, I’ve missed you too.” Ryan dropped his forehead onto Daniel’s strong shoulder. All the restless energy of the last few days faded as he focused on his lover’s warm arms around his middle and his musky scent enveloping his senses.

“What do you say we take a nice long bath together?” Daniel’s hands moved up and down his back. “It’ll help you relax all those tense muscles you’ve been using to experiment with abstract art.”

“That sounds great.” Ryan laughed. “And experiment is the right word. I haven’t got a clue what I was doing. I guess I just needed to get all those dark feelings out somehow and ended up with a totally weird painting.”

“It’s not really weird.” Daniel pulled back so he could look at him. “It’s not your usual style, but it does communicate how you feel. Actually, frighteningly well. I could feel your anger and your frustration when I looked at that painting.”

“Oh. So it wasn’t just me?” Ryan couldn’t believe his lover had picked all of that up just by looking at the mass of swirls and dark tears.

“No, definitely not. You may have discovered a new talent of yours.” Daniel kissed him, much too briefly, on the lips. “But enough of that for now. It’s bath time.”

It sounded like they were little kids, and that made Ryan giggle. But he followed Daniel into their bathroom more than willing to forget their troubles for a bit. He ran the bath while Daniel pulled scented candles from one of the cabinets. With the candles placed and lit, they undressed each other, slowly caressing and kissing bared skin until they were naked. Not to mention rock hard.

They slid into the bath, and Ryan leaned back against Daniel’s chest, relaxing into the warm water. Daniel stroked his arms, and he rested his elbows on the edge of the tub and caressed his lover’s thighs.

“Mmhm.” Daniel’s deep voice made his back vibrate.

“Nice.” He grinned. Reduced to single syllables already.

“Very.” Daniel pulled a soft washcloth into the water and started to wash Ryan’s arms, his chest, and then his abdomen, staying away from where his touch was most needed.

“Please.” His hips bucked.

“Soon.” Daniel chuckled and pushed him forward to wash his back with equally languorous movements.

A small push against his backside had him move up onto his knees, and Daniel slipped a wet finger along his crack. Sliding forward across his clenching hole, Daniel caressed his perineum, applying slight pressure which made his cock throb in response. When Daniel reached the back of his sack and stroked it lightly, he moaned.

“God, love, so good.” He rocked back and forth to try and encourage Daniel to keep stroking his sensitive spots. “More.”

Daniel added a second finger and kept stroking, slowly increasing the pressure. Intense pleasure raced straight from his balls to his cock, making it throb. Water sloshed out of the tub as his rocking grew

frantic. When Daniel moved closer and reached around him to enclose his cock in a tight fist, three strokes was all it took.

“Daniel!” He came so hard that his semen made the water splash up against his abdomen

Still shaking with his release, he sat on his haunches. Daniel rose to his knees and embraced him from behind, holding him securely in his arms. Daniel’s hot cock slid along his crack, and his lover started humping as he pressed back and down to help provide the needed friction.

“So close.” Daniel panted into his ear, sliding one hand down his abdomen to help press his lower body back. “Shit. Ryan...”

Daniel groaned and sprayed his lower back with his semen. Both were breathing heavily and rested for a while, leaning against each other.

When they finally made it out of the bathtub and into their bed, Ryan’s last thought before falling asleep was that it should always be like this. Just the two of them, no outside interference.

Chapter 19

DANIEL sat back in his chair and looked around the Bistro. Halloween was still three days away but the team had done a good job putting all the decorations up in time for Sunday lunchtime. The kids had a ton of Halloween crafts to keep them busy in their corner and he'd noticed more than a few of their parents either watching them intently or openly joining them.

Ryan had shown no hesitation in going with Eric and Edward when they'd asked him to help them make pumpkin seed necklaces. The pre-painted orange, black, white and green seeds were being threaded at an alarming speed. It was a good thing Ryan was there to help Karen supervise and make sure the pointy needle didn't do any damage to eager little fingers.

"Looks like fun, doesn't it?" Ben grinned at him as he played with one of the awfully real-looking black pompom spiders the twins had made as table decorations for each of them. The little wiggle eyes were going all over, almost making him dizzy.

"Sure does." Daniel smiled. "We both needed a break. It was a good idea to come here instead of going to the Palace this week. It's more informal and combining Halloween with French cuisine is certainly no weirder than having it in an Italian restaurant."

"You're right, it isn't." Ben laughed. "Having the Pagoda all decked out with pumpkins does go a bit far though. I'm glad Wu put his foot down and limited the celebration to Halloween itself this year."

"Yeah." Daniel chuckled. "Wu was right. It's not like we make a big deal out of Chinese New Year at the Palace or the Bistro."

“Indeed.” Ben turned serious. “Any news on the studio attack? I don’t want to ask when the twins are here.”

“Nothing.” Daniel’s heartbeat increased just thinking about it. “We’ve had nasty postcards replace the threatening letters. We’ve had one about every other day for the last week. The last one was delivered just this morning. They all tell Ryan to leave. In no uncertain terms.”

“Shit.” Ben frowned. “And the police still have no idea who’s behind this?”

“None.” Daniel shrugged. “Whoever did the studio break-in has to have some skill, or they wouldn’t have been able to get into the house without any visible sign of entry. The forensics team found traces of a very sophisticated lock pick on the back door. The other clue is that they keep delivering these postcards to the house with the other mail. The mailman has been interviewed, so we know the cards weren’t amongst the normal mail. None of the neighbors has seen anything suspicious.”

“It does sound like it wasn’t Ryan’s parents, then.” Ben looked thoughtful.

“It does look like it wasn’t them *personally*, no.” Daniel frowned. “Doesn’t mean they’re not behind it, though. Ryan is definitely convinced it’s them and I tend to agree. I mean, who else wants him gone this badly?”

“Well...” Ben took a deep breath. “Remember the weird way Acton was behaving two weeks ago?”

“He wouldn’t have the skill.” Daniel hesitated. “Would he?”

“Well, I don’t know about skill, but it looks to me like he’d have the motivation.” Ben sat back in his chair. “When Eric asked whether the thieves were trying to annoy Ryan because they wanted you to marry someone else I got to thinking about this again.”

“I remember that.” Daniel sat up straight.

“When I’d originally talked to Acton and told him off for his behavior I focused on the professional side of the issue. He said he was very sorry and apologized.” Ben tilted his head. “But even though he was using the right words there was something about his attitude and body language that just didn’t feel right.”

“Oh?” This was definitely news.

“Yeah, oh.” Ben smirked. “I didn’t really think anything much of it at the time. But Eric’s question had made me think, so I decided to watch Acton more closely to see if this vague feeling of unease was justified.”

“And?” Daniel moved forward on his chair.

“Well, there wasn’t anything definite that could be used as evidence in a court of law.” Ben shrugged. “But he does tend to talk about you as if you were a close personal friend of his, not his boss. When the other waiters grumble about something, he defends you as if he was your bodyguard or something. It just confirmed to me that he seems to think there is a lot more going on between the two of you than there actually is.”

“Which is exactly nothing. Shit.” Daniel sighed and sat back in his chair.

“Yeah.” Ben nodded. “I don’t really think that Acton did any of this, but what if he was helping someone else? Maybe he’s giving them information? I mean, if he’s really deluded himself into thinking you and he could become an item, then Ryan being gone would solve a lot of issues for him.”

“I guess it would, at least in his own slightly warped way of looking at things.” Daniel grimaced. “I guess I better let the police know about our suspicions, maybe they can get some information out of Acton.”

When the waiter approached with their food Ben called the others back to the table. The twins brought their necklaces and Daniel, dutifully admired them.

After the twins had finished, they went back to the kid’s corner to make scary-looking jack-o’-lantern masks from orange paper plates.

“I just love Halloween.” Ryan sighed wistfully as they waited for their coffee.

“It is a fun holiday.” Daniel had never been particularly attached to it, though.

“I just wish....” Ryan’s eyes were big as he watched the twins struggle with small scraps of black paper and glittery glue.

“What?” Daniel wasn’t going to refuse his adorable lover anything.

“Huh?” Ryan turned toward him.

“You wish what?” Daniel raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know. Just....” Ryan took a deep breath and made eye contact. “Daniel, can we celebrate Halloween together?”

“Sure.” Where else was he going to be?

“No, what I mean is—really celebrate—with decorations and candy and maybe even going trick-or-treating?” Ryan looked so hopeful—like this was a big deal for him. “I know it probably sounds childish and ridiculous to you, but we were never allowed to celebrate it when I was a kid. And there wasn’t really any chance of having fun over the last four years either.”

“You’ve never celebrated Halloween?” Ben looked as incredulous as Daniel felt.

“No.” Ryan looked down at the table.

“But... why?” Karen looked almost shocked.

“My parents said it was a ‘despicable heathen’ holiday. Not Christian at all. They always made us spend the day in prayer instead. Just like All Saints Day.” Ryan still didn’t look up.

“So that’s why you never went trick-or-treating with us?” Daniel had always thought that strange.

“I just wanted to have some fun, you know?” Ryan finally raised his eyes, luminous and green and full of remembered pain. “I love the colors and the costumes and the scariness of it all.”

“Well, in that case we’re going to have a seriously fun Halloween this year!” Daniel was determined to help Ryan get rid of his demons.

“We are?” Ryan’s eyes looked so much better with hope replacing the pain.

“Yep, definitely.” Daniel was going to get costumes and everything.

“I bet the twins would love to take you trick-or-treating. I usually take them, but this way I could have some fun with my lovely wife instead.” Ben waggled his eyebrows at Karen, making her laugh.

“Hey, going with the twins would be perfect.” Ryan smiled, looking very young all of a sudden. “I bet they know all the best places to get candy around your neighborhood!”

DANIEL made sure he got to the mail first on Monday morning, expecting another threatening postcard and wanting to give Ryan a break from discovering them. Returning to the house, he put the card aside for reporting to the police and went through the rest of the stack. He hoped....

Yes! There they were, just as promised. The black envelopes with gold lettering looked as distinguished and special as the sample Jack and Stephen had shown them when they’d first looked at wedding invitation designs in Vancouver two weeks ago.

He took the one addressed to Ryan to the kitchen where his fiancé was preparing breakfast. He’d insisted on sharing the task, and Daniel was happy to let him contribute.

“I’ve got a surprise for you.” He’d hidden the envelope behind his back.

“A good one?” Ryan looked up from cutting fruit with eyebrows raised.

“I promise.” He nodded. “Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

Ryan frowned a little, but wiped his hands dry and complied. Daniel carefully put the envelope on his palm, face up.

“Okay, you can open them now.” He stepped back a little.

The frown on Ryan’s face had deepened but when he opened his eyes and looked at the black envelope his face split into a wide grin.

“Oh. Oh, it looks wonderful.” Ryan’s relieved smile made his whole face light up.

Carefully opening the envelope, Ryan unfolded the pocket invitation. A small respond card with its own envelope was tucked into the big pocket at the bottom. The bright white card, square and as big as the envelope, had a filigree infinity design at the top, followed by the text:

Ryan Johnston and Daniel Miller
request the honor of your presence
at their wedding ceremony

on Thursday the 1st of January 2008
at five o'clock in the afternoon
in the Somerset Suite

followed by a celebration of their union
from six o'clock in the evening
at the Manor Restaurant

Hastings House Country House Hotel
160 Upper Ganges Road
Salt Spring Island
British Columbia (BC), Canada

“Wow. It’s real now, isn’t it?” Ryan looked up, his green eyes bright with happiness.

“Hell, yes, it’s definitely real.” He grinned and slid his arms around his fiancé’s middle, pulling him close. “Everybody else will receive theirs today as well, so it’ll be as official as it gets by the end of the day.”

Ryan put the invitation on a dry part of the worktop before sliding his arms up around Daniel’s neck. Lips parted, his future husband breathed a hot “I love you” into his mouth before his lips closed over Daniel’s in a slow, gentle kiss. Both of them moaned as their tongues caressed the other’s in this intimate gesture of their deepening love.

He tightened his arms around Ryan’s responsive body and dove into the kiss with all he was. He couldn’t wait to make this official!

THREE days later Ryan had painted a ton of Halloween-themed portraits of ghosts, ghouls, and other grisly figures. They’d decorated the house inside and out. Pumpkins, spider webs and spider garlands, even some bat tinsel had found its way inside. He’d watched Ryan go totally overboard and loved every minute of it.

They'd spent the afternoon and early evening with little Eric and Edward. All four had decided to dress up as pirates, frightening anyone in sight into giving them enough candy to last the boys for a year. They'd all laughed when Ryan insisted on taking his share of the loot, as he called it, home with them. He'd made the twins pout a little, but Ben and Karen had been grateful.

As he was following Ryan into the house, he was admiring his lover's behind in the tight leather pants from their club wardrobe. They were showing Ryan's increasingly muscular legs and spectacular ass to best advantage. Combined with a frilly white shirt, rented brown jackboots, and a wide red sash wound around his small waist, Ryan looked almost like a real pirate. Definitely good enough to eat. The sight had driven him to distraction all afternoon.

He locked the door and turned around to focus on his lover.

"Come here, sweetheart." His voice had gone all husky.

He held out a hand and pulled Ryan into his arms for a kiss. Ryan's soft lips opened to him immediately and he explored the hot mouth thoroughly before pulling back for some fresh air.

"I had such fun, Daniel. This was the best Halloween ever." Ryan's smile was devastatingly beautiful. "Thanks for bearing with me."

"It was no hardship." He laughed and pulled Ryan with him as they went upstairs and into the bedroom. "I loved watching you have a good time and laugh with the boys. But you did drive me wild, you look so good. So now I'm ready to ravish you."

"You are?" Ryan's eyes went dark as his pupils dilated.

"Yeah." He slid his hands into Ryan's blond hair, caressing his nape. "I think it's time we played the adult version of trick-or-treat."

"The...." Ryan's eyes went wide. "The adult version?"

"Uh-huh." He grinned as he was stroking Ryan's neck, making the other man sigh with pleasure.

"What adult version?" Ryan blinked heavily and leaned into his caresses.

"The one where I ask you if you want a trick or a treat." He winked at Ryan and stepped back to give him space to think as he started unbuttoning his own shirt.

“Huh?” Ryan stared at his chest as it was revealed and then shook his head and looked back up. “You want me to make a decision after you’ve driven me mad with your sexy outfit for hours? And now you’re distracting me with a striptease?”

“Yep.” He nodded, impressed with how well his strategy was working. “A very simple decision. You want me to illustrate?”

“Oookay....” Ryan was clearly confused, his gaze switching between Daniel’s face and his abdomen as Daniel pulled off the shirt and dropped it onto the floor.

“A trick.” Daniel stepped closer and lightly slapped Ryan’s ass, making him gasp in surprise. “Or a treat.”

Daniel stroked Ryan’s clearly visible erection through the soft leather, making the other man thrust his hips.

“Oh.” Ryan moaned and closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing his groin against Daniel’s hand. “Oh, now I see.”

“Well?” He was prepared for both choices.

“Um. I... a treat?” Ryan blushed.

“All right.” He untied the sash around Ryan’s waist and started unbuttoning his lover’s shirt, kissing every bit of newly bared skin as he slowly peeled the fabric off his shoulders.

When he was done he dropped the shirt next to his own and sat Ryan down on the edge of the bed so he could pull off his boots. That task completed, he started unbuckling Ryan’s pants. Carefully opening the button then sliding his hand inside to protect Ryan’s erection he slid down the zipper and peeled the pants off the slim hips before the sight of the rock hard erection distracted him completely. The pants were quickly dropped once they were off, followed by his own.

Ryan was leaning back on his elbows, luminous green eyes following his every movement. His dark pink erection lay against his flat stomach dripping precome. He was a sight to behold.

“Now for your treat.” Daniel grinned as he pulled the bright orange tube of lube from the nightstand, ignoring the black leather cock ring for now. They could play with that another time.

“Orange lube?” Ryan’s eyes grew big as saucers as he squeezed a big dollop of bright orange lube onto his fingers.

“Would you have preferred black?” He wagged his eyebrows suggestively as he warmed the substance.

“Black?” Ryan laughed and shook his head. “Surely not.”

“I’ll get some for you....” Daniel kneeled in front of his lover and started applying lube to his balls, then across his perineum and lower.

“No.” Ryan spread his legs wider as he started stroking across the small puckered hole. “God, don’t stop.”

“You like this, huh?” Daniel grinned and kept stroking, circling the clenching hole. He just loved driving Ryan insane with need like this.

Ryan moaned and started humping the air, erection bobbing, desperate for attention. When he slid his middle finger inside, Ryan gripped his legs behind his knees and pulled them up, completely exposing himself.

Daniel got more lube and started stroking in and out very slowly as he bent down and captured Ryan’s glans with his lips.

“Daniel!” Ryan’s shoulders rose up as the pleasure became more intense.

His only response was to suck more of Ryan’s throbbing cock into his mouth. On the next stroke inside Ryan’s body heat he added a second finger and started caressing Ryan’s prostate. It made Ryan yell and clench around him. He started bobbing his head up and down the hard shaft, but not too fast. He wanted to draw the pleasure out as long as possible.

“Please. Daniel. God.” Ryan was close to sobbing as he bucked his hips, fucking his mouth. “Please.”

Daniel stroked faster, more deeply into the clenching hole, carefully increasing the pressure on Ryan’s prostate and swallowed Ryan’s cock all the way at the same time.

“Daniel! Love!” Ryan bucked up one last time, muscles stiff, and started shooting deep into Daniel’s throat.

He kept licking and sucking, wanting Ryan hard for the next part. His own cock was demanding attention, so he lubed it up fast while Ryan went boneless—except for his still hard cock—on the bed.

“Wow.” Ryan finally opened his eyes. “Just wow.”

“Need you now.” Daniel wasn’t even sure he’d make it inside before he came.

“Anything, love.” Ryan was still breathing hard. “Anything.”

Daniel leaned forward, putting his hands next to Ryan’s shoulders on the bedspread. Looking deep into those emerald pools he could lose himself in, he slowly pushed his hard member into Ryan’s tight hole.

“I love you.” Daniel put his forehead against Ryan’s and started moving his hips.

They breathed each other’s air as their passion rose and Daniel’s movements became faster, his strokes harder and deeper. Ryan’s hands came up his arms and gripped his shoulders as his lover started moving his hips to meet his thrusts, doubling the pleasure. Daniel felt his balls slapping Ryan’s ass on each inward thrust, the sound making everything even more erotic.

“Daniel. Fuck.” Ryan’s legs started shaking, and he slipped them around Daniel’s waist, pulling him in even harder. Making him go deeper. “You’re going to make me come again.”

Daniel looked down, and Ryan’s cock was as hard as if he’d never come. Oh yes, his lover was going to come a second time. The thought made him so hot that he lost his rhythm. Looking deep into his lover’s bright emerald eyes he started pounding him, hitting his prostate on every thrust, making Ryan whimper.

With a yell Ryan finally gave it up, spunk hitting his chin, his chest and finally the last few spurts coated his abdomen. The scent pushed Daniel over the edge, and he howled as he came into the clenching hot hole that was trying to keep him inside Ryan.

“Good. Love.” Ryan stroked his back, helping him come down.

“Hmmm. Love you.” With his last bit of coherence, he made sure he fell next to Ryan, rather than collapsing on top of him. He wasn’t going to move for a while, so he pulled Ryan closer to his chest and closed his eyes. “So very good.”

Chapter 20

“WHAT the hell?” Ryan stared at the defaced front door in utter disbelief. He’d gone to get the mail, almost expecting another threatening postcard. For the last ten days or so, they’d arrived every other day on the dot. The relief hadn’t lasted long. He had turned around, mail in hand and started to walk back to the house when he saw it.

The word “faggot” was spray-painted onto the white front door in large, purple letters and then crossed out with blood red paint. The anger at the brazenness of this latest attack on their home almost suffocated him.

He walked back to the house, shoved the door closed with a bang, dropped the mail onto the little table and marched straight to the phone in the living room. He dialed Detective Barrios’ number from memory, they’d called that often. He was shaking with rage by the time the phone rang at the other end. Damn it, this had to stop.

“Detective Barrios.” Her voice sounded calm.

“Ryan Johnston here.” How he wanted his last name to be Miller instead of Johnston. It was so unfair he’d have to wait almost a year before it would become a reality. “There’s been another attack on our home.”

“Oh no. I’m sorry to hear that. Are you and Mr. Miller okay?” There was a rustling sound as Barrios shuffled papers around on her desk.

“Yeah, we’re okay.” Ryan took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “They put graffiti on our front door this time.”

"I take it you didn't notice anything before now? Didn't hear any unusual noises?" Barrios clicked her pen into readiness.

"No, we didn't hear anything." Ryan was still fuming.

"All right, you know the drill. Don't touch anything. We'll be there in half an hour." Barrios hung up the phone and Ryan did the same.

It was time to let Daniel know. He found his lover in the kitchen preparing yet another of his amazing omelets for them.

"Hey, sweetheart." Daniel turned suddenly serious when he looked up. "Are you all right? You look upset."

"Yeah, that's because I *am* upset." Ryan started pacing.

"Shit, I forgot." Daniel put down the cheese grater. "There was another postcard 'due' today, wasn't there?"

"Except there wasn't one." Ryan turned to face his lover. "It was a lot worse."

"What have they done now?" Daniel wiped his hands and stepped closer, holding out his hand.

"They've put graffiti on the front door." Ryan was too upset to stand still and started pacing again. "It just makes me so angry. There's nothing we can do to prove it's them, and they just keep making it worse."

"Graffiti on the front door?" Daniel frowned and sat down. "This is beginning to turn into a full-blown hate campaign, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Ryan took a deep breath. "I wish there was something we could do. I've called the police, but they're not going to find anything. I just know it."

"I've been thinking." Daniel raked his long hair with a hand. "Maybe it's time for them to step up their efforts. They're not going to catch whoever this is by coming here after the fact and writing a report, are they?"

"No, reporting doesn't help, you're right." Ryan sat down, forcing himself to calm down, at least for now. They needed to face this together.

“So, I think they need to start watching the house” Daniel took his hand and stroked it absently. “That way either they’ll catch the person who’s doing this or even stop them from returning.”

“I think you’re right.” Ryan nodded as the doorbell rang. “That was fast.”

“I’ll get it.” Daniel rose from his chair. “That way I can have a look as well.”

Ryan just nodded. He could do with a bit of a break to try and let go of his anger. It wasn’t a productive emotion. He needed to focus his energy on making stuff happen. If he didn’t start pulling his act together his parents would win in the end, wouldn’t they? And that was just unthinkable.

Footsteps interrupted his thoughts a while later. He looked up as the two detectives walked into the living room, followed by Daniel. He got up, put the fresh-brewed coffee onto a tray with four mugs, sugar and milk and carried everything into the living room.

“Thanks, Ryan.” Daniel smiled at him as he took over, serving everyone before sitting down next to him on the sofa. The detectives had taken the easy chairs.

“So, what did you want to discuss with us, Mr. Miller?” Barrios put down her mug and looked at Daniel.

“I just wanted to talk to you about the fact that we’ve now been enduring this harassment for almost four weeks.” Daniel finished his coffee and returned the empty mug to the tray in front of him. “We’ve been reporting instance after instance of hateful intrusion into our personal lives and nothing has changed. We think it’s time for a different approach.”

“I hope you understand that there is nothing we can do without evidence.” Barrios frowned.

Ryan snorted and got an irritated glance from both detectives.

“It’s not that we don’t believe you.” Eldrige took another sip of his coffee. “We have actually checked back with the Johnstons’ after every incident but they have consistently denied to have done more than send the initial three letters. The interviews with the workmen were unproductive. The evidence from the studio that the forensics team examined was, as you know, insufficient without a suspect to

check it against. And Acton Haddow, your employee whom we talked to on Monday, had nothing to add to the picture at all.”

And why would Acton admit to having done anything? There was not even a hint that he’d done anything more than give Daniel admiring glances. Ryan doubted the shy waiter would even have the courage to do more. He just seemed incapable of this level of terrorization even if he was in love with Daniel and wanted Ryan gone.

“So, what exactly is it that you think we can do here?” Barrios leaned forward in her seat.

“We think the only way we’re going to stop this is if you catch the perpetrator in the act.” Daniel sat back with an expectant smirk.

“And how are we going to do that?” Barrios’ eyebrows rose. “I hope you’re not expecting us to watch your house 24/7?”

“I’m actually expecting, or rather hoping, that you will do anything necessary to catch this person.” Daniel had stopped smiling. “It seems to me that a change of tactics is needed if we want to see any progress at all.”

“I can see where you’re coming from.” Barrios sighed. “I really can. Your suggestion makes a lot of sense. However, the reality of our situation is very different, and we just don’t have the budget for 24-hour surveillance in your case.”

“What? But—” Ryan almost jumped up but Daniel’s hand moved to his thigh and held him back. Barely.

“In ‘our case’?” Daniel’s eyes narrowed. “What—is ‘our case’ not serious enough to warrant your attention to that degree?”

“Not in the way you mean.” Barrios grimaced. “It’s very unfortunate but under the current budget restrictions only cases with reasonable cause to believe there’s a serious threat to someone’s life get approval for 24-hour surveillance.”

“That’s—just unfair.” Ryan was about to lose the little of his calm that was left. “So you’re saying you can’t help us at all? Because our lives aren’t threatened—yet?”

“Unfortunately, that is correct.” Barrios held up a hand when he was about to reply. “However, what we can do now that your property has been damaged in this way is drive past more frequently.”

Like that was going to help. He grunted and caught another irritated glance from Barrios. Too bad it was his life that was being messed with.

“If you’re really determined and can afford to pay for it, I would recommend you consider hiring a private security service. We have a few that we’ve worked with in the past. They’ll be able to perform the 24-hour surveillance we all believe is needed to catch whoever is doing this.” Barrios sighed. “I’m really sorry there isn’t more I can do for you, but my hands are tied.”

A WEEK later Ryan waved at the security guards on duty in a car across the street as he got into the cab he’d called. Daniel had taken the car into the city earlier to check out the construction progress on the new restaurant over on Westside.

There had been no more instances of nasty postcards or graffiti anywhere since last Friday when Daniel had hired A+ Security to watch their house. The peace and quiet that came from the lack of threats was reassuring and had helped him relax enough to start focusing on his future. Starting with the contacting of some galleries.

He tucked the portfolio case that folded out into a presentation easel more tightly under his arm as he sat back. His best sketches and printouts of some of his larger paintings were finally going to be shown to one of the three galleries that had shown an interest when he’d spoken to them over the phone. The Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts was probably not his best bet in terms of selling his paintings, but they did offer sales advice to their students, so they must have the necessary understanding and connections. All he needed was a foot in the door and a list of contacts.

The large one-story brick building looked like it used to be a warehouse. Except now massive floor to ceiling windows replaced large parts of the street-facing walls. People of all ages were walking in and out of the building, exuding an air of urgency and a definite creative buzz. Inside there were colorful paintings on the walls, sculptures and displays of ceramic pots of all shapes and sizes.

“Hello, sir.” A perky receptionist with steel-rimmed glasses and auburn hair smiled at him as he approached the front desk to the right. “What can I do for you?”

“My name is Ryan Johnston.” He clasped his portfolio case more tightly. “I’ve got an appointment with Yvette Debrosse.”

The receptionist scanned her list.

“Ah, yes, here you are.” She looked back up at him and nodded. “I’ll let her know that you’re here. Please take a seat over on the red sofa and I’ll send her your way as soon as she’s here. Would you like some coffee while you wait?”

“No. No thanks, I’m fine.” He was hyper enough as it was.

He sat down as directed and looked around to try and take everything in. Dazed from all the different impressions, he closed his eyes for a moment. Overwhelming was an understatement.

“Mr. Johnston?” A young woman’s voice brought him back to reality, and he opened his eyes.

“Yes, that’s me.” Unfortunately still Johnston.

“I’m Yvette. Welcome to the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts or UICA for short.” Yvette looked like she was in her early thirties. Her long dark brown hair was piled artfully onto top of her head, wisps of it framing an oval face. Mocha eyes examined him curiously. Her bright yellow suit made her stand out even in this colorful environment.

“Thank you. And please call me Ryan. Mr. Johnston is my father.” And he wanted nothing to do with him. Maybe he should pick a pseudonym?

“No problem.” Yvette laughed. “Would you like to come with me? We have a small room for evaluating pieces of art in the back, near the offices. It has a skylight and, almost more importantly, it’ll give us a little more privacy than staying in the mayhem out here in the foyer.”

“Sure. Just lead the way.” He managed to at least sound confident.

They walked around the offices to the right of the entrance and almost straight into a large well-lit room. There was a table in the middle, right under the skylight and some hooks on the walls.

“Put your pieces anywhere you like.” Yvette made a sweeping gesture around the room. “I’d like to see them to their best advantage. It’s always exciting to look at a new artist’s work for the first time.”

Ryan swallowed. Artist. Yes, that was him now, wasn’t it? He still couldn’t quite believe it. To have made it this far, to have a professional evaluate his work was an accomplishment in itself, wasn’t it?

After the sketches and photos had been displayed on the table and around the room, Ryan stepped back and let Yvette wander. He had grouped them all by theme, portraits and landscapes, he’d even brought photos of some of his abstract pieces he’d done more and more of ever since that first one last week.

“You’ve got quite a range, haven’t you?” Yvette had walked around the walls twice, poured over the pictures on the table and finally stood back.

“I guess.” Was that good or bad? “I’ve just recently started to paint more frequently and have discovered some new areas.”

“Such as the abstract art?” Yvette grinned.

“Yes, how did you know?” Maybe he shouldn’t have brought those, he still wasn’t sure he’d ever be very good at it.

“They’re not bad, don’t worry. It’s just that they look less—practiced.” Yvette looked at them again and narrowed her eyes. “There is something—unspoiled about them, they feel more tentative, like an experiment.”

“You’re right, they were just an experiment.” Was this going to ruin everything?

“Don’t get me wrong.” Yvette turned around to look at him. “I think they will definitely sell. You’ll just have to find the right market for them.”

“Okay.” That didn’t sound too bad. “Would you be able to help me with that at all? I really have no idea how to go about this.”

“We usually don’t help artists who aren’t students of the Institute.” Yvette tilted her head. “However, as I said on the phone your story sounded interesting, and it made me curious. And looking at your work definitely has me intrigued. So, what I’ll do is give you a few contacts you can try for the abstract art.”

“That is great, thank you so much.” Ryan wasn’t looking forward to having to go through all this again, but it looked like he’d have no choice. And it was important he get this right as well. He wanted to finally accomplish something, be someone worthwhile and interesting.

“Now as for the portraits and landscapes.” Yvette stepped over to the other side of the table and bent down to take a closer look. “I really like your style. The people, both in your *thugs* grouping and the as yet non-themed one, just look so alive. What I would like to do with these is do a small exhibition for a few of your portraits in our post-Thanksgiving event which takes place in about two weeks, just after the long weekend. We find that people usually start looking for Christmas presents around that time. We always do a ‘local artist’ support section and I could slot you in there, if you want.”

“Yes. Yes, please.” God, this was going better than he’d expected.

“Would you be willing to take commissions if there’s interest?” Yvette straightened up. “I suspect that some people might want their portraits done if they like your style, rather than buy any of the ones on display. You might be quite busy for a few weeks.”

“That would be fine.” Ryan was so excited it was hard not to jump up and down. “I love painting people, so that would not be a problem at all.”

“Good, that’s settled then. I have your contact details on file, so I’ll send you the necessary information, including the opening date. If you send me digital versions of all the work you have I’ll make a selection and organize the transportation and logistical details.” Yvette smiled and stepped toward the door.

“That is great. Thank you so much, Yvette.” He started collecting his pieces and carefully put them back into his portfolio case. Was he going to dare ask about his landscapes as well? He gave himself a nudge and went for it. “Um, what about my landscapes?”

“Oh yes.” Yvette grinned. “Well, I don’t think they quite fit our bill, but I’ll tell you what, I’ll throw in some contacts for those as well. There are very few galleries here in Grand Rapids in that area but there’s quite a few in Chicago which specialize in that sort of thing. They might very well be interested.”

“Thank you so much. I really appreciate your help.” He was definitely going to bounce out of here. Maybe all the way home. He couldn’t wait to tell Daniel.

“Just remember us when you’re rich and famous.” Yvette winked and opened the door. “We do live mostly off donations, you know?”

“Sure.” That sounded like she actually believed he could make it. Wow. “If I ever make it that far.”

“You will, Ryan.” Yvette led the way back and held out her hand when they’d reached the foyer. “I have every confidence in you.”

The ride back in the cab took forever. Thank God Daniel’s car was parked in the driveway indicating that he was home. Ryan stormed into the house, taking in the scent of fresh baked bread on the go. He dropped his portfolio case in the study.

“Daniel, where are you?” Back in the foyer he listened for an answer.

“Down here.” Ah, the door to the basement was open. “I’m in the gym, sweetheart. I’ll be right up. I want to hear how you did at the Institute.”

Oh no. Freshly exercised Daniel, all sweaty and muscles recently pumped was just what he wanted to celebrate. No coming up, he wanted his lover in the gym. So he ran downstairs before it was too late.

“There’ll be time for that later. First, I want you right where you are.” Ryan stepped into the gym, Daniel’s musky scent pervading the room.

“You do?” Daniel was on the mats, looked like he’d just finished his sit-ups. His tight exercise shorts showed his definite interest, the hard erection growing longer as Ryan watched. Daniel’s well-muscled chest was covered with a fine sheen of sweat. What a picture to come home to. And he was all his. “It went well, then?”

“Yes, it did. Details later.” Ryan’s voice came out as a growl. God, he’d felt good before and looking at his lover, all hard and ready for him made it even better. “Right now all I want is you in my arms.”

“I’m glad it went well for you. I do want to hear all the details. But...” Daniel lay back on the mats, opening his arms. “If what you want now is me—to do with as you will—well, you’ve got me.”

Oh yes. That was exactly what he wanted. With another sound suspiciously close to a growl, Ryan started pulling off his clothes as he walked toward the still grinning Daniel. Leaving them in a messy heap, he kneeled next to his lover and slowly pulled off his tiny gym shorts. His lover's stiff cock stood almost straight up in the air and he couldn't resist licking it.

"Baby." Daniel's voice had gone all husky. "God, that's good."

Without further hesitation he started licking and sucking the swollen cock head, lapping up all the salty-sweet precome he could find. The he opened his mouth wide and slid his lips down all the way, making Daniel moan deeply.

"Yeah, like that. God, baby, you're so good at that." Daniel started panting, his thighs going tight with the effort of staying still. "Just like that. Please."

Just before it was too late, he pulled back up and off. He looked at Daniel—all flush and out of breath, eyes wide and dark blue with desire.

"I love you so much." Ryan moved over and bent down to kiss the parted lips, sliding his tongue deep into his lover's eager mouth.

"Mmhhh." Daniel slanted his head to let him go even deeper and brought his arms up around Ryan's neck to hold him in place.

Ryan lay down half on top of him, pressing their bodies closer together, loving the musky scent rising from Daniel's heated skin. He broke the kiss and started nibbling his way down Daniel's neck, across his collarbone, tasting the salty sweat. He licked across Daniel's pecs until he reached an already stiff nipple. Kissing and suckling until Daniel started writhing in pleasure, he moved to the other one, ending with a slight bite that made Daniel yelp.

"Shit, Ryan." Daniel pulled him even closer. "So *good*."

"Want you." How was he going to hold back?

"Yeah, please." Daniel nodded, eyes glazed, clearly wanting him right back.

"Lube." Shit, what was he going to do for lube?

"There's massage oil in the cupboard." Daniel's voice was soft, needy as he pointed and then spread his legs wide in invitation.

And he was supposed to tear himself away from that? But what he wanted was even better than looking at Daniel, so he jumped off and got the oil. Pouring a large amount over his fingers he knelt between Daniel's legs and slid his hand between the slightly spread cheeks.

"Ah!" Daniel gripped his legs behind his knees and pulled them up in a clear invitation for more.

Ryan poured a small amount straight onto the clenching opening and followed up with his middle finger. Sliding it in and out a few times, he watched as Daniel's eyes got even darker.

"More." Daniel closed his eyes and bent his head back. "So good, baby. Need more. Please, need your cock."

Two, then three fingers had barely made it in when he almost lost it himself. Pulling them back out, he spread the remaining oil over his throbbing cock, bent forward and pushed straight into the soft heat.

"Yes!" Daniel pulled him inside and tightened his muscles around Ryan's cock, making him moan in response.

"So tight." He pulled out and pushed back in, hard. His body was already taking over, everything urgent now. Again and again he slid into Daniel's body, trembling with the need to come.

"God, yes, fuck me." Daniel lifted his hands to pull him down by his shoulders, opening his mouth for a deep kiss.

That was it. When their tongues touched, replicating the action of their bodies lower down, Ryan lost his rhythm and started to pound Daniel in earnest. Tingles in his balls warned him that he was close, but he had to hold on for Daniel's sake.

Seconds later Daniel pulled back from their kiss and howled as his semen spurted up between them.

"Coming." Ryan went stiff, his cock swelling and pulsing his release into Daniel's still clenching channel. The world went gray around the edges as he poured all his love into Daniel before collapsing onto his lover's heaving chest.

"God, that was amazing." Daniel's breath warmed his ear.

"Uh huh." Ryan couldn't really think straight, never mind move, he was so blissed out. "I think—I think gym sex is a keeper."

Chapter 21

“HOW can you go on just ignoring what Ryan wants?” Cordell’s dark eyes flashed at Daniel, going beyond upset and into angry territory. “Insisting on giving him half the business when he’s clearly said he doesn’t want that—is just wrong.”

“He doesn’t need to know, does he?” Daniel was getting really tired with the argument but his old friend just wouldn’t give up. “Shit, Cordell, I just want to make sure he’s taken care of. No, scratch that, it’s more than ‘want.’ I *need* to make sure he’s okay, at the very least financially, if anything happens.”

“That’s a stupid argument.” Cordell rolled his eyes. “On both counts. First of all he *does* need to know. What if he finds out, after having asked you not to do it? Hm? Have you thought about how that will make him feel?”

“We’ll work it out.” Daniel was sure he could convince Ryan to see things his way. Eventually. “It’s only right that we share everything we have; it’s what real partnership is all about. I’m sure that once Ryan gets over his hang-ups of accepting help and regains his sense of self-worth, he’ll be fine.”

“I think you’re assuming an awful lot there.” Cordell sat back in his big leather chair, his large muscled frame making it squeak. “From what Ryan said that afternoon I came to see you at your house a few weeks back, it was very clear that he feels bad enough about sharing the bank accounts and the house.”

“Yes, he did feel bad about that initially. But surely he’s gotten used to it by now?” Daniel hated it when Cordell settled back like that, digging his heels in for a long argument.

“Well, maybe he has.” Cordell nodded, appearing conciliatory. “But think about it, Daniel. He really didn’t have a choice, did he? I mean, his only other option was to go back to living almost in poverty with hateful people who made his life hell, from what you’ve told me.”

“So?” He could be stubborn with the best of them.

“So?” Cordell sighed. “Accepting help out of desperation couldn’t have been very easy for him. Hell, he’s a grown man and has his pride. You’re saying his sense of self-worth is already low—do you think this sort of ‘help’ is going to change that?”

“I guess you’ve got a point there.” Daniel growled, not liking that one bit. “But that doesn’t change the fact he desperately needed help. I have to make sure he’s okay at the very least financially.”

“I’m not saying you should take back the sharing of the accounts and the house.” Cordell leaned forward as his dark gaze became more intent. “But I *am* trying to stop you from making it worse. From making it even more difficult for Ryan to rebuild his self-confidence.”

“But what if anything happens to me?” Daniel leaned forward.

“You changing your will already took care of that.” Cordell rose and started pacing. “If anything happens to you, Ryan will get everything you own. Since you don’t have children and neither your parents nor your brother are likely to contest the will—where’s the problem?”

“It’ll be faster if he’s already a part owner.” Daniel looked up at his friend who was now staring out of the large picture window of his plush downtown office.

“That’s a very weak point.” Cordell whirled around and focused his considerable energy on Daniel. “Why don’t you tell me what the real issue is for you?”

“I want to share everything with him.” Daniel swallowed. “I want him to be a true partner and that means we share everything.”

“What if Ryan isn’t ready for that?” Cordell sat on the edge of his desk, facing Daniel. “Or worse, what if his definition of partnership is different?”

“What?” Now Cordell had his undivided attention again. “What do you mean when you say that?”

“Oh come on.” Cordell raked his short dark curls with a hand. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten all the discussions we’ve had about my various very short-term boyfriends? How they kept throwing their views of partnership at me and not one of them so far has even included the word long-term in it? How you kept telling me that everyone has different interpretations of what partnership means? How mine, looking for Mr. Right, just didn’t fit with theirs?”

“And you think that’s what’s happening here?” Daniel suddenly felt weak in the knees. Had he been that short-sighted and overbearing?

“Duh.” Cordell grinned, showing all his perfect white teeth to their best advantage against his dark skin.

“Man.” Daniel hit his forehead with his flat hand as he sank back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment. “Ryan’s said again and again how he wants to be an equal partner and how that means financial as well as emotional equality to him. I just didn’t get it, did I?”

“Doesn’t sound like you did.” Cordell laughed, making his eyes crinkle. “I can’t believe I’m the one giving you relationship advice now.”

“Yeah, well, I’m really grateful for you setting me straight. So, thank you.” Daniel grimaced. Shit. He’d been about to make a monumentally stupid mistake. “From now on, I’ll be spending a lot more time and effort listening to what my partner is really saying.”

“That sounds good. And you’re welcome. But you don’t need to worry.” Cordell’s face darkened. “I’m nowhere near getting to a relationship stage with anyone myself, so I won’t need much advice for the foreseeable future.”

“Have you at least stopped going to those leather clubs of yours?” Daniel was sort of relieved the pressure was off him and they could focus on Cordell. That was a much more familiar situation. “Well, maybe expecting you to stop going isn’t really what I mean. They do sound like you have a lot of fun there. Like it’s something you really like, maybe even need. No, what I really mean is—have you stopped expecting to find Mr. Right there?”

“They’re not really ‘my’ leather clubs.” Cordell frowned as he went to sit back down in his chair. “But to answer your question, I have actually stopped going.”

“What? When did that happen?” Daniel was floored. “Why?”

“You kept telling me that the people who go there aren’t even close to looking for permanent. And I think that I’ve finally admitted to myself that you’re right. The one guy who I thought was different turned out to be looking for a full-time ‘Master.’” Cordell shuddered. “So not what I’m looking for.”

“I don’t know.” Daniel chuckled when Cordell’s expression turned indignant. “Sorry, couldn’t resist that one. I guess you have enough responsibility at work so you don’t want more of that in your personal life.”

“Well, that’s part of it.” Cordell sighed. “The bigger part is the whole ‘slavery’ thing, though. I mean, how can one human being want to ‘own’ another like he’s a piece of furniture? I just don’t get that. Anyway, I’ve decided to stay away and use a different strategy.”

“And that is?” Daniel couldn’t wait to hear this one.

“I’ll let you know when I’ve decided what it is.” Cordell laughed again, the worry fading from his face. He looked at his watch. “Shit, I’ve got a client due in five minutes.”

“What? It’s noon already?” Daniel checked his own watch. “I better get going. I’ve got to pick up Ryan from his appointment at the Gallery 154 on Lake Drive so we can have lunch. We’re going to inspect the new restaurant on Westside afterwards.”

“Oooh, any hot activities planned over lunch?” Cordell’s eyes lit up.

“No, as a matter of fact.” Daniel tried to look serious but could feel his lips twitch. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Okay, okay. Got it.” Cordell pulled a file from the stack on his left. “There was one thing I wanted to share with you, though. Something I found out when I originally looked into Ryan’s parents’ background to see if there was anything the police overlooked. You know, back before you got Detectives Barrios and Eldrige working on your case?”

“Oh?” That couldn’t be good.

“Yeah.” Cordell pulled a sheet of paper out of the stack and stared at it before looking back up. “Beyond the fact that they’re insanely rich

since Mrs. Johnston inherited her father's fortune about five years ago, you know that Mr. Johnston is a teacher, right?"

Daniel nodded, waiting for Cordell to tell him what all this was about.

"Well, nicely in line with their ambition to gain social status, he was apparently made a head master a couple of years ago and moved to a religious school on Westside." Cordell looked up.

"That's the same neighborhood where we're planning to open the Aquamarine Wave by the end of the month, isn't it?" Daniel did not like the sound of that at all. Even being in the same city as the Johnstons was too close, as far as he was concerned.

"Worse." Cordell handed him the piece of paper. "The school is also on Oakleigh Road, just a few houses down from the restaurant. That is why the PI's report rang a bell with me when the final version came in last week. I remembered the street name from the signing of the contracts for the restaurant."

"Shit." That wasn't good.

"My thoughts exactly." Cordell frowned. "I've been adding this new understanding to the fact that my research showed that the high school is largely funded by Mrs. Johnston's money. Now, normally, that would make Mr. Johnston's job fairly secure. However, if the school board found out that he has a gay son whose lover owns the restaurant just a few houses down from their school—what do you want to bet they might want to reconsider their financial situation?"

Fuck. That suddenly increased the likelihood that the Johnston's were behind all this by a significant amount. And how the hell was he going to tell Ryan how close to his father they were going to be with this new restaurant?

THE lunch at the Jade Pagoda had been great. Not only had Wu been up to his usual high standards on the food, he'd had great fun personally teaching Ryan to use chopsticks. Much to Daniel's amusement, even though he'd made every effort to hide it so that Ryan wouldn't be embarrassed.

“So, you liked watching me struggle with the chopsticks?” Ryan’s voice held a trace of laughter. When Daniel looked away from the street they were driving along for a second, he saw that his lover was trying to suppress a smile.

“Sort of.” He grinned.

“You loved it.” Ryan slid his warm hand along his thigh and squeezed. “It was pretty funny, so I can’t blame you. Just don’t make me use them all the time, like Wu suggested. I don’t think I’ll ever need to become as proficient as Wu thinks I should be.”

“That’s too bad.” He chuckled at the picture in his head. “I was looking forward to next week, seeing you eat our Thanksgiving dinner with chopsticks.”

“You weren’t.” Ryan laughed.

“No, not really.” He took the final turn into Oakleigh Road. “But I did have fun imagining it.”

He pulled into the big parking lot and shut off the engine.

“Wow, another great place.” Ryan’s eyes were wide as he stared at the wave-shaped front of the building. While the walls were made to look like sand, everything else was painted in varying shades of green or blue. The big sign over the entrance in the shape of a fish spelled Aquamarine Wave in—what else—aquamarine letters that looked like various sea creatures.

“We had to have this one custom built.” Daniel got out of the car and waited for Ryan to follow before thumbing it locked. “The property that was here before had fallen into disrepair and had already been condemned by the time we bought the land. Úlf Helgarson did a great job designing the place and Richfoot Construction, the same guys that did your studio at home, is making the design a reality.”

“Úlf? Is that even a name?” Ryan had walked up to the front door but had stepped aside to explore the wall with his fingers. Few people could resist touching the sandy surface and the numerous shells that had been sealed in.

“Yeah, he’s from Iceland and claims to have Viking ancestors. Looking at the knowledge about marine life he brought to the design, he’s probably right.” Daniel held the door open for Ryan as they walked inside.

There was dust everywhere. The noise was deafening. Hammering, sawing and sanding were taking place at the same time. The ceiling at least looked like it was finished, and the special lamps had been put in. They, together with the paint effects and large fish tanks, would make guests feel they were under water.

Currently the walls were still unadorned, though. The center of the current activity seemed to be the large water tanks that he knew had to be put in this week to give the water time to settle before the fish and other animals were going to be put in a week from now.

“This looks amazing.” Ryan had turned around and looked back at him now with wide eyes that had turned a bright shade of aquamarine in the artificial light.

“I’m glad you like it.” Greg stepped up to them, a wide smile about to split his face. “It’s beginning to look really good, even if I do say so myself.”

“You’re doing a great job here, Greg.” Daniel shook the offered hand and then turned to Ryan. “This is our foreman, Greg Watford. He’s in charge here.”

“Hi, Greg.” Ryan smiled as he shook the other man’s hand.

Daniel noticed the admiring glance his lover gave the other man. He was slighter than you’d expect a foreman to be, but as tall as Daniel at six-three—built like a swimmer but with ample muscles all over. His broad shoulders tapered into a narrow waist and long, perfectly shaped legs completing the picture. His dark hair was cropped close to the head and his deep brown eyes twinkled with mischief. Greg was straight as an arrow, but he sure looked good enough to tempt any gay man worth his salt.

“Greg, this is my partner and fiancé, Ryan Johnston.” Daniel smiled when he saw the embarrassed flush coloring his lover’s face as he quickly withdrew his hand from Greg’s and stepped back. Yep, Ryan was affected by the man’s gorgeousness as well.

“Nice to meet you, Ryan. Would the both of you like a tour of the place?” Greg gestured around the room.

“We don’t want to keep you from your work, but a quick walk-around would be appreciated.” Daniel took Ryan’s hand and winked at him as they followed Greg’s tight ass around the building site.

When they left the building, both were thoroughly impressed. There was a new car in the parking lot. Daniel squinted to try and identify the slight figure leaning against a small blue Chevy Metro with more certainty.

“Is that Acton?” Ryan looked just as puzzled as he stared over in the low light of the mid November afternoon.

“It sure looks like him.” Daniel watched the young man get into his car and leave before they could walk over to check. “Let me just call Vittorio and check.”

Vittorio checked the roster and told him that it was Acton’s day off today. How odd that he’d decide to come all the way over to the other side of town to stand around and watch the new restaurant. When Daniel asked if Acton had applied for a job at the new place he was told that the shy waiter hadn’t done that.

Putting thoughts of Acton and any other weirdness aside, Daniel drove them back home. Deep in thought, trying to figure out how to make amends for trying to push Ryan into accepting his version of partnership, he almost missed the turn into their road.

“You’ve been very quiet all afternoon.” Ryan looked at him shyly as they got rid of their warm jackets. The weather had turned recently, and he expected snow at any time now. “Is it something I said?”

“What?” Daniel shook himself. God, Ryan sounded worried.

“I can see that you’re worried about something.” Ryan hung his head. “I just wish I’d had better news for you today. It just seems like nothing is moving right now. Nobody has shown any interest in my landscapes and the portrait exhibition isn’t until after Thanksgiving.”

“Sweetheart, this isn’t about you.” Daniel held out his hand. “Come here.”

Ryan stepped straight into his arms, cuddling in. He just held him for a few minutes, rocking them gently back and forth.

“Are you sure it isn’t me?” Ryan looked up, a hesitant look in his eyes.

“I’m very sure.” Daniel bent down to place a quick kiss on those tantalizing pink lips. “It’s just that I had a meeting with Cordell today and he made me realize a few things that I’ll need to talk to you about.”

“Can we do that later?” Ryan melted against him as he slid his arms around his shoulders, stepping up to fit their groins more tightly together. “I’d like to try a different type of communication first. A more horizontal one, if you know what I mean. I hated having to leave so early this morning, and then I couldn’t even really touch you the rest of the day either.”

How could he resist that offer? All thoughts of a serious talk were forgotten as he dove into the exploration of Ryan’s hot mouth. He lost himself in Ryan’s scent, the feeling of the other man’s soft skin under his fingertips and the little moans his lover made as they undressed each other, caressing bared skin with hands and lips and tongues.

When they finally made it upstairs and onto the bed, he was too far gone to try and make it inside Ryan. He held on tightly, rubbing their stiff cocks together, letting their copious precome smooth their way. His orgasm almost took him by surprise with its intensity, curling his toes as he came all over Ryan’s flat abdomen.

“Fuck, Daniel.” Ryan stiffened and returned the favor, shaking his way through several aftershocks as he pumped spurt after spurt of his release between their bodies.

Yeah. Fuck. Good.

“Love you, Ryan.” There, that summed it all up nicely. They could always talk in more detail later.

Chapter 22

RYAN was struggling to get his ivory button down dress shirt straightened out and tucked into his dark brown slacks without causing more wrinkles. Why had they decided to dress up for dinner again? He grinned. Oh yeah. It was Thanksgiving. They'd spent most of the day in the kitchen, laughing and preparing food together. Enough to feed an army, as seemed the norm for families all over the country.

The sun had set less than an hour ago, but it was already pretty dark. It was time to make themselves feel festive by dressing up for the occasion. Ryan was so excited it was difficult to finish without rushing to join Daniel who was adding his magical final touches to their feast.

He went downstairs slowly, savoring the anticipation of spending the first Thanksgiving with the man he loved with all his heart. The man he was going to marry in just under six weeks.

He may not have solved his financial issues. Nor had he obtained homes for any of his art other than the portraits, which the UICA had taken quite happily. But just the fact that he'd found Daniel again and that they shared a love that seemed to grow more intense by the day was a lot to be thankful for. Much later in the evening he intended to show his partner, his lover, exactly how grateful he was.

First he was going to enjoy spending time with his new family. The doorbell rang just as he was about to enter the kitchen, so he turned back to open the door. Nicole and Peter were closely followed by Mom and Dad.

"You didn't really bring more food, did you?" Ryan examined the platters and cake plates as they were carried past him and straight into the kitchen.

Daniel's booming laugh told him all he needed to know. He grinned as he followed the others into the kitchen. Apparently his lover was just as surprised as he'd been.

"What, you thought we wouldn't have enough?" Daniel took the pumpkin cookies his mother carried so he could hug her.

"You can never have enough food at Thanksgiving." Mom smiled and turned to Ryan for another hug. "Wouldn't you agree, Ryan?"

"I wouldn't dare disagree with you, Mom." Ryan held up both hands in a gesture of total surrender.

"Wise decision." Dad's hug was strong and warmed him up inside. "Never disagree with my woman about food or her children."

When everybody had hugged everyone else they started putting all the food on the table. Daniel carved the turkey while Ryan lit the candles they'd placed around the dining room. He switched off the overhead lights and sat down next to Daniel.

Mom and Dad were holding hands, as were Nicole and Peter. He twined his fingers with Daniel's when his lover was done carving.

"We have a lot to be thankful for this year. We have our health, our businesses are doing well and Peter and Nicole finally got married." Daniel looked at each person in turn before focusing back on him. "But I am most grateful that you have returned to me, Ryan. You have already changed my life for the better, just by being here. The fact that you agreed to marry me next New Years Day will make me the happiest man alive. Thank you for saying yes to becoming my husband."

"Thank you for taking me in. For making me feel welcome." Ryan cleared his throat, suppressing his tears with all he had as he looked around the table. "All of you have made coming home very special."

"Thank you for coming back to us." Nicole smiled, fighting her own tears. "I missed you so much."

"Hear, hear." Mom and Dad nodded and smiled, as did Peter.

God, he was so happy he could bust. All throughout the meal and the quiet conversation he kept wondering what he'd done to deserve this. Well, maybe he hadn't done it yet, but he was sure going to try and show them that he was worth all their love and attention.

When they'd eaten their fill, Nicole and Peter cleared away the used dishes. Mom was put in charge of leftovers while he and Dad herded Daniel into the living room.

"After all, you did most of the cooking." Ryan pushed him into the soft sofa and sat as close to him as polite company allowed. "It's time you took a break, love."

"Anything you say, sweetheart." Daniel grinned and put his arm around Ryan's shoulders, pulling him even closer.

Ryan snuggled in and put his mouth right next to his lover's ear.

"Just remember that later, when we're upstairs." Ryan grinned when Daniel's hand gripped his own more tightly in response. "I've got plans for you."

"Shit, Ryan." Daniel closed his eyes and nuzzled into Ryan's neck to hide his suddenly very red cheeks. "Don't say stuff like that with my parents around. I don't mind kissing in front of them, but you've made me so hard that my boner is going to show if I have to get up. You want to embarrass me?"

"No, love, of course I don't. I keep forgetting that my words affect you just as much as yours affect me." Ryan squeezed Daniel's fingers. "Just wanted to let you know what's what. Don't want any complaints later."

"Like I'm going to complain." Daniel sighed and pulled back, his eyes bright and his cheeks still redder than normal. "God, you make me want."

Well, the wanting was entirely mutual. Ryan had fun talking and joking with everyone as the early evening changed into night. But what he was really looking forward to was the part where he had Daniel all to himself once they went upstairs.

"HELLO?" Ryan was still half asleep when he picked up the phone. It was still dark outside. A quick glance at the alarm clock showed it was only seven-thirty a.m.

"This is Greg Watford." The man on the other end coughed. "We met last week."

“Yes, Greg. I remember you.” Ryan sat up in bed, trying to shake himself awake as he wondered why Richfoot Construction’s foreman was calling them at this ungodly hour. During the Thanksgiving weekend to boot.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’m afraid Daniel will need to come to the construction site. I’ve already called Ben Venneri and he’s on his way.” Greg took a deep breath. “There’s been an incident.”

“An incident?” Shit. That could mean only one thing. Please let this not be true.

“Yeah, the police called me a few minutes ago. I’m on my way right now.” Greg’s deep voice sounded strained. “Can you make it?”

“Yeah.” Ryan tried to stop shaking. “Yeah, I’ll tell Daniel, and we’ll be there as soon as we can. Tell—tell the police to contact Detectives Barrios and Eldrige. They’ll need to know about this as well.”

“Huh? You’ve had issues like this before?” Greg sighed. “Never mind, I’m almost there. You can tell me later. I’ll tell the police. I’ve got to go.”

The phone went dead as Greg ended the conversation. Ryan just sat there for a minute, trying to recover.

“Sweetheart?” Daniel shifted his arm away from his face and blinked up at him “Were you just talking to someone?”

“Yeah.” Ryan took a deep breath. How the hell was he going to tell Daniel? “Yeah, that was Greg on the phone.”

“What?” Daniel’s eyes widened as he glanced at the alarm clock, then back at him. “Foreman Greg? At this hour?”

“Yes. He....” Ryan closed his eyes for a moment until he felt Daniel’s warm hand close over his cold fingers.

“Ryan? What’s going on?” Daniel sat up and raked his sleep tousled hair, his gorgeous blue eyes narrow with worry.

“He said we need to come to the construction site. Apparently there’s been an incident. The police called him, and he’s already on his way over there. So is Ben.” Ryan held onto Daniel’s hand for support, trying not to lose it. This could be anyone’s doing. Property got attacked all the time, didn’t it? It didn’t have to be his—

“Shit.” Daniel put his head in his hands. “Please tell me this isn’t what I think it is.”

“I—I don’t know.” God, Daniel was thinking the same thing he was. “Greg was still on the way to the site. The police didn’t give him any details.”

“I’m sorry.” Daniel looked up and pulled him into his arms. The warmth radiating from his lover’s body was reassuring. Real. “I’m jumping to conclusions here. Let’s just go there and see what’s what.”

They got dressed in a hurry and were in the car and on their way within a few minutes. The drive only took twenty minutes, thanks to the lack of traffic on the day after Thanksgiving. They got there just after eight but it was still pretty dark.

When they neared the site it became obvious something big was going on. A sea of red and blue flashing lights greeted them. The street had been cordoned off and the restaurant’s parking lot was full of police vehicles.

What he could see of the restaurant itself looked—damaged. The sign with the name hung askew above the door, some of the glass letters had been smashed. Pieces of the wall had been knocked off. There was black graffiti everywhere. “Faggot fuck off” and “queers go to hell” were only some of the hateful slogans he could see.

Oh God, what had they done?

A uniformed officer stepped up to them as Daniel pulled the car as close to the entrance of the parking lot as he could get. He opened the window on the driver side.

“You’ll have to turn around, sir. This is a crime site.” The officer looked grim, a dark mustache making him look intimidating.

“I’m Daniel Miller, one of the owners of the restaurant.” Daniel sounded so calm. “This is Ryan Johnston, my partner. Greg Watford from Richfoot Construction called earlier to let me know I needed to be here.”

“All right. The other owner, a Mr. Ben Venneri, is already here. He let us know to expect you.” The officer attempted a smile, but it looked more like a grimace. He pointed to a small area in one corner of the parking lot. “Please park over there. I’ll get Detectives Barrios or Eldrige to come find you. Please don’t go wandering off on your own.”

“Sure, no problem.” Daniel closed the window and parked the car where indicated.

Detective Barrios walked over a few moments after they’d gotten out.

“Mr. Miller. Mr. Johnston.” She shook their hands. “Would you like to come inside? The forensics team is taking stock of the inside damage, but there are a few areas that have already been cleared.”

The walk to the restaurant seemed to last forever. The closer they came the clearer it became how much had been destroyed. The floor was wet as soon as they entered. All the tanks, filled with water only last week, had been smashed to pieces. Glass and parts of plants were spread over the floors. Luckily no fish had been added to the aquariums yet.

Graffiti was everywhere, ugly words and phrases that made Ryan cringe. This was disastrous enough to stop the restaurant from opening for weeks.

“Would you mind telling me why you had Mr. Watford call us to the site?” Barrios led them toward the back of the restaurant once they’d seen everything. Even the kitchen equipment had been damaged.

“It just seemed like the right thing to do. You were already looking into the threatening postcards, the unsigned letters, and the graffiti on our front door, so I just thought....” Ryan’s stomach was roiling. He felt nauseous. This was quickly developing into a situation way beyond what he could deal with.

“So you think this attack is connected to those more recent events and attacks?” Barrios stopped to turn around and look at him.

“Well... yes.” Wasn’t it obvious?

“But most of the previous threats were directed more at you, Mr. Johnston.” Barrios frowned. “Why would you think that an attack on Mr. Miller’s and Mr. Venneri’s restaurant would come from the same people?”

“They want me gone, right? Just like four years ago. But I still haven’t left, despite all their threats.” Even though he’d started thinking about it. The nasty letters coming through the mail had worried him, more than he’d ever admitted to Daniel. Three weeks of daily terror had taken its toll. A+ Security may have stopped more vandalism to the

house, but they hadn't been able to stop the disturbing threats delivered by postcard.

"You still think that your parents are behind this? Despite the continuing lack of evidence?" Barrios raised her eyebrows.

"Yes." Ryan was sure. Who else wanted him gone? "I think they got fed up with me not listening to their demands, and so they stepped up the activity. They know I'm engaged to Daniel. My guess is that they figure it might help to threaten him as well."

"Assuming that they are indeed behind all this, it makes sense. The problem is that we cannot prove that yet." Barrios turned back around and walked toward the office area, opening a door to a room that currently contained a small folding table and some plastic chairs. Ben and Greg were already inside. "Why don't you sit for a moment? I'll get us some coffee and we'll talk."

By the time they'd greeted the other men, both very pale, Barrios returned, her colleague Eldrige in tow. Plastic cups containing coffee were handed out, and Ryan was grateful for the warm steaming liquid that gave him something to hold on to.

RYAN was still reeling from the earlier revelations when they finally made it back into the house in the late afternoon. Not only had the Aquamarine Wave been almost totally destroyed, the other three restaurants had been vandalized as well. Not as badly as the new one, but they were all going to need considerable cleanup efforts.

They'd spent the entire day driving around to assess the damage. Daniel had been on the phone to organize the cleanup and to let their three managers know. Ben was going to deal with letting staff know when they were expected back to work.

This was a serious setback. Not just in terms of bad publicity but in terms of real financial damage. Ryan had listened to the estimates as Daniel was discussing the situation with Ben. He'd been ready to throw up quite a few times.

If this didn't stop, Daniel and Ben were going to be ruined. And it was his fault that it had happened in the first place.

"I'll be in the study for a while. There's a few more things I need to set up." Daniel was pale and looked exhausted, but his lover found him a small smile as he briefly caressed his cheek before stepping back. "Why don't you go and lie down for a bit? You look really tired."

"Okay." Words were beyond him now, guilt making his steps heavy as he went upstairs to their bedroom.

He undressed quickly and slid between the sheets. He closed his burning eyes to try and stop the tears from flowing.

It needed to stop. He couldn't let Daniel and Ben suffer like this just because he wanted to stay with Daniel and be happy. His parents were obviously not going to give up until he was gone. They'd attacked the restaurants this time, but who knew what they would do next? They were so fanatical that he didn't put it past them to start doing bodily harm to someone to get him to go. And the police seemed to be powerless to stop them. It was all up to him.

There was really only one thing he could do. He needed to leave Daniel if he wanted his lover to be safe. The thought caused his heart to hurt, the pain radiating out into his whole body. God, it had been so hard four years ago, before they'd ever even been together. It was going to be so much worse this time around. He had experienced what it was like to love and be loved. What it was like to be safe and wanted. How could he possibly give all that up?

But he had to leave to keep Daniel safe. The tears started flowing freely as he curled up into a small ball, crushing Daniel's pillow to his chest for comfort. He couldn't stop the sobs from escaping as he gave himself over to his feelings of impending loss and soul-deep regret.

Just one more night. He wanted just one more night with Daniel. Tomorrow was soon enough. He might see no alternative to moving out if he wanted to protect Daniel. But this time, he wasn't going to leave Grand Rapids until he'd had a chance to talk to Nicole. She'd always known what to do in the past. Maybe he could stay with her, get her to help him figure out what to do, how to get out of this mess while still protecting the man he loved with all his heart.

Chapter 23

DANIEL stared at the empty spot in the bed with a sinking feeling. It was after nine a.m., but he was still disappointed that Ryan wasn't there. He needed him so much, especially now with all this shit going on in their lives.

It had been so late last night by the time he'd made it to bed, Ryan had been fast asleep. Curled around his pillow, he'd looked so alone and lost. He'd taken Ryan into his arms, spooning around him for comfort. He'd regretted not going to bed with him, giving and getting comfort from each other's presence. Instead he'd withdrawn into the familiarity of organizational challenges, not willing to face the emotional fallout while he was still struggling himself. Ryan must have needed him, and he hadn't been there for him.

He sighed as he turned onto his back and stretched. There was still a lot more to do today to get everything back in order, but he was going to put Ryan first. He was probably in his studio, painting. It was where his lover usually went when it all got to be too much.

Done with his morning ablutions, he walked over to the studio. Slowly opening the door to avoid disturbing Ryan, not that he was easily disturbed when painting, he was disappointed to see the room empty. Deserted. Worse than that: Ryan's artist bag with his travel painting supplies was missing.

"Ryan?" He walked downstairs, a sense of dread in his fluttering stomach. "Ryan, where are you?"

The study was empty. Nobody to be found in the living room. A glance at the coat rack revealed that Ryan's jacket was gone. Hope made his heart feel a little lighter. Maybe he'd gone outside to the lake?

But then he saw the white envelope on the center island in the kitchen, leaning against a coffee mug. Ryan's key ring lay next to it. His knees buckled, and he had to hold on to the countertop to avoid falling. His biggest fear slammed into him like a tsunami, wiping out everything in its path, stunning him into wordless terror.

"Daniel" was written in shaky script on the front. The envelope wasn't sealed and he took it with him to sit down on the couch. Minutes passed while he stared into space, eyes blurry with tears that wouldn't fall. He knew in his heart what it would say, but he wasn't ready to make it real by reading the letter.

Finally, with a deep breath, he forced himself to take the simple white sheet out and unfolded it. Ryan's ring tumbled out, and without thinking, he caught it before it fell to the floor. Tightening his fingers around it, making a fist to protect it, he started reading.

Daniel, my love,

By now you will know that I am not in the house. It hurts me to have to do this, but it is the only way I can think of to make sure you are safe. My parents have made it very clear that they want me to leave. I don't want to give in to them again, but it looks like I have no choice. I have to make sure no one gets seriously hurt.

The attack on your restaurants has shown how determined they are, how far they will go. I'm afraid that they won't stop at the destruction of your property. That physically hurting you, maybe even Ben or his family will be next.

I cannot be the cause of anything happening to you, my Daniel.

I need to do everything I can to make you safe. To stop the attacks on the restaurants and to avoid any future attacks on you and Ben. Right now, I see no other choice than to leave you. It is too dangerous for us to stay together.

I still love you. I will always love you. Nothing can change that. But you have a life and a future creating wonderful food and running your business. I just cannot bear being the cause of you losing everything you have worked so hard for.

I will let my parents know that I have left you and that I'll leave Grand Rapids within the next few days. I am moving in

with Nicole until I can figure out where to go from here. I do not want to run away in a panic like last time.

I'm sorrier than words can say that we cannot have the life together that we had planned. Please know that I will always, always love you. There is nobody else for me now and there never will be.

Please be safe, my Daniel.

All my love, forever,

Ryan

Daniel dropped the letter, his right hand shaking too badly to hold on. He raised his fist against his heart, clutching the ring with all the strength he had left and curled up on the couch. Tears were streaming down his face as silent sobs shook his body.

Ryan was gone.

Vanished, just like four years ago. Going to live next door, for heaven's sake, with his sister until he decided where to go. Leaving him behind, alone and desolate. He felt like the ground had been pulled from under his feet, and he was falling into an abyss of loneliness and despair.

Ryan had given up on them. Protection against the Johnstons may have sounded like a good reason to Ryan, but Daniel didn't need protection. Didn't want protection. The police would figure everything out eventually.

No, there must have been another reason for Ryan to have left. And then it dawned on him. Ryan didn't trust him. He hadn't listened when Ryan had told him what true partnership meant to him. He hadn't been willing to compromise on his stupid principles to let Ryan exhibit his brilliant work in his restaurants. He hadn't really helped Ryan be himself. Instead he'd pushed him into what *he* believed was a relationship. And to top it all off, he hadn't even supported him last night when his lover had needed him to be close.

Shit.

He had let Ryan down in the worst way. And now his partner, his future husband, the man he loved with everything he was, had left him.

Fuck.

“DANIEL?” He wasn’t going to listen to the voice. He’d finally managed to drink enough to numb his pain, making it just about bearable.

“Daniel, you’ve got to wake up.” The voice got louder, hurting his head. It was joined by a hand on his shoulder, shaking him.

“Please, Daniel. Don’t do this to yourself.” The shaking continued, and he finally opened one eye to see who was torturing him.

It figured that it was his little brother. Peter always meant well but had never understood when not to butt in.

“Leave me alone.” He closed his eye again and tried to regain his previous state of semi-unconsciousness.

“I can’t do that.” Peter shook him again. “I know that you’re feeling miserable right now, but I can’t leave you here like that.”

“Why not?” Nothing mattered anymore. His life was over.

“You may not believe me right now, but this is not the end of the world.” Peter loosened his grip on his shoulder and started stroking him instead. “You’re going to work through this nonsense and everything will be fine again.”

“You don’t know anything.” He opened both eyes and glared at Peter. The light in the bar was low and it was quiet. Where had all the other patrons gone?

“Well, you may not think so now.” Peter grinned. “But I know the two of you. You’ve held out for each other for four years. A small misunderstanding like this is not going to keep you apart. It can’t.”

“Small misunderstanding?” Anger rose inside him, making him sit up too fast. Ouch. His head hurt, and he was dizzy. He wasn’t a big drinker. Going overboard like he had tonight had maybe not been such a good idea. “Ryan left me! What’s there to misunderstand?”

“He’s trying to protect you, you dimwit.” Peter handed him a mug with a dark liquid that smelled like coffee. “Here, drink that, and I’ll drive you home.”

“Protect me, my ass. He doesn’t need to protect me. We could have stood up to them together. The police will figure this out and stop

them. But I guess Ryan just didn't trust me enough to know that I'd stand by him." The hot liquid almost burned him going down his parched throat. "Not that I can blame him. I didn't exactly give him any reasons to trust me."

"What?" Peter's eyebrows went all the way up his forehead. "What the hell are you talking about? Ryan not trusting you?"

"Yeah, well, I didn't think you'd get it." It was all his fault, but he wasn't about to reveal the details. Whatever they were. Right now he couldn't remember any of them too clearly. God, his head hurt.

"Never mind. You can explain all that tomorrow once you've caught some sleep. Maybe you'll make more sense then." Peter took the empty mug and passed it to a tall, broad man behind the bar. Oh, yes, he remembered him. He was the bartender who'd kept him supplied with bourbon. Where had he come from?

"You going to take him home?" The big man growled the words, a smirk on his face communicating exactly what he thought of Daniel.

"Yeah. Thanks for calling me, man." Peter just smiled at the big guy as if he picked up drunken people all the time. "I appreciate it. And so will my brother here, once he regains his senses."

"Good thing he had your card in his wallet." The bartender shrugged, still smirking, and put the mug into the basin.

"Come on. Let's go." Peter slid an arm around his middle and helped him stand.

Shit, everything was suddenly spinning around him, making him want to throw up. Maybe he hadn't drunk enough, if he still cared.

WHEN Daniel awoke, bright sunlight was stabbing him through his eyes straight into his brain, making it throb in pain. *Crap!* He quickly closed his eyes again and felt around until he found a pillow to cover his face with.

Oh God. It was Ryan's. His lover's musky scent filled him with such longing he forgot his pounding head and just breathed deeply. His stomach cramped with the loss. His heart hurt with the need to hold Ryan in his arms, to feel his soft lips on his skin.

But Ryan was gone. Fuck. This was unbearable. He needed to do something about that. Ryan was just next door, for pity's sake. There had to be something he could do to get his future husband to come back to him. He couldn't let those horrible parents win.

And then it hit him. Of course!

Headache suddenly irrelevant, he pulled the pillow off his face and carefully placed it back on the bed. Where it belonged, on Ryan's side. When he sat up, he was still dizzy, but the throbbing in his head was bearable. A tall glass of water and a couple of aspirin on the nightstand told him Peter had thought ahead, as usual.

A shower and several cups of coffee later, he was in his study, feeling hope for the first time since discovering Ryan's letter yesterday morning. Had it only been twenty-four hours? It felt like a lifetime.

Never mind. Everything was going to work out. Somehow. It had to. He couldn't go back to a life without Ryan. He was going to do everything to get his man back. To build the trust they still seemed to lack. He was really going to listen this time and make sure he didn't ignore Ryan's feelings and needs.

If the restaurants were the problem, the thing that Ryan's parents chose to attack, he'd get rid of the restaurants. If the Johnstons didn't want Ryan in Grand Rapids—they would leave. Whether or not the police caught the perpetrators didn't matter anymore. He knew there had to have been more people than the Johnstons to hit all the restaurants like that in one night. But he suddenly didn't care anymore.

The only thing that was important was getting Ryan back. And the best way to do that was by removing the Johnstons' ability to attack.

He picked up the phone and dialed Ben's number. His friend and partner needed to know what he intended to do. He was going to call Cordell next to set it all into motion. Fast. Before Ryan left Grand Rapids to go God knew where.

"Ben Venneri." Ben's voice sounded tired, drained.

"Hi, Ben. It's Daniel." God, where was he even going to start? He couldn't help feeling responsible for the damage, even though he hadn't caused it. And Ben had a family to support. All the uncertainty was bound to be way worse for him.

“Hey, Daniel. How are you holding up?” Ben rustled with some papers.

“How am *I* holding up? Ben, you have a family to think of. Compared to that, I’m doing fine.” He’d not realized this before, but it suddenly became clear to him.

“Shit, Daniel. You’re all on your own from what Peter told me last night. That can’t be easy. At least I have Karen and the twins to comfort me.” Ben swallowed. “Listen, I’m sorry about the mess with Ryan. I know he took it hard, but you’re going to get him back.”

“Yeah, I know.” He would. “Actually, that’s why I’m calling.”

“It is? Why are you talking to me, then? Shouldn’t you be talking to him?” Ben had a point, but there were things Daniel needed to do first.

“Yeah, and I will. But listen to this is first.” He took a deep breath and explained his thinking, ending with the plan of selling the restaurants once they’d been restored to working order.

“Fuck, no.” Ben’s voice was louder than before.

“Huh?” That was blunt, even for Ben.

“No way are you going to sell the restaurants. That’s just wrong. They’re your dream just as much as they’re mine. We’ve worked very hard to make them a success. I won’t just let you give up on them.” Ben was so angry he was almost snarling.

“I don’t think I have a choice here.” He sighed. “Ben, you’ve got to understand that Ryan is my life now. Without him there is no reason to dream anymore. It was different before, because he wasn’t here. I mean, I still wanted him. Hell, I think I was even waiting for him, hoping he’d be back one day. And now that I know what life with him is like, I can’t give that up. Not even for the restaurants.”

“You’re really serious, aren’t you?” Ben exhaled slowly, sounding defeated.

“I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life.” He closed his eyes. “I just wanted to let you know so that you can think about this. I’m not going to pull out immediately, but I want to make it known that I am going to. Make sure the Johnstons know about it as well.”

“Don’t you think the police are going to get whoever did this? Isn’t that the better solution?” Ben snorted. “I mean, with this much destruction there’s bound to be some evidence that’ll lead to an arrest.”

“Whether or not the police find the perpetrators is almost irrelevant.” How was he going to explain this? “What Ryan believes his parents are going to do is the issue here. He’s convinced that they will never stop. He even thinks they might escalate this further until someone gets hurt. I can’t say I believe that completely, but again, that’s not the issue. Ryan’s thoughts and feelings are.”

“Wow, you really are taking this listening-to-your-partner stuff seriously.” Ben took a deep breath. “Okay, I can see where you’re coming from. I just wish you wouldn’t rush into this.”

“There’s no rush about it. The actual execution will take a while, depending on who buys my half.” He smiled. “Actually, I meant to ask you if you would like to buy me out. Become a full owner, you know? That way you won’t have to deal with some stranger interfering in our—your dream.”

“Well, that would at least be better than having to deal with a stranger.” Ben sighed. “I just don’t think I’ll be able to swing it financially.”

“Why not? I’m not going to ask for cash, you know. We can set up payments you can afford, take as long as you need.” He’d really much rather Ben have full control. It was bad enough that he was going to desert his friend mid-venture.

“Are you serious?” Ben sounded almost excited. “That might actually work, you know. I mean, I’ll miss you and your ideas like hell, but you’re right, not having to deal with a stranger would minimize the damage.”

Good, that had gone much better than expected. They soon rang off since Daniel was ready for more aspirin.

Having his headache under better control freed him up to start developing a strategy to get Ryan back. Lost in daydreams, he suddenly realized the phone was ringing.

“Daniel Miller.” Who could this possibly be? God, he hoped it wasn’t his parents. He didn’t think he could face them right now.

“Marta Barrios.” The detective’s loud voice was making his head hurt again.

“Detective? What can I do for you?” He wasn’t going to get his hopes up.

“It’s not what you can do for me.” She chuckled. “We have some news that I thought you might want to hear.”

“Is that so? Anything good?” He held his breath.

“I’m not sure about good. But definitely interesting.” The detective cleared her throat. “We’re still not sure what to think about this, but it looks like the suspicions about Acton Haddow you mentioned to us a while back were well-founded after all. We found him lurking at the Emerald Palace today and interviewed him. At that point we were just trying to get some basic information, checking if he’d noticed anything strange on Thursday and such.”

“And?” The suspense was killing him.

“Well, he broke down in tears about ten minutes into the interview and said that it was all his fault, that he’d done it.” Barrios laughed. “I still don’t think it was him. He doesn’t look like he has the strength to wreak such havoc. However, the details he gave us fit the evidence to such a degree that we’ve had to arrest him.”

“Shit.” No way was he able to hold back any longer.

“Yeah, adding the confession to the information you shared with us about him ‘having a crush on you’ as you put it, we definitely have the motive nailed.” Barrios sighed. “It still only solves the destruction of one restaurant, though. He refused to admit to having anything to do with the other restaurants. He’s also not revealing if there was someone else involved.”

“Someone who put him up to it?” He was sure that Ryan’s parents were involved in some way.

“Exactly. And we are going to get them. It just may take a while.” She sounded almost apologetic.

Not that it mattered. He was going to follow through with his plan regardless. Just to be on the safe side. He wasn’t going to let anything interfere with getting Ryan back.

Chapter 24

RYAN put down the envelope with trembling fingers. Writing this letter was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Taking off his engagement ring and putting it inside for safe keeping had made it awfully real. Thinking about his plan last night and actually going through with it this morning had proven to be two entirely different things.

He just couldn't bear to be the cause of all this damage to the restaurants Daniel had worked so hard to make a success. His lover had been so withdrawn last night he'd seemed almost like a different person. Ryan had wanted to cuddle with him, comfort him, but Daniel had gone to his study instead. On some level Daniel might even blame him for what was happening. And what if it got worse? No, he had to try and stop this before his parents got even more aggressive.

With a last hesitant caress of the letter he turned toward the front door. His small carryon suitcase sat waiting for him, containing minimal clothing and some toiletries. The leather artist bag Daniel had given him sat next to it, a few emergency painting supplies inside. He didn't think Daniel would mind him taking just a few things. They would need to sort out the rest later.

His chest constricted as he put his key ring next to the envelope. He walked toward the front door, picking up his bags as he went, every step making his heart hurt a little more. He closed the door behind him and kept walking, refusing to look back.

It was still early, so he sat on Nicole's porch for a while, not wanting to wake her up this soon. But it was too cold to sit outside, so after a few minutes, he got up and rang the doorbell. It was really loud in the stillness of the morning, and he flinched.

He stared at the door viewer until the chain rattled and the door was pulled open, revealing a stunned looking Peter in nothing but pajama bottoms.

“Ryan?” Peter blinked, rubbed his eyes. “What are you doing here at his ungodly hour of the morning?”

“Hi, Peter.” He shrugged. “It’s... complicated.”

“Okay. I guess you better come in, then.” Peter stepped back and closed the door behind them. His eyes widened when he saw the bags. “You’re planning to stay?”

“Well...” Ryan suddenly didn’t know where to start.

“Peter? Who is it?” Nicole’s voice came from upstairs.

“You’ll never believe me.” Peter raked a hand through his short black hair. “Come see for yourself.”

“Ryan?” Nicole stopped on the bottom step, tying her robe closed, hazel eyes widening in shock as she looked at him, then his bags, then back at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh Nicole. I’m so sorry to disturb you like this, but I could really use your guys’ help right now.” He swallowed, suppressing his tears.

“Come here.” She stepped closer and opened her arms, enfolding him in her warm embrace. “Don’t worry about disturbing us. I told you we’d be here for you if you need us, and I meant it.”

From the corner of his eye, he could see Peter nod despite his wide eyes, the question clear on his face. And then he dropped his head onto Nicole’s shoulder, buried his face in her long blonde hair and just held on for a minute.

“You want some coffee?” Peter put a warm hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“Please.” Ryan lifted his head and looked at his best friend, staring into the blue eyes that looked so much like Daniel’s, yet were not his lover’s. Tearing his gaze away, he straightened up and stepped back from Nicole. She wouldn’t have it, though, and grabbed his hand.

“Come on, let’s go sit on the couch, and you can tell us what’s going on.” She pulled him into the warm living room to their right and

settled herself as close to him as she could, leaving more than enough space for Peter on her other side.

They sat in companionable silence until Peter returned, carrying a tray with three steaming mugs of coffee, a small earthen pot with honey, a sugar bowl, milk and some spoons.

"I've got to ask you this." Peter set down the tray and picked one of the mugs for himself, gesturing at them to get their own. "My big brother didn't kick you out, did he?"

"What? No!" Ryan sat up in shock. "How could you even ask that?"

"Don't know." Peter shrugged, a sheepish expression on his face. "You coming over here like this is just so weird that was about the only explanation I could come up with while I was in the kitchen."

"No. Just no." Ryan took his coffee after having added a ton of sugar and some milk. "He would never do that."

"Well then, what happened?" Nicole added some honey to her coffee and leaned back into the sofa cushions. "I can't imagine you leaving him."

Ryan looked down. Had he made the most monumentally stupid mistake of his life? It sure felt like it right now.

"Ryan?" Nicole grabbed his hand again, demanding his attention. "You *left* him? What on earth did you do that for?"

When he was done telling them the whole story they still looked at him incredulously.

"You're not serious, are you?" Peter recovered first. "You're telling me that you left my brother, broke the engagement—to what—to protect him?"

"Yes." He really wished there'd been another way. "It's not like I *wanted* to leave him, you know? I just think my parents will stop attacking him if they find out that I've left him. I mean, it's not like they have anything against him, right? Surely they're just using him to get to me."

"Well, yes. They have been trying to get you to leave, probably so they couldn't be accused of having a gay son." Nicole nodded thoughtfully. "Actually, now that they can no longer deny that they

have a gay son, the next best thing for them is probably to make sure everyone knows they don't accept that son."

"Right. So they're pretty determined to make me go. And while this attack was bad enough, I'm really scared that they'll start escalating it further. And I can't just stand by and let Daniel and who knows who else get hurt." Ryan finished his coffee and returned the mug to the tray.

"I see why you might believe that." Peter leaned forward. "But don't you think Daniel can protect himself? Hell, you've got the police working on the case, surely they can find out who did this and stop them."

"They haven't been able to find anything so far." Ryan shrugged. "And even if they do, what's to stop my parents from doing it again? No, I'm going to have to let my parents know that I've left Daniel so he stops being a target for them."

"It'll make it clear to them that you're serious." Nicole nodded. "I can see how you think that might work."

"Well that's part of it." Ryan closed his eyes, the thought of truly leaving hurting him down to his bones. When he opened them again Peter was staring at him.

"There's more?" Peter raised his eyebrows.

"Well, yes." He might as well tell them everything now. "I've got to think through where to go, what to do. I didn't want to just run like four years ago, without a plan or any sort of preparation. That didn't really work out too well, did it? And you guys said you would help, so I thought—"

"Of course we'll help." Peter sighed. "But that's not the point. Don't you think that Daniel would like to help as well? Why did you have to leave him to do the planning? It'll completely destroy him, you know?"

"Why did I have to leave him? Aside from the fact that it's the only convincing thing I can do right now to show my parents I'm serious? To stop them from doing even more damage?" Ryan took a deep breath. "I don't want to cause him any more problems than I already have. He'll be safer if I'm not around."

Peter snorted and looked disgusted.

“Hold on.” Nicole frowned. “I think you are completely and utterly wrong. I mean, Daniel isn’t my brother, but I do know him pretty well. And he will *not* see it that way for even a second. Shit, don’t you realize how much he loves you? Don’t you understand that he’d do *anything* for you? Absolutely anything?”

“I do know that.” Ryan almost cried then, remembering all the times Daniel had told him how much he loved him. “I just don’t want him to put himself in danger for me.”

Why wouldn’t they accept that?

THE rest of the day had passed in a haze. They’d agreed that Ryan needed some time to think all this through. Clearly they were hoping he’d come to his senses and see things their way.

He’d gone to bed in one of their upstairs bedrooms and had slept like a log. When he awoke on Sunday morning the sun was already up in the sky. A quick shower later he got dressed and went downstairs to find Nicole and Peter in the kitchen, already in the middle of breakfast.

“Hey, sleepyhead, finally decided to join us?” Nicole got up and hugged him. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“Morning. Sorry I slept so late. And yeah, please.” He grinned at his sister, glad she was more awake than he was and happy for her to make breakfast for him. She busied herself with organizing another plate and more food while he sat down.

“Morning, Ryan.” Peter looked at him with a very serious expression on his face. “I know we didn’t get anywhere near convincing you of the idiocy of your actions yesterday. But I have some new information for you which might change your mind.”

“Oh?” That would be a surprise, he was pretty sure this was the best way to protect Daniel—and Ben.

“Yes, oh.” Peter sat back and crossed his arms. “Do you want to know what I did last night after you’d turned in?”

“I guess.” He thought he’d sounded interested.

“I got a call from a bartender who wanted to know if I knew a Daniel Miller. When I said that he was my brother, the man requested I

come pick him up, or he'd have to get the police to remove him from the premises. He was too drunk to even be put in a taxi and anyway, he hadn't been able to get an address out of him." Peter grimaced.

"But Daniel doesn't drink." Ryan's heart started beating very fast.

"Exactly!" Peter rocked back on his chair and looked triumphant.

"Exactly?" Ryan shook himself. "What do you mean—'exactly'?"

"When I went to pick him up, he was so drunk and miserable that I almost didn't recognize him. It was like he'd lost the will to live." Peter glared at him. "When I told him that it was all a misunderstanding and that the two of you would figure it out if you would only speak to each other, he almost tore my head off."

"You see? He's angry at me. He's better off without me putting him in danger." Ryan only wished he could really believe that himself.

"Nonsense. When I told him you were trying to protect him, he almost lost it, he was so angry. Guess what he said." Peter rocked his chair back onto the floor.

Ryan just shrugged. How should he know?

"He said that you didn't need to protect him. What you needed to do, what both of you needed to do, is stand up to your parents together. And Ryan, I hate to tell you this, but drunk as he was at that point, he was making a whole lot of sense." Peter uncrossed his arms and pointed at Ryan. "You need to learn to trust him enough to stand by him and to know that together you are stronger than apart."

"What? But I do trust him." Ryan felt dizzy, reeling from the revelation.

"He doesn't seem to think you do." Peter shook his head sadly.

"And I'm beginning to think that may be part of the problem." Nicole put the silverware and food she'd gathered on the table and stood next to Peter, one hand on his shoulder. "It's exactly what Peter and I learned early on in our relationship. The only thing you can do to fight our parents is trust each other implicitly and present them with a united front. You have to stand up to them."

"But they didn't attack you." Ryan was trying to understand all this.

“Well, maybe not physically.” Nicole smiled, showing her dimples. “But they did try to drive a wedge between us, tried to find anything that we didn’t agree on to play us off against each other.”

“I think the same thing is happening here.” Peter narrowed his eyes. “You seem to think that you need to protect Daniel by leaving. You don’t want him to fight for you because you’ve got this idiotic notion in your head that you’re the one putting him at risk in the first place. Daniel doesn’t want your protection in that way, he wants to stand with you and let the police help to sort out the rest. But he doesn’t think you trust him enough, so he won’t push you.”

“But I do trust him!” Ryan’s head was beginning to hurt.

“Doesn’t look like it from his point of view.” Peter rolled his eyes. “Look, Ben called me a little while ago in total shock. Daniel spoke to him, wanting to sell his share in the restaurants and leaving with you. He’s serious enough to start making arrangements with Cordell tomorrow.”

“He can’t do that. He’s worked so hard to make them a success. He loves creating new dishes and running his restaurants....” Ryan stopped, his brain catching up with his mouth.

“Now you’re beginning to get it.” Peter grinned and Nicole nodded.

“He thinks I’m more important than his life’s passion?” Ryan felt like he was falling from a tall cliff.

“*You* are his passion now.” Nicole ruffled his hair. “In fact I think you always have been, in a theoretical kind of way.”

“Yeah, the restaurants were just something he kept himself busy with while he was waiting for you to return.” Peter pulled Nicole into his lap.

“Shit.” Ryan inhaled deeply to try and calm down. “Daniel kept saying how I’m his future now, how important I was to him. He’s actually said it a lot. I just couldn’t really believe how much he needs me, you know? He’s so strong and has done so well, I just didn’t get it. Not deep down. But you’ve made it very clear, so—I better shape up and start fighting back.”

“Yep.” Both Nicole and Peter were of the same opinion. “Now you’ve got it.”

RYAN made it to Cordell's office bright and early on Monday morning. If Daniel wanted him more than the restaurants, he must think that Ryan was worth the fight. How could his own lack of self-confidence have stopped him from seeing that before? Years of his parents telling him that he wasn't good enough had apparently taken their toll. He needed to fight his own feelings of inadequacy, go back to Daniel to apologize.

He could only hope that Daniel would take him back. Fighting for his relationship was going to require more than one strategy

The first of which was sorting out this mess with his parents. While the police were still looking for suspects, there might be other stuff he could do to try and stop them from doing more damage. He'd called Cordell and asked for ideas but the lawyer had insisted he come see him. Apparently there was news that might impact what they could do and Cordell thought a personal meeting was needed.

The office was right in the best area of downtown and the building it was in looked very sleek, all chrome and glass. Cordell had a huge mahogany desk in an office on the seventeenth floor. The view was breathtaking.

"Welcome Ryan." Cordell got up from behind his desk to shake his hand. He was wearing a light gray suit and a dark gray dress shirt that made him look very professional. The bright yellow tie set off his dark skin to perfection.

"Thanks for seeing me so quickly, Cordell." Ryan sat down on the leather armchair that Cordell indicated. "I really need your advice on how to stop my parents from doing more damage."

"I'm glad you've finally seen the light, so to speak. Running away to protect your fiancé may have seemed like a good idea, but it wouldn't really have solved anything. Other than making the both of you totally miserable." Cordell winked at him, dark eyes twinkling. "And causing Daniel to make the most stupid and costly mistake of his life. Selling his share in the restaurants. I mean, shit, what a dumbass idea!"

Ryan blushed and looked at the floor. He'd played a part in that, hadn't he? Cordell's booming voice made him look back up.

"Don't you start any of that 'it's all my fault.'" Cordell shook his head at him. "You've both made some assumptions about what the other was thinking or might need. Neither of you has really listened to some of the stuff the other was trying to tell him. I've already told Daniel, and now I'll tell you: you guys need to start listening to each other if you want your relationship to work. Got it?"

Ryan just nodded.

"Okay, enough of that. Let's talk about this situation with your parents." Cordell relaxed and leaned back in his chair, a small smile appearing on his full lips. "I've got a bit of interesting news for you which may help you get results more quickly than anticipated."

"God, please. I could do with some good news." Ryan scooted forward in his chair, his entire focus on Cordell now.

"All right." Cordell's smile grew into a grin. "I got a call from a Detective Barrios this morning."

Ryan gripped the armrests more tightly to try and hold on.

"It seems that she spoke to Daniel last night to inform him that they'd made an arrest. A young man called Acton Haddow, one of Daniel's and Ben's employees, was seen at the Emerald Palace. The police interviewed him, thinking he might have noticed something unusual the day before. Within five minutes he broke down and admitted to having vandalized the Emerald Palace."

"Acton?" Ryan fell back in his chair. "But he wouldn't—I mean—he's just not the type. Is he?"

"Well, it seems that Daniel agrees with you. He thinks something else is going on and asked Detective Barrios to get in touch with me. They believe that one of my colleagues might get Acton to tell us what really happened." Cordell tilted his head. "I know I can't do it myself since I'm Daniel's and Ben's lawyer. I'm already working for 'the other side,' as it were. However, I'm not sure one of my colleagues is the best choice either."

When Cordell kept staring at him it finally dawned on him.

“You want me...?” Ryan swallowed. But it actually made sense. It was a good way for him to show that he was ready to fight. “But Acton thinks I’m the enemy!”

“I know. Daniel told me about the little crush Acton seems to have on him.” Cordell’s grin became almost devilish. “But you know, I think that will work in our favor. If Acton gets emotional enough, he may start saying things that he otherwise wouldn’t.”

Shit, that was devious. But then, didn’t they say that everything was fair in love and war?

Chapter 25

DANIEL stood with his back to the wall, trying to meld with the crowd so Ryan wouldn't see him. There were quite a few people in the well-lit room, gallery number four to be exact. He'd had no problems finding it with the help of a handy artist listing and map provided at the entrance. Ryan's portraits hung on the walls in little groups. A few already had "sold" stickers on the wall next to them.

God, he was so proud of his lover he could bust. Guests were milling around the room, looking at the paintings and expressing their admiration. The opening speech from one of the gallery employees had been short and sweet and Ryan had stood next to her with a slightly stunned expression on his gorgeous face. He'd flushed a bright pink when she'd called him a "promising young artist."

How Daniel wished he could have stood next to Ryan, supporting him in this new venture, this next big step in his life as an artist. Not to mention taking pleasure in just being close to his lover. Over the past three days he'd missed waking up next to him, touching him and having him around. At least he was in the same room now. He'd thought long and hard about it, but in the end, he'd decided he wasn't going to let the Johnstons' threats keep him away. They weren't going to have someone watching Ryan to check if he'd really broken up with him, were they?

"Aren't you the young man in that portrait over there?" A woman in her late fifties or early sixties in a dark red suit looked at him over her gold-rimmed glasses.

"I might be." Daniel grinned. Ryan had apparently made quite a few more sketches and even paintings of him than he'd thought. A lot

of them had ended up here. Not the more *intimate* ones, though. No nudes at this exhibition.

“You look exactly like him.” The woman looked back and forth between him and the painting, silver hair swinging. Her bob cut made her look a lot younger than the soft wrinkles in her face said she was.

“Well, that is kind of the point of a portrait, isn’t it?” Daniel grinned at her, feeling elated and a bit cheeky

“Oh, that’s funny.” The woman laughed out loud and pulled an older man in a blue suit and a white shirt to her side. “Joseph, you’ve got to come over here and meet this young man.”

“I do?” The man winked at Daniel and turned back to the woman. “And why might that be, my dear?”

“Don’t ‘my dear’ me.” The woman slapped him on the arm playfully. “I was just telling him how much he looked like the man in those portraits over there. He told me that that was the point of doing portraits.”

“Well, it is.” The older man deadpanned but his lips twitched.

“Joseph! You’re making fun of me.” The woman tried to look indignant but couldn’t quite stop her own lips from twitching.

“Would I ever make fun of you?” Joseph grinned now.

“In a heartbeat.” The woman laughed as well. “Well, since you seem to know the artist well enough to have had a portrait done by him, maybe you can tell us if he accepts commissions? I would love to have our official 40th anniversary portrait done by him.”

“Well, he didn’t do mine on a commission, but I’m pretty sure Ryan would be interested. He’s only recently started painting full-time and is probably looking for good opportunities to make a name for himself.” There, that wasn’t too much, was it? A bit of advertising never hurt anyone.

“That was a good sales pitch, wasn’t it Joseph?” The woman briefly looked up at her husband before returning her warm brown eyes to him. “Are you sure you’re not his agent?”

“No, madam, I’m definitely not his agent.” Although that might not be a bad idea once they started over in a new city.

“Well, maybe you should come work for our gallery in Chicago, then.” Ignoring the shaking of his head, the woman pulled a business card from her purse and handed it to him. “Here, come look us up if you ever make it to the Windy City. We’d love to give you a tour, wouldn’t we Joseph?”

Daniel stared at the card which said Updyke Fine Art. Wasn’t that one of the galleries Ryan had mentioned? The names Ophelia and Joseph were printed at the bottom, just above address and phone details.

“Thank you, Mrs. Updyke.” Daniel smiled and pocketed the card.

“You are welcome, young man.” She nodded at him. “It was nice meeting you, but I think we need to talk to our artist next.”

“Sure. Good luck with that.” Daniel nodded back and watched them walk over to where Ryan was standing.

Ryan looked good enough to eat in his dark gray suit and white shirt. The green tie was just the right shade to bring out the color of his eyes even more. He hadn’t seen him since Friday night, asleep in his bed. Three days without his lover was way too long.

Ryan was surrounded by admirers and hopefully taking lots of orders for paintings. With a sigh he turned away and continued studying the portraits. He didn’t want to call attention to himself by staring at his soon-again-to-be-fiancé.

“WHAT are *you* doing here?” Cordell stepped up to Daniel as he was about to leave the Urban Institute. The lawyer glared at him with his “power stare,” making Daniel feel like a naughty child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” He’d thoroughly enjoyed Ryan’s big opening event at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts.

“I don’t know.” Cordell handed his coat to the young lady behind the desk. “You tell me.”

The young lady smiled at them and handed Cordell his ticket once she’d placed the heavy coat on a hanger.

“Well?” Cordell stared at him again.

"I was here to see Ryan's first exhibition." He handed the young lady his own ticket, and she retrieved his coat for him.

"Aren't you supposed to be broken up? Separated? Not talking to each other?" Cordell picked up one of the maps and studied it.

"So? Does that mean I can't go to an exhibition which just *happens* to include Ryan's work?" His future husband's work, never mind all this separation nonsense, because he had plans to fix that.

"You, my friend, are impossible." Cordell chuckled. "Somehow I didn't think you could stay away."

"Nothing impossible about me." He grinned. "Ryan may have left me to try and protect me from his parents, but that doesn't mean I've stopped loving him. This is an important part of his life, and I want to be there to support him."

"So you're not here to save him?" Cordell frowned.

"Save him? Here? From what?" What did Cordell know—had Acton said anything today? Were the Johnstons planning another attack?

"Daniel, you know perfectly well what I mean." Cordell looked stern again.

"No, I don't." It was his turn to frown. "Don't speak in riddles, man, what's going on here? Is Ryan in danger?"

"You see?" Cordell stuffed the map into his back pocket, apparently having decided where he wanted to go. "At the barest hint of danger to Ryan you go all 'knightly' on him and come rushing to his rescue."

"Well, I *am* going to protect my future husband if his ghastly parents are going to attack him here, if that's what's going on." If Cordell wasn't going to tell him what he thought, he might strangle the man.

"Attack? What attack?" Cordell's eyebrows rose up his high forehead.

"Crap. We're talking in circles here." Daniel took a deep breath to help him calm down. "Let's sit down over there for a minute and start from the beginning."

“Okay.” Cordell rubbed his big hand over his face once he was seated.

“I’m here to support Ryan and see his portraits at his first exhibition. The fact that he left me, not really voluntarily I might add, doesn’t mean I’ll suddenly stop wanting to see him do well. Anyway, I intend to win him back, as you well know.” Daniel raised an eyebrow. “What’s your story?”

“Right. I thought you might be here to try and talk him out of seeing Acton tomorrow. Maybe convince him that you can do it for him.” Cordell tilted his head.

“What?” Ryan was going to talk to Acton? Why?

“Well, you do have this tendency to rush in and overwhelm Ryan. Remember our discussion the other day? And how you were going to listen to what Ryan wants and needs? Step back so he can keep his pride and build his self-confidence?” Cordell glared at him again.

“Yeah, I remember that discussion. But that’s not what I meant. What I meant to find out was why Ryan is going to talk to Acton.” He wasn’t sure he liked that plan at all.

“Well, the police think that he’s only one of the perpetrators since he couldn’t have destroyed all the restaurants on his own. However, Acton has only confessed to vandalizing the Emerald Palace?” Cordell paused. “So, they need to get him to talk, right?”

“I’m with you so far. That’s also pretty much what Detective Barrios told me when she called Sunday night.” Daniel sat back, trying to relax. Cordell, thorough lawyer that he was, liked to take his time with these types of explanation.

“I don’t think that Acton will open up easily. He hasn’t confessed to anything else so far, so it doesn’t look to me like he will. This almost makes it look like he’s trying to protect whoever else did it. Or he is being threatened by them.” Cordell shrugged. “Either way, he’s apparently completely clammed up and won’t respond to any of the officers who have tried to talk to him.”

“And you think he will talk to Ryan?” Surely not? “Shouldn’t I be the one to talk to him? After all, I’m the one he has a crush on.”

“Ah-ah-ahhh.” Cordell shook his head. “Didn’t we just agree you were *not* going to ride in on your white horse to save Ryan again?”

“Right. Sorry. Old habits and all that.” He blushed. Shit. Letting Ryan fend for himself was going to be a lot harder than he’d thought.

“Okay. So, back to what I was saying.” Cordell grinned. “I’m hoping that the ‘shock value’ of Ryan, whom he sees as the enemy, coming to see him will make him emotional enough to start talking. Obviously, we’ll tape the whole thing and hopefully will get a better idea who to look for.”

“That might actually work.” God, he sure hoped it would.

IT WAS already late when Daniel entered the bar. He’d much rather have stayed at the gallery, but Úlf had asked him for this meeting a week ago, and he wasn’t about to cancel. He wasn’t sure what the architect wanted from him.

Under the new circumstances, though, he needed to talk to the man anyway. Ben and he had agreed to put their plans for restaurant number five on hold for now. Ben couldn’t make it tonight, but Daniel didn’t want to make Úlf wait. The man’s business was going to be impacted by this. The least he could do was give him a personal explanation.

And there he was, over in a quiet booth at the back. Not to be missed, Úlf stood out in any crowd. Whether or not the man really had Viking ancestors like he claimed became a moot question once you met him. Taller than Daniel at six-six, he was also a lot broader in the shoulders and had thighs like tree trunks. His silver blond hair was long and straight, tied back into a neat ponytail as usual. He wore his tight blue jeans and even tighter black T-shirt well.

“Hi, Daniel.” Úlf’s smile was wide and his silver blue eyes twinkled when he got up from his seat to greet him.

“Hi, Úlf.” They shook hands, his own looking small in the other man’s big paw.

They’d barely sat down when a waiter came over to get their drink orders. Once he’d gone, Úlf turned back to him.

“I’m sorry to hear about the destruction of your restaurants. The coverage in the media has been pretty extensive.” Úlf’s friendly smile was gone. “Have they caught the person who did it yet?”

“They’ve got someone in custody who admitted to vandalizing the Emerald Palace but says he didn’t do anything else. He also won’t talk about who did do it or even who instigated the whole thing.” Daniel snorted. “He’s one of our waiters, believe it or not. I actually have my doubts that he did as much as he said he did, even though his motive seems pretty clear.”

“What motive could one of your employees possibly have to vandalize one of your restaurants? Especially since that would endanger his job even if he wasn’t found out?” Úlf’s eyebrows rose.

“Exactly. The fact that he has a crush on me and wanted to take revenge for my getting engaged to Ryan just sounds a little too weird. It’s just not like him. He’s such a quiet and shy man. No, we think Ryan’s homophobic parents are behind it all and may have put him up to it. Trying to make life for Ryan and me impossible.” Daniel took the alcohol free beer the waiter had just deposited in front of him and took a few deep drafts. “Since Ryan has now left me to try and protect me from further attacks from his parents, life is actually pretty impossible for me right now.”

“Shit, you’ve been going through hell, haven’t you?” Úlf drank some of his own beer, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed. “Makes me think I shouldn’t worry about the cancellation of the plans for the next restaurant.”

“What? How did you know?” Daniel had wanted to break it to the other man more carefully.

“I didn’t really know.” Úlf grinned. “But it is pretty obvious, right? I mean, you’re going to be busy rebuilding the existing restaurants and sorting out all the insurance crap before you’ll have energy to get going with the next one, right?”

“I’m really sorry, Úlf.” Daniel sighed. “I wish it was different, but you’re right. I hope you can understand that.”

“Sure. Hey, I’ve had delayed projects before, it’s not a problem. Just let me know when you’re ready to progress.” Úlf sat back, settling into the leather bench.

“Actually—well—we may have a bit of a problem there as well.” Daniel wished there was an easy way of saying this.

“Oh?” Úlf’s light eyebrows rose.

“Yeah. You see, I’ve decided to sell my half of the restaurant business to Ben. If he can make it work financially, things will be pretty tight for him for a while. So there may or may not ever be a fifth restaurant.” He hated the fact that he was leaving Ben to fend for himself in this. It was just that Ryan was far more important than anything else.

“Oh. I see.” Úlf looked thoughtful for a moment. “Is that because you’re trying to take away the parent’s ability to attack?”

“That’s pretty perceptive.” He nodded.

“Well, I hate to repeat this, but strategy is in my blood.” Úlf grinned. “I do have Viking ancestors, you know?”

“I know. You’ve told me. Repeatedly.” Daniel laughed. “Thanks for taking this so well.”

“No problem, man. I’ve got bigger problems right now.” Úlf raked both hands through his hair.

“Bigger problems? Not business related?” Daniel had never heard the big man talk about his personal life before. He was a pretty private guy.

“Not business related at all.” Úlf squirmed in his seat, suddenly shy. “Actually, the reason for asking you for this meeting was purely personal. I was going to ask you a big favor. But now I don’t know. You seem to have your plate pretty full already.”

“Hey, that doesn’t mean I can’t try and help out a friend.” Daniel smiled, trying to reassure the suddenly shy man.

“Okay. Well. Where to start?” Úlf finished his beer for courage and leaned across the table. “How well do you know Greg from Richfoot construction?”

“Huh?” That was so *not* what he’d expected. He almost laughed. “Not that well, actually. I mean, on a personal basis. I’ve worked with him for about three years now, like I have with you, but we never got as close as you and I did. Why?”

“Um, I was just wondering....” Úlf blushed a deep red and hid his face behind his hands.

What the hell? And then the penny dropped.

“Are you—interested—in him?” Shit, this was bad. Greg was engaged to be married—to a woman.

Úlf just nodded, still hiding behind his hands.

“Hey man, I’m sorry to tell you this, but Greg is about as straight as they come. He’s been engaged to a woman for a while now.” If only he could give Úlf better news.

“What?” Úlf’s head shot up, and he stared at Daniel with wide eyes.

“Yeah. Sorry man.” He shrugged, not knowing what else to say.

“That can’t be right.” Úlf shook his head.

“Why do you say that? Look, I’ve met the woman myself.” This was hard, the disappointment and pain on Úlf’s face growing by the second.

“Shit.” Úlf sagged in his seat. “He never said anything.”

“Huh? So you did talk to him about it?” That didn’t make sense.

“No. Fuck.” Úlf suddenly got up and pulled a few bills from his pocket, dropping them on the table in an untidy heap. “Sorry, I have to go. I can’t talk about this.”

And he was out the door before Daniel could even open his mouth to say anything. What the hell had just happened? One thing was certain, though. He and Cordell weren’t the only guys with relationship issues.

Chapter 26

RYAN'S hands were cold and shaking with nerves. He was about to enter the interview room at the police station where Acton was being held for the time being. Apparently he hadn't been able to come up with enough money to make bail. And then there was the fact that he was part of an ongoing police investigation.

Barrios had told Ryan that Acton would be waiting for him but that he hadn't been told who his visitor was.

"Are you ready?" Barrios looked back at him for confirmation, her hand already on the doorknob. "Remember that you're trying to get as much information from Mr. Haddow as you can. We'll be taping everything, so we can go over it as many times as we need to after your conversation. And if you need help, just say so, and we'll come in and take over."

Ryan nodded, trying to dry his clammy hands by wiping them on his jeans.

"It's not too late to stop this, you know?" Barrios smiled reassuringly. "We can try another way of getting him to talk."

"No." He wasn't going to chicken out now. "No, I've got to do this. Thanks for offering a way out, but I need to learn how to stand up for myself, fight for what's important to me. And this is a good first step."

"All right, if you're sure?" Barrios waited for his nod before quietly opening the door and stepping aside.

The little room was just as depressing as the one he and Daniel had sat in when they'd made their initial statement to Officer Gahr.

Drab beige walls, another bright green plastic table and matching uncomfortable plastic chairs made him want to turn around and leave, never to come back.

Acton sat with his back to the door. Still painfully thin, his medium long chestnut hair now hung limp and listless. His gray sweatshirt was rumpled and the black jeans had surely seen better days.

Ryan took a deep breath for courage and walked around to the other side of the table. Acton looked up, misery written clearly all over his face. His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open when he recognized Ryan.

“What—what are *you* doing here?” Even Acton’s lips seemed to have lost all color.

“I came to talk to you.” Ryan sat down.

“And why would I want to talk to *you* of all people?” Acton raked his hair with a trembling hand. “It’s your fault I’m in here in the first place.”

“My fault?” Ryan’s eyebrows rose. “What have I got to do with you vandalizing Daniel’s restaurants?”

“Oh please!” Acton snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. “It was only one of them. I keep telling them that, but they don’t believe me either.”

“*Only* one of them?” That just made him so angry. “Do you think that makes it better? Only admitting to having destroyed one of them? What do you think will happen if the police can’t find anyone else? Huh? Who do you think a jury will blame for all of it, whether or not you confessed?”

He knew that this was not, strictly speaking, true. But Cordell had briefed him to go overboard a little here or there to make it sound like the threat to Acton was bigger than it really was. Just to make sure the young man had a reason to start talking.

Acton’s slate gray eyes widened even more, something like uncertainty and the beginnings of fear showing in them.

“What—whoever put you up to this didn’t tell you that you’d go down for all of it if you got caught?” Ryan was making that up, but he’d read enough mystery novels to know how this usually worked.

And Acton was visibly losing confidence, so Ryan must be doing something right. "I bet you they're too clever to get caught themselves, so they're quite happy to have you go down for it."

"You think... you actually think..." Acton blinked and uncrossed his arms, leaning forward a little.

He had the bastard now. Acton hadn't even denied anyone else was involved.

"Actually, what I think has got nothing to do with it." He leaned back, trying to look detached and nonchalant. Inside he was still afraid this wouldn't work. "It's what the judge and jury will think when this case goes to court."

"So Daniel is going to press charges?" Acton was totally deflated.

"Huh? Why the hell do you think he wouldn't?" Ryan had a sneaky suspicion what Acton might be thinking. It was time to cure him of that notion once and for all.

"But he said—he said Daniel would blame *you* for it." Acton lowered his eyes and stared at the scarred table top. His voice was so low Ryan almost couldn't hear what he said. "And I thought Daniel liked me...."

Oh shit, there it was. He almost relented, Acton already looked shattered, all his illusions about to go out the window. But the other man hadn't said anything really useful yet. And Ryan had to get to the truth if he wanted to stop his parents and stand a chance of having the life with Daniel he wanted.

"Daniel doesn't blame me for it." Ryan snorted for emphasis. Still, he crossed his fingers behind his back, hoping this was not really a lie. "How could he? He loves me. He's asked me to marry him."

"He does love you, doesn't he?" Acton looked back up, long dark eyelashes moist. "He doesn't want anything to do with me?"

Ryan almost apologized, but silence might do more to increase the pressure on Acton to speak. Ryan was almost there, so he bit his tongue and just nodded. Waited.

"God, I'm in so much trouble." Acton put his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands.

Ryan remained quiet, letting the tension mount even further.

When silent sobs started shaking Acton's thin shoulders Ryan couldn't take it anymore. He reached out and put his hand on Acton's shoulder.

"You don't have to go through this on your own." Ryan knew that Cordell was waiting outside, ready to become Acton's lawyer. He'd explained that once Acton became a material witness in support of Daniel's and Ben's case, Cordell would have no problem defending Acton as well. He'd said that he'd help Acton get a deal in exchange for information about the real perpetrators.

"You don't know anything." Acton sniffled, trying to suppress his sobs.

"So, tell me." Ryan removed his hand and Acton looked up.

"Why would you care? Nobody else does. Why would you, of all people, even be interested?" Acton wiped his eyes dry with a sleeve.

"Listen, Acton. It may not look like it now, but I've been where you are. Alone and thinking nobody cared about me." Ryan swallowed. "So I do understand. And I do want to help, if I can. Because I know what it's like, and I don't think anyone deserves that."

"But that's not all, is it?" Acton narrowed his eyes, not ready to trust him yet.

"No, you're right, there's more. I want to make sure that the people who planned this are punished. I think I know who they are, but I can't prove anything. And neither can the police." Ryan pulled his hand back and scooted back in his seat.

"So you need my help?" Acton blinked and sat back in his chair, still slightly suspicious.

"Yes, I need your help. And we need to make it stick so that they can't recover and make it even worse." Ryan shrugged, wondering whether Acton had figured out that he was talking about his parents. "I guess I just want to live my life in peace and share it with the man I have loved for so long."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. Except I haven't got anyone who loves me." Acton closed his eyes for a moment and then looked back up. "Okay, if you can figure out a way to get me a lawyer I'll help you."

There are things—shit. There are things that I can't talk about with you. Things that made me do what I did."

"And they're the reason why you need a lawyer?" What the hell did his parents do to him?

"Yeah. Before I tell anyone who is behind this there are a few things I need to figure out how to do." Acton's gaze was intense, almost desperate. "Because if I don't, I won't survive it. Literally."

"Shit, that sounds serious." Or was it just dramatics? But no, that was real fear in those gray eyes.

Acton nodded.

"Okay. I'm glad there's a friend of Daniel's outside who is a lawyer. He said that he'll help you get a deal in exchange for you helping us out." Ryan smiled. "Looks like there're a few more things he'll need to do."

"A friend of Daniel's? And he'll really help me?" Acton went pale as a sheet.

"Yes, he will." Ryan made sure his voice was firm. "As far as he's concerned we're all trying to get the real instigators of this arrested and brought to justice. You will need to play a key role in this, so I'm sure he'll help you sort out the other stuff as well."

"If you think so...." Acton still looked despondent, but at least he hadn't gone back on his promise.

"I do." Ryan got up and went outside, closing the door behind him.

"Well done." Cordell had a big grin on his face and clapped him on the shoulder. "Looks like I can take it from here?"

"Yeah, listen—apparently there are a few other issues that need taking care of before he'll help." Ryan felt exhausted all of a sudden.

"No problem, I'll take care of whatever is necessary." Cordell picked up his briefcase and turned to Barrios. "You'll turn off the tape?"

"Already done." Barrios grinned. "We do know about lawyer-client privilege."

Cordell nodded, opened the door and walked in.

“You? What are you doing here?” Acton’s voice was a high squeal and then the door closed and there was silence. What the hell? Acton knew Cordell?

A FEW hours later Ryan sat in the back of an unmarked police car. Detective Barrios was driving, Detective Eldrige next to her. Cordell was in the back to his left, face unmoving. Ryan had asked whether it was true that Acton knew Cordell as soon as the lawyer emerged from the interview room a good two hours after he’d gone in. Cordell had just shaken his head and told everyone he couldn’t talk about that part. He assured them it had no impact on this case and had gone off to make a few phone calls before briefing them on Acton’s statements.

Now that Acton’s official statement had been recorded and the appropriate warrants obtained, they were on their way to the high school where his father worked as head master. It had come as a complete shock to Ryan that it was practically next door to the Aquamarine Wave. Not wanting an establishment run by a gay person “near” impressionable children had made them decide it needed to be destroyed to scare off the “unwanted elements.”

Another car was picking up his mother. Yet another one was on its way to find the ex-PI who had coordinated all the hate mail, attacks on the house, and the information gathering for and setting up of the actual restaurant attacks. According to Acton’s statement, he was the one who had blackmailed him into participating.

Ryan was still reeling from all the revelations. While his parents had definitely planned the whole thing, Acton said that the ex-PI was on a hate-campaign against gays ever since a gay drunk driver had killed his wife a few years ago. Being a heavy drinker himself, he’d picked the “gay” part of the guilty man’s profile as focus for his personal vendetta. He’d started working with right-wing and other anti-gay groups to make life impossible for as many gays as possible. These acts had lost him his license but that had only spurred him on even more.

His parents had only wanted to destroy one of the restaurants, but the ex-PI had decided they all needed “redecorating.” Acton had only

narrowly escaped the man's wrath by not letting on that he was gay as well. He had now been taken into protective custody to protect him against whomever the ex-PI had threatened him with until Cordell could finish the arrangements he'd made for the young man to be safe.

And now Ryan was about to confront his father, probably in public. He was shaking with nerves, but had insisted he needed to be there. He just had to see his father arrested for himself. He'd had to promise not to interfere, but Barrios had understood why he needed to be present.

They soon arrived at the school on Oakleigh Road, only a block away from the destroyed restaurant. The two detectives pulled their badges and asked for directions to the principal's office. A few corridors and closed classrooms later they arrived at the administration's area and were confronted by a large, middle aged woman with frizzy hair and horn-rimmed glasses.

"May I help you?" Her voice was scratchy, as though she'd smoked too many cigarettes.

"We need to see Mr. Johnston on police business, please." Barrios held up her badge, as did her colleague.

"W-What?" The woman's eyes narrowed as her face pulled into a scowl. "Is that Rahmic kid in trouble again? I told them not to accept someone of his origins into this school, but would anyone listen?"

"No, madam. This is not about any of the children attending this school." Barrios looked like she barely suppressed a frown at the woman's attitude.

"Well, in that case, why *are* you here?" The woman smiled slyly, clearly curious.

"I'm afraid we need to discuss that with Mr. Johnston himself." Barrios pointed at the door with "Principal" painted on it. "Is he in?"

"Well, Mr. Johnston normally doesn't see anyone without a proper appointment." The woman's bushy eyebrows rose. "However, since this is important police business, I'm sure he'll make an exception. Please, go ahead."

A brief rap on the door and a muffled "come in" later, they walked into his father's office. He sat behind a large desk, light brown

hair graying at the temples, a frown on his face. His hazel eyes widened when he saw Ryan.

“What in the Lord’s name are you doing here?” Ryan’s father half-rose behind his desk, cheeks flushing a deep red.

Ryan and Cordell flattened their backs against the wall so they were out of the way. Eldrige remained in the open door. Probably ready to prevent any escape attempts.

“For the record—are you Mr. George Johnston?” Barrios had taken a step forward, brandishing her badge.

“You know I am. You’ve been badgering my wife and me for weeks!” Ryan’s father turned his scowling face to her after a last hate-filled glance at Ryan.

That was when Ryan realized that he couldn’t even think of him as his father anymore. He was truly a complete stranger. Had been for a long time, but the events of the last few weeks had confirmed that they had nothing in common and nothing to say to each other anymore. It only made Ryan wish for a different last name even more.

“I’m here to place you under arrest for hate crimes against your son and his fiancé, harassment against both of them, and incitement to criminal vandalism and destruction.” Barrios unclipped the handcuffs from her belt and stepped around the desk.

“But—but—you can’t do that.” Mr. Johnston’s face had gone even redder as he was spluttering in protest. “I’m a respectable citizen and... and...”

Barrios was not to be deterred.

“Eldrige, would you read him his rights please?” Barrios had one of the suspect’s hands cuffed when he started pulling on it.

“This is intolerable. I want to see my lawyer.” Mr. Johnston kept pulling on the one handcuff, trying to get away.

“And you will, sir, just as soon as we’ve properly booked you at the police station.” She grabbed his other hand and his struggle intensified.

“Would you like to add resisting arrest to your charges, sir?” Her face was stony.

“N-No.” Mr. Johnston stopped struggling and turned his head to stare at Ryan, his eyes dark with hatred. “It’s all your fault, you know? If you hadn’t given in to those perverse urges of yours, everything would have been fine. It’s not like we didn’t give you fair warning and ample opportunity to get the help you so desperately need. I truly despise you and am very grateful to know that you’ll rot in hell.”

Ryan just stood there for a moment, frozen.

“It’s a good thing I don’t believe in hell, then.” Ryan shook his head when he’d recovered the ability to speak. “I still can’t believe you would treat your own flesh and blood the way you’ve treated me. What happened to all those principles of love, forgiveness, and tolerance? Somehow a religion which preaches one thing and then turns around and tramples its principles into the dust when they don’t suit its purposes cannot have my respect. Nor can you anymore. If I could so legally, I would divorce you and your wife, *Mr. Johnston*. Let me tell you, though, that the knowledge of having spoken the words to you today is more than enough.”

Mr. Johnston was blood red all over his face, fury shaping into a grimace that looked less than human. But no sound came out of his mouth.

“Herewith I officially divorce you and your wife for all eternity.” Ryan took a deep breath, feeling the cleansing effect of saying the words from the top of his head down to the tips of his toes. “I want nothing to do with either of you ever again. You may be my biological parents, but that is all the acknowledgement I will ever give you again.”

Ryan turned around and left the office, trying to keep the elation at bay. He’d done it, he had truly separated himself from all the oppressive darkness he’d felt whenever he thought of the people who had conceived him. Their influence on his past was undeniable, but he now realized that all those struggles had only made him stronger. The fact that he had survived and was on his way to becoming a successful artist, and hopefully a loving husband, was *his* accomplishment. He’d been strong enough to survive everything they’d thrown at him and come out the winner. He really was okay just the way he was.

When Barrios had finished handcuffing Mr. Johnston, Eldrige read him his rights. They filed past the “guard dog” outside the principal’s office. She was staring at them with her mouth open. Her

hostile looks followed them outside where children were streaming out of the classrooms, ready for their lunch break.

Mr. Johnston walked along the corridors, flanked by Barrios and Eldrige, head held high in defiance.

Ryan grinned. All that was purely a façade. He understood that now, having realized how little substance there really was underneath his progenitor's surface image. His own strength ran soul-deep, though, and was hopefully going to help him regain Daniel as his future husband.

Chapter 27

DANIEL was ready to jump out of his skin with impatience and worry. He'd been pacing back and forth in the living room for what felt like hours.

What was going on with Ryan and Acton? Had Acton revealed anything this morning? Had they managed to implicate Ryan's parents? Fuck, he needed to know.

It was just after five p.m., the sun just about to set, and he still hadn't heard anything. From anyone. He was about to start biting his nails, something he'd never done in his entire life, when the doorbell rang.

He threw open the front door with such force that it banged against the wall. It was Ryan! Daniel's heart beat so hard, he thought it was going to jump out of his chest. All he could do was stare at the beautiful sight of his lover's emerald green eyes that were riveted on his own.

"May I come in?" Ryan's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Please." Daniel wanted to say so much more but words wouldn't form.

Ryan had come back. His knees weak with relief, he stepped aside, closed the door, and followed his lover into the living room after he'd put his coat on the coat hanger without even thinking about it. Like he was coming home. Yes!

Ryan looked different. His back was straighter, his steps more certain. His eyes had been shining despite the slight hesitancy in them.

He was more—more like he'd been before he ran away. Self-confidence looked good on him.

Ryan turned around, not sitting down but remaining standing with his arms at his sides, palms outward and open.

"I am so sorry for leaving you." Ryan blinked. "It was the only thing I could think of doing to protect you."

"It's okay." Daniel stepped closer, needing so badly to feel Ryan in his arms again. "I understand why you did it."

"No, please, I need to say this." Ryan held up a hand as if to stop him from coming closer. "I owe you an explanation of what's been going on and why I did what I did. And I won't be able to get it right if you distract me."

It hurt to be pushed away, but Daniel was determined to let his lover speak his piece, so he nodded. He understood all about distractions.

"Okay." Ryan sighed and sat down on the sofa, patting the space next to him until Daniel joined him. "When I wrote that letter and left here, I did it because it was the only way I could see to protect you from further attacks. As soon as I talked it over with Nicole and Peter, I realized I might have made a mistake because I didn't talk to you first. I'm really sorry I didn't. I was just so used to solving problems on my own. Adding that to feeling guilty for being the cause of all of this, I thought that I needed to send a real signal to those people that I was serious about leaving."

"But the police...." A soft finger on his lips stopped him.

"Shhh, let me get through this, please." Ryan smiled shyly before removing his finger and turning serious again. "When Peter told me the next day that he'd picked you up from a bar on Saturday night, totally drunk because of what I'd done and believing I didn't trust you, I was shocked. But when he informed me that you had spoken to Ben about selling him your part of the business, I finally woke up. It made me realize that I'd been an idiot all along."

"You're not an idiot!" Daniel couldn't hold back any longer.

"Hopefully not anymore." Ryan grinned briefly. "But I sure was before. Anyway, once I'd realized that you really did need me, no

matter how strong you seemed, I went to see Cordell to figure out a plan to fight back. To finally confront them.”

“That’s where this plan to talk to Acton came from, isn’t it?” Daniel was so proud of Ryan for going through with that plan, but he *really* needed to know how it had all ended. And why hadn’t he referred to his parents as “parents” even once?

“Yes.” Ryan nodded and frowned. “It wasn’t easy, but I got him to the point where he made a statement which enabled the police to get warrants. I was shocked to find out that the school where Mr. Johnston is a head master is only a block from the Aquamarine Wave. Apparently that was what made them attack the new restaurant, using an ex-PI who had a problem with gays and decided to attack the other ones as well while he was at it.”

“Mr. Johnston?” Shit, he’d never told Ryan about the school. Not that it seemed to matter now.

“Yeah, I can’t refer to them as my parents anymore, so I’ve started using their names.” Ryan swallowed. “That confrontation really opened my eyes. Mr. Johnston totally lost it, blaming me and my ‘perverse urges’ for everything and telling me I’d rot in hell. Who treats their children that way? That’s when I finally realized that it wasn’t me who was the problem, it was them. All those years when they told me I wasn’t good enough, when they kicked me out.... I’d been strong enough to survive all that and come out the other end in one piece. For the first time in my life, I can really believe that I’m okay just the way I am.”

Yes! Finally. Daniel could have hugged the man, but Ryan looked like he was still holding back. Apparently there was more.

“Except for one thing.” Ryan looked down at his shaking hands.

Oh no, what now?

“I regret leaving you more than I can say.” Ryan blinked away a few tears when he looked back up, one hand clasping the other to hold them still. “I am so very sorry and can only hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Daniel was about to nod, of course he’d take Ryan back. But Ryan slid down onto the floor, to his knees and pulled a small black

box from his pants pocket. When he opened it there was a simple gold band inside, the mirror image of the one he'd given Ryan all those weeks ago.

"Daniel, I love you with all my heart. I always have, and I always will." Ryan opened the box and pulled out the ring. "Will you please forgive me for making a stupid mistake and take me back? Will you please marry me and become my husband?"

"Oh Ryan." Daniel almost couldn't speak past the lump in his throat. His heart was beating fast enough to be heard at the other end of the room. "Of course I forgive you, and I will always take you back. I never stopped loving you and will gladly marry you and become your husband."

With shaking fingers Ryan pushed the ring onto Daniel's finger, bending down to kiss his hand for good measure. When he looked up, such joy in his green eyes now, Daniel smiled and pulled the gold link chain he'd started wearing around his neck out from under his sweater, sliding it off over his head. Ryan's eyes grew wide when he saw his ring on it.

"I've worn this close to my heart ever since you left." He opened the chain and slid off the ring, holding it out to Ryan. "Will you accept it back as a token of my love and wear it again for everyone to see?"

"Yes." Ryan lifted his hand and watched him slide the ring back where it belonged. "Yes, my Daniel."

And with that he couldn't hold back any longer. He bent down and kissed Ryan on the lips. With a small moan Ryan pressed up against him and opened his lips to let him inside. Tongues met, and he tenderly stroked every soft area he could reach inside Ryan's mouth. The gentle response his lover—his partner—gave him made him groan with the sudden arousal that made his pants too tight. God, how he'd missed this.

He slid his hands under Ryan's arms and pulled him up to straddle his lap. Pressing him tightly against his body was pure heaven. Ryan's arms came around his neck, holding him close. When he felt Ryan's hard erection press against his own, he almost came in his pants, it was so good. After a series of kisses that made his toes curl and Ryan whimper with need, he pulled back to try and catch his breath.

“Need....” He was panting with the effort of holding back, thighs shaking. “Need to take the edge off, yeah?”

Ryan just nodded, pressed his groin tighter against Daniel’s, and dove back into the kisses, practically devouring him. He let his head fall back against the couch and gave himself over to the feelings of bliss flooding his body. The angle gave Ryan an even better chance at kissing him breathless and his partner followed through with a passion that was hot enough to make gold melt. Ryan’s hand slid both hands into his hair, massaging his scalp as they kissed.

Pushing his hips up against Ryan’s pressing the other way created enough pressure and friction to drive him mad with the need to come. He grabbed Ryan’s ass cheeks through the fabric and held on for dear life. His balls were tingling and he knew it wasn’t going to be long now. Spikes of desire traveled from his engorged dick into his balls and up his spine, driving him even higher.

With a last jerky motion against Ryan’s equally irregular twitches, he finally came. Shuddering and shaking with his orgasm, he felt Ryan push and tremble against him as his partner groaned his joy into his mouth. Warmth flooded his pants in spurt after spurt of blessed release that wouldn’t stop.

“Love....” Ryan pulled back from the kiss, eyes looking glazed with satisfaction. “I love you so much.”

“Uh-hm.” Daniel’s brain had turned into mush. “I love you too.”

WHEN Daniel awoke the next morning, for the first time in days, he did so with a smile. It was just getting light outside, well, as light as it got at the end of November. It would be Christmas in less than a month and then it wasn’t going to be long until New Year’s Day and their wedding. It was a good thing he hadn’t had the energy to cancel that. He’d been feeling too sorry for himself to get anything beyond the basic stuff done.

Ryan was cuddled tightly against him, his partner’s arms around his middle as if he was trying to stay close even in sleep. Good. That was the way it was supposed to be. And he was going to do his best to keep it that way for the rest of their lives.

Daniel carefully stretched a little, feeling a delicious soreness in his ass that had been absent for too long. He almost blushed when he remembered how often they'd made love last night. After finally recovering enough to leave the sofa and make it into bed, they'd both been insatiable. They had entered each other's bodies again and again to make sure they both claimed the other and felt claimed in return until their dicks and balls had hurt too much to try and come again.

The make-up sex had really been more like marathon sex. But even that hadn't been good enough to want him to ever go through a "difference of opinion" like that again. He decided they needed to find their inspiration for great sex elsewhere from now on.

Ryan made a quiet snuffling sound and burrowed his nose more deeply into Daniel's chest. It looked like he was about to wake up.

"Morning." Ryan's voice was muffled. His hot breath warmed Daniel's chest muscles and tickled a little.

"Good morning, baby." Daniel grinned and placed a kiss on his partner's head.

"You sound way too awake, my love." Ryan turned his head up and blinked a few times, deep green eyes trying to focus.

"I've been up for a while." He pulled Ryan's sleep-warm body up against himself and took a deep breath of his scent. "Just enjoying having you back in our bed."

"Oh." Ryan sighed deeply and slid a leg between his, putting pressure on his balls and grinding his half-hard cock against Daniel's groin. "It just feels really good to be back. I hated sleeping alone again. I was so cold all the time."

"Shhh." Daniel slid his hand into Ryan's locks and angled his head so he could look into those luminous eyes. "That's all behind us now. We'll never sleep apart again if I have anything to say about it."

"Really?" Ryan smiled. "Even when I have to go to Chicago and other places to do my commission paintings?"

"Yes, even then. I can always come with you." Daniel grinned. He could see a lot of fun trips and evenings spent in interesting hotels coming up.

“You can?” Ryan’s eyes widened, and he frowned. “I sure hope that’s not because you’re still thinking about selling your share in the restaurant business. Is it?”

“No, baby, it isn’t.” Daniel shook his head. “That idea went out the window the minute you proposed to me. But I do think that taking a step back from the day to day management will be a good thing for me. Ben wants to spend more time with his family. Our restaurant managers are all doing so well that we’ll be fine, just like we’d planned before all this mess happened. All we need to do is finalize whom we want to hire for the Aquamarine Wave, and we can relax almost completely until the fifth restaurant goes into the construction phase.”

He just had to remember to let Úlf know about the renewed change of plans. Remembering the abrupt way in which the architect had left the bar the other night when they were talking about Richfoot’s foreman, he just hoped that the two could still work together. He sure hoped so. They’d made an excellent team.

“Okay, as long as any trips we may take won’t interfere with your business. I couldn’t bear that.” Ryan still had a small frown on his face.

Daniel bent his head to kiss the frown away which made Ryan giggle.

“So, tell me all about those commissions you have. I saw that you had already sold quite a few portraits only a few hours into the opening event.” Daniel’s heart still swelled with pride when he remembered that evening.

“You—you were there?” Ryan’s eyes widened. “I didn’t see you at all.”

“Of *course* I was there.” Daniel pulled his partner closer, increasing the pleasant pressure on his still somewhat sore balls. “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Threats or no threats!”

“Shit, Daniel.” Ryan swallowed. “That means so much to me. I missed you all evening, just wanting you there with me.”

“I was, baby.” He kissed Ryan on the lips, just to give him a brief taste. “And I was so glad I’d gone. To see you take your first steps into this new world of being an artist was worth any risk.”

Ryan blushed and tilted his head up for a deeper kiss. He gladly complied and their tongues soon danced together as if they’d never

stopped. God, this would never get old. But he was too sore to take it any further this morning and he'd bet that Ryan had the same problem. They really had been going at it like bunnies most of the night. Regretfully he pulled back.

"Sorry. Too sore." He didn't stop caressing Ryan's back though.

"I know." Ryan winced. "I can't believe we came five times last night. I don't think I'll be able to get it up again for—at least a few hours."

Daniel grinned at the impish look on Ryan's face when he said that.

"Oh, I don't know." He slid his hand between their bodies and down to Ryan's cock. "This doesn't feel like it'll take a few hours?"

"Ahhh, shit." Ryan actually pulled back. "Sorry love, I really don't think I can."

"Hey, don't worry." He slid his hand back up and cradled Ryan's jaw. "I was just joking. I'm at exactly the same place. So, what about we have breakfast so you can tell me all about your commissions and plans for the next few weeks?"

"Sounds good." Ryan kissed him on the lips. "I've missed your fabulous food as well, you know?"

"Pastries?" Daniel grinned, remembering that first leisurely morning where he'd spoiled Ryan shamelessly.

"Pastries! Yeah." Ryan was up and out of bed before he could blink.

Laughing at his partner's enthusiasm, he followed more slowly, watching that delectable backside sashay into the bathroom in front of him.

Chapter 28

WITH a last critical look at his handiwork, Ryan stepped back. His first major portrait was completed. He'd made some initial sketches based on photos the Updykes had e-mailed last week. This week he'd worked on the actual painting, with the pair sitting for a few hours over the last three days. Now it finally looked good enough.

"Are you done? Can we have a look?" Mrs. Updyke, or Ophelia as she'd asked him to call her, was as excited as a little girl.

"Hmmm." It was fun making her wait. Her left foot kept tapping the floor. "All right, I think I'm done."

"Come on, Joseph." Ophelia pulled her indulgently smiling husband with her and had them both standing next to the easel in no time.

Her eyes widened, and Joseph whistled his appreciation as they studied the painting. It was about seven-by-seven feet. They'd wanted it life-size so it would fit in with all their ancestors' portraits in the mansion's staircase. Ophelia sat in a leather armchair, eyes twinkling with mischief. Joseph stood behind her, hands on her shoulders.

"I'm officially impressed." Ophelia pushed her gold-rimmed glasses back up the bridge of her nose. "You truly did an excellent job."

"It looks like we'll get up and walk out of the frame any second." Joseph moved his head back and forth to see different angles. "That's very impressive, Ryan."

"I'm glad you like it." He'd been so nervous at first, but then his inner vision had taken over and helped him bring the couple's inner essence onto the canvas.

“We more than like it, we absolutely adore it.” Ophelia stepped up and hugged him. “We’ll tell all our friends. You’ll be as busy as you want to be.”

“Thank you, I really appreciate that.” Ryan smiled. “But you know that I don’t want to be *too* busy.”

Over the last three days they’d talked a lot. The Updykes now knew most of what had happened in Ryan’s life and had offered to help in any way they could. Thanks to his newfound self-confidence and understanding of his role in Daniel’s life he’d been able to think about how much paid work he’d actually *want* to do. There were still so many other things to paint that he wasn’t sure that he wanted to do only portraits.

“No, absolutely not.” Ophelia grinned. “After all, there’s a wedding coming up soon, isn’t there?”

“Yes.” He couldn’t wait.

“I’m so glad that really nice young man we met at your opening event turned out to be your fiancé. We thought he was your agent, you know?” Ophelia winked.

“I’d much rather have him as my husband.” Ryan laughed. God, he was so happy now that all the drama was over.

“Hm, I can see what you mean. If I wasn’t married already....” Ophelia ducked her head playfully when Joseph growled at her.

“Sorry, he’s all mine.” Ryan frowned and tried to look stern which made both Updykes laugh.

“Don’t worry, honey, you deserve a happy ending after everything you’ve had to go through.” Ophelia patted him on the arm in a grandmotherly fashion. “Which reminds me: how’s the rebuilding of the new restaurant going?”

“Daniel tells me it’s making great progress.” He hadn’t had the heart to go back and face all that destruction again. “The construction company is apparently performing miracles so that the grand opening can take place in a little over a week from now, well in time for Christmas. It’ll be only two weeks behind the original schedule, and most customers have been very understanding about their bookings being moved back.”

“Hey, that’s very good news.” Ophelia smiled.

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.” Ryan cleared his throat. “I was wondering if you might want to come to the restaurant opening on the fourteenth. You’re my first paying clients, and I really enjoyed working with you, and, well....”

“Thank you, we appreciate that. We’d love to go! I’m sure it’ll be fabulous.” Ophelia turned to her husband. “We haven’t got anything planned that evening, have we?”

“That’s Friday next week, isn’t it? No, I think we’re free.” Joseph nodded. “And even if we did, I think attending the opening of such a renowned restaurant would be far more important.”

“Great!” Ryan bounced on his feet. “I’ll send you official invitations with the details and everything.”

“I can’t wait to eat at one of Daniel’s places.” Joseph grinned. “You’ve told us so much about his amazing food. It’ll be a real treat to finally get to eat some of it.”

“Have you been doing a marketing job for the restaurants again?” Daniel’s amused voice came from the doorway. “I thought you were supposed to be talking *arty stuff* with your clients.”

“Daniel!” He turned around and sank into Daniel’s embrace. “You’re early.”

“Yeah, I got bored with wandering the streets.” Daniel winked. “It’s damn cold out there, by the way. So I was glad that Rupert let me in.”

“We’ve been talking ‘arty stuff’ as well, Daniel.” Joseph shook Daniel’s hand in greeting. “I’m glad you’re early, I’m awfully hungry and about ready to pack it in and go downstairs for dinner.”

“That would be excellent.” Daniel shook Ophelia’s hand. “I can’t deny being quite hungry myself.”

“Men!” Ophelia rolled her eyes. “You’re always hungry.”

“Yes ma’am.” All three men chorused at the same time.

“CAN I show you guys something?” Ryan had waited for a break in the conversation. Ben and his family were over for a little pre-

Christmas get-together this Sunday. Karen was building something Lego-y with the twins, trying to distract them from the Christmas tree.

Daniel and Ben both nodded and followed him upstairs to the studio.

“Does this mean you’re finally allowing me back into your creative den?” Daniel winked, having been banned from the studio since they’d gotten back together again.

“Yeah, I was just working on something that I didn’t want you to see before it was finished. I’m sorry....” Ryan had found it really hard not to share his plan with Daniel from the very beginning, but he’d figured a surprise like this would work better.

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart.” Daniel took his hand and squeezed gently. “I was just teasing you.”

“Okay.” Ryan reached for the doorknob. “When we go in, just have a look at the paintings and let me know what you think. I don’t want to sell these, though. Just consider if you might be interested in them as decoration.”

Puzzled looks from both men made him smile nervously as he opened the door and waved them inside. He followed them more slowly and watched their eyes widen as they looked around the room. He had hung his seascapes all along the walls. Some were standing on the floor. He’d adjusted the lighting to create a feeling of being underwater. This made the fish and other sea creatures come even more alive.

Daniel recovered first.

“Ryan, these are magnificent.” His fiancé turned around to look at him, blue eyes blazing with admiration. “You did all this—put all this effort into making these beautiful paintings even after I was so awful to you about not wanting your art in the restaurants?”

Ryan nodded, touched that Daniel still remembered how hurt he’d been. Even though, with hindsight, he had to admit that he’d gone a little overboard with his reaction. He did need to learn how to be less of a drama queen when things didn’t go his way.

“I have to agree.” Ben swallowed. “We were really stupid to turn you down, weren’t we?”

“No, you weren’t.” Ryan shook his head. “I couldn’t see it at the time, but you were perfectly right not to want to start selling pictures in your restaurants. That just wouldn’t have fit with what they stand for.”

“So, what do you want us to do with these?” Daniel frowned. “You didn’t just do them for the fun of it, did you?”

“I wanted to suggest using them as decoration.” Ryan took a deep breath for courage. “I’ve been thinking about what I could do to make the restaurants even better. I thought that a series of themed paintings might enhance their image. Make the customers’ experience more special.”

“You’re giving these to us?” Ben looked incredulous.

“Yeah, if you’ll take them.” Ryan hoped he hadn’t gone too far.

“If we’ll take them?” Ben’s eyebrows rose. “Man, these are absolutely brilliant. We’d be stupid not to take them. They’ll do so much to make the atmosphere at the Aquamarine even more distinctive.”

“I’m with Ben.” Daniel stepped closer and embraced him. “I can’t believe you did this for us, but I’m very, very grateful. Thank you.”

“Oh good. I’m glad.” It felt great to give something back to Daniel and have him accept it like this. “I’ve got some more ideas for the other three restaurants. I’m sorry I didn’t get to doing them yet, but I’ve been so busy...”

“Shit, Ryan, I’m bowled over that you were able to do this much in so short a time.” Daniel stroked his back, trying to relax him. “No wonder you’ve been so tired lately, you’ve been working flat out to get all this done.”

“What can I say?” Ryan grinned and leaned into Daniel’s caresses. “I was really motivated, you know?”

“I think this much motivation deserves a reward.” Daniel placed an all-too-brief kiss on his lips while moving his hand down to Ryan’s ass, giving it a little squeeze.

“Yeah?” Ryan pressed closer to Daniel in reaction and found him hard against his own swelling dick. “I like rewards.”

“I bet you do. But this is definitely turning into a TMI situation.” Ben laughed and walked toward the door, pretending to cover his eyes

with a hand and turning his head. "I'll be downstairs keeping the family entertained."

"Thanks." Daniel returned his attention to Ryan once the door was closed. "Now, where were we?"

"I believe you said something about a reward?" Ryan lifted his hand and tunneled it into Daniel's glossy hair, loving the fact that his fiancé had left his locks untamed today.

"I did." Daniel's lips came down on Ryan's mouth, his tongue following suit, licking and laving until Ryan opened up to him with a moan.

Tongues tangling, soft moans and whimpers expressing their mutual need, Daniel pushed him backward until his legs hit what must be the recliner. Daniel grabbed his sweater and pulled it up and off. His fiancé's fingers had his pants open before he could blink. Daniel grabbed the fabric and yanked pants and underwear down in one smooth movement, barely giving him time to lift his feet to free him completely.

Before Ryan could so much as take a breath, he was pushed back, somehow neatly falling onto the recliner. Daniel, still fully dressed, put his hands on the armrests before bending over him with eyes blazing. He kissed his mouth and then licked his way down a jaw and along his neck. He sucked lightly on that sensitive spot where shoulder met neck before moving down to bite first one nipple, then the other.

Ryan arched his back and mewled, he was so aroused.

Daniel lifted his head for a moment and grinned. His hands stroked Ryan's thighs as he moved until he knelt between Ryan's legs, his knee stopping the footrest from popping up all the way. Daniel moved his big hands to the inside of his thighs, just above the knees and pushed his legs farther apart, opening him up all the way. Finally his lover pulled him forward until his ass hung over the front of the seat and pushed his legs up and out. God, he loved it when Daniel got demanding like this.

"Beautiful." Daniel's voice was husky as he stared at Ryan.

"Please." He was shaking with desire.

"What do you want, baby?" Daniel licked his own lips provocatively.

“That.” Ryan couldn’t think straight, his dick so hard against his stomach that it almost hurt. “In me. Now.”

“I love it when you’re incoherent.” Daniel grinned and bent down for an all-too brief lick along his dripping dick.

“More. Please.” Ryan tried to move his hips up to increase the friction but Daniel held him securely.

“I love this even more when you beg.” Daniel smiled and licked once around the corona.

Finally he enclosed him in his hot mouth and sucked him down all the way. When he hit the back of his fiancé’s throat his breath hitched, and he thought he’d come then and there. But Daniel pulled back and grinned.

“You’re closer than I thought, baby. I’ll have to adapt my plans.” Daniel reached out and fumbled in the drawer of the standing sink, returning with a tube of hand lotion.

Plans? The man had enough functioning brain cells to remember plans? He was about to explode, he needed to come so badly.

“Hold on for me.” Daniel opened the tube and pressed some lotion straight onto Ryan’s already twitching hole.

“Cold.” But that was actually helping him control his arousal by pulling him back from the brink just enough.

Swirling a finger around and around his opening, Daniel slowly worked some of the lotion inside. He followed with a long finger, sliding into Ryan in a smooth movement, making him gasp. He turned his hand around and started stroking his prostate, making Ryan wiggle it was so good.

A second and third finger followed quickly, making Ryan moan and beg for more. Finally Daniel withdrew his fingers, opened his pants and pulled out his very hard shaft. He placed it at Ryan’s opening and looked deep into his eyes.

“I love you, Ryan.” Daniel bent down to kiss his trembling lips at the same time as he pushed in, and it was almost over.

The feeling of Daniel thrusting inside him, pegging his prostate every single time while his tongue ravaged his mouth was too much. Ryan’s balls pulled up, and he spilled his release onto his stomach in great bursts of joy as he came. His channel clenched around Daniel’s

still pumping cock, and his fiancé lost his rhythm, drenching his insides in blasts of hot come.

“Love.” Ryan was gasping for air, still shaking with aftershocks, when he brought his arms around Daniel’s shoulders to hold him close.

“Fuck. You make me come harder every time we do this.” Daniel collapsed onto him, a welcome weight that made him feel safe.

“Same here.” Ryan grinned. “Not a problem though.”

A few minutes of snuggling and tender kissing later, they both decided they needed to get up and join their friends downstairs. Who knew what Ben had told the boys to keep them away from their favorite uncles for this long!

BARELY a week later, the big opening event was in full swing. It was Friday evening and the restaurant swarmed with assorted guests, the media, and anyone else who’d managed to charm their way past the bouncers. Ryan stood in a corner, taking a break from talking to people and watched Daniel charm everyone.

His paintings had been hung in strategic places, enhancing the effect of the many aquariums to best advantage. Entering the Aquamarine Wave now felt like walking into an enchanted version of an underwater paradise.

Candles brought everything to flickering life, making the difference between the real fish moving around and the painted fish on the walls less noticeable. Handel’s *Water Music* was the theme song for the evening, other pieces had been chosen to evoke gentle ocean waves, sunny white beaches, and underwater beauty. A buffet of finger foods centering on seafood had been set up along two walls. A wet bar, including the most outrageously colorful cocktails, completed the picture.

“What are you doing here all on your own, honey?” Ophelia’s distinctive voice woke him from his reverie, and he turned to greet her.

“I’m so glad you were able to make it.” Ryan shook her hand and then Joseph’s.

“I’d like to introduce you to Elliot Papuni, a friend of ours.” Ophelia indicated the small man next to her.

He was about five-eight and slim but well toned. His skin was the color of milky coffee, and he looked Polynesian. His clothing was colorful enough to qualify him as a tropical bird—or fish, for that matter.

“Hi, Elliott.” Ryan held out his hand, not sure what to say.

“Hello, Ryan.” Elliott’s voice was soft and smooth, his small hand warm to the touch with a firm grip. “I’m so happy to finally meet you. I simply adore your work and was hoping you’d show me more.”

“Oh?” Sounded like he had a fan.

“Yes, I saw the portrait you did.” Elliott’s smile revealed two rows of pearly white teeth as his chocolate brown eyes lit up with enthusiasm. “I was so impressed, and when they told me your story... well. Needless to say I was very touched, darling.”

Ryan blushed.

“Did you do the paintings here in the restaurant?” Joseph motioned around the room. “The ocean creatures just look so lifelike, just like your portraits of people.”

“Yes, I did these.” Ryan smiled. All the recognition was making him proud to have contributed something to Daniel’s and Ben’s success.

“They are truly fabulous, darling.” Elliott tossed back his long black hair in an elegant movement. “I was wondering whether you’d be interested in doing an exhibition or two in Chicago? A few of my friends own galleries and would give their eyeteeth to be able to offer their customers pieces like this.”

“They would?” Ryan laughed. “I’ve been looking for venues to take my landscapes for a while now, but none of the ones I contacted seemed interested.”

“I don’t know about your landscapes, but if they’re anything like these, I can find good homes for them.” Elliott pulled a card from the inside pocket and handed it to Ryan. “Here, give me a call next week, and I’ll set something up for after the New Year.”

The card was as colorful as its owner.

“You’re an art critic?” Ryan was even more impressed that Elliott liked his stuff.

“I hope you’re not going to hold it against me, darling.” Elliott grinned and batted his long, dark eyelashes.

“Of course not.” But Ryan blushed anyway.

“You are just so cute.” Elliott hugged Ryan. “I think we’ll become great friends.”

“Just as long as you remember that he’s taken.” Daniel’s growly voice from behind them made Ryan jump.

“Oh honey, I know.” Elliott blinked up at Daniel, flirting shamelessly. “All the good ones are.”

Chapter 29

DANIEL awoke to Ryan lying half on top of him under the soft down duvet. His fiancé's head was on his chest, blond locks falling every which way. Ryan had slung one arm around his middle. A leg lay across both of his, pressing Ryan's morning wood against his hip. What a way to wake up!

They'd made it to their favorite Vancouver hotel late last night, along with all the other wedding guests. Le Soleil was just as impressive the second time around, even giving them the same suite they'd liked so much last time. The twins had been sleepy, but when they saw the lobby with its thirty-foot-high vaulted and gilded ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and fluted columns, they were suddenly wide awake again. Eric had wondered whether they were in some king's palace. Edward had been too wide-eyed to say anything.

Daniel was looking forward to their New Year's celebration in the Copper Chimney, the hotel's two-story restaurant. Apparently part of the lower story was going to be transformed into a dance floor. He was sure it was going to be glorious.

But first things first. He had an armful of softly snuffling man to awaken so they could meet the others for breakfast, to be followed by lots of touristy activities.

He cupped his fiancé's head in both hands and lifted it so he could place soft kisses all over his face: forehead, eyelids, cheeks, nose—hmmm—and his soft lips. Sliding his tongue along them, he grinned when Ryan made a soft sound, opening to him and greeting him with lazy strokes of his own. His eyes remained closed, though. That was his lazy baby, especially in the mornings.

A slow rocking of Ryan's hips followed, increasing the pressure from his fiancé's thigh on Daniel's quickly hardening cock. Bringing his hands around, he gripped Ryan's hips, shifting him slightly to better position himself into the crease between thigh and abdomen. Yeah that would do it. Kissing and slowly rocking for many minutes gradually increased their arousal until Ryan's eyes opened.

"Morning, love." Ryan smiled and moved his hand to stroke and carefully tweak one of Daniel's nipples, making him squeal.

"Mor-morning." He panted with need now, the sudden increase in desire making him move more quickly.

"Yesssss." Ryan matched him move for move, rubbing frantically for release.

He was too far gone to care and let go, spurts of sticky semen spraying against their stomachs. Ryan immediately followed him, hot spunk mixing with his as he shook through his morning orgasm.

"So good." Ryan lowered his head and cuddled close.

"Yeah. The best." Daniel grinned. They weren't really closer to getting up, but the day had started well.

A soft knocking on the outer door interrupted their post orgasmic bliss only seconds later. Daniel groaned. That could only be the twins. They were always up too early anyway, and the three hour time difference made things worse.

Ryan groaned but got up and put on his robe, stumbling to the door in his cute half-awake morning state. Daniel rose on an elbow so he could look through the bedroom door into their living area and past the huge burgundy sofa to the outer door.

When Ryan opened it, two wide-awake and very bouncy five-year-old boys stood there with expectant grins on their faces. A sheepish looking Ben stood behind them.

"Oh." Eric's smile fell. "You're not up yet?"

"Not really, no." Ryan pretended to yawn.

"We're sorry." Edward looked crestfallen. "We didn't mean to wake you."

"But we've been up for *hours*, and we're hungry and Dad said it was okay to check if you were up." Eric tried to look apologetic.

"It is after eight a.m." Ben shrugged. "Sorry, guys."

"No, it's okay." Ryan raked a hand through his locks. "It's time we got up anyway. We've got a long day ahead of us, don't we?"

Enthusiastic nodding from the twins was the result.

"Tell you what, guys. Why don't you take Daddy and Mommy downstairs and get something to eat, since you're so hungry? Daniel and I will take a quick shower and follow you as fast as we can, okay?" Ryan looked up at Ben and got a wink.

"Quick as they can, boys." Ben laughed. "You heard the man."

DANIEL smiled as he sat in one of the three small floatplanes they'd chartered to take the sixteen wedding participants and the one officiate from Vancouver to Salt Spring Island. His fingers were tightly interlaced with Ryan's across the narrow aisle of the six-seater plane, and he just couldn't seem to stop grinning. This afternoon he'd finally be a married man. He couldn't wait.

The party last night had been a great success and they rung in the New Year of 2008 with much fanfare, good humor, and excellent company. Ophelia and Joseph Updyke, a last-minute addition to the guest list that their wedding planners had luckily taken in stride, had told them stories about the Chicago art world that made everyone laugh. His parents had gotten along with them from the very first, as had Ben and Karen. The twins had promptly *adopted* them as their newest set of grandparents.

Cordell was there as well, looking elegant as usual. His date, Acton, had been a big surprise when Cordell asked for *approval* to bring him a week ago. It was good to see the young man so relaxed. He'd gained weight and looked truly happy. There was a story there that Cordell hadn't told them yet, and Daniel was going to find out what had happened as soon as they were back from the honeymoon.

Jack and Stephen had joined them at the airport this morning, preferring to have their own private New Year's celebration, since it was their anniversary. It had taken some convincing to get them to agree to come to the wedding at all, but they'd done such an excellent job on the organization that Ryan had insisted they be invited, and

Daniel hadn't disagreed. He could see them becoming good friends over the next few years.

"It's not long now, is it?" Ryan's voice floated across the aisle above the infernal noise the piston engine was making to keep the propeller going.

"No, sweetheart, in a few hours I'll finally be able to call you 'husband.'" Daniel gently stroked his fiancé's fingers.

"Yeah." Ryan blushed adorably. "Yeah, it'll be different, right?"

"I love you as much now as I will for the rest of my life." He lifted Ryan's hand to his lips and kissed it. "But being married will make it all feel even better, I'm sure."

"More permanent, huh?" Ryan grinned. "I can deal with that, love."

"Good." He grinned back. "I'm not going to let you get away from me again."

"Good. Because now that I have truly found my way back to you, I'm going to keep you and love you forever." Ryan turned his hand around and kissed his knuckles, his green eyes alight with joy.

A few minutes later their thirty-minute flight was over, and they landed in Ganges Harbor with only a few bumps. Thanks to the location of the island in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains, it was a lot milder and drier here than elsewhere around this time of year. There was no snow, and the lack of wind combined with brilliant sunshine made it live up to its reputation as the "Hawaii of Canada"—at least today.

Two small shuttle buses from Hastings House hotel were waiting for them at the exit, and everyone piled in while the drivers took care of their luggage. The drive to the hotel only took a few minutes, and the views on the way as they wound their way up the little hill were exceptional. The combination of the blue water glittering in the sunlight and the dark green of the tall cedars was stunning. He felt Ryan's fingers twitch and grinned. His fiancé was about to pull out his sketchbook, he was sure.

After an excellent light lunch in the private dining room, they were given a short tour around the property and were shown to their suites to freshen up before the wedding ceremony at five.

Ryan joined Peter and Nicole in their suite to get ready while he went with Ben and Karen, who were staying in Churchill Cottage, slightly out of the way on the back of the estate. The twins were almost too excited to behave and kept bouncing on their queen bed until one of the grownups reminded them to be good.

Finally they were dressed in their mini-tuxes and given the rings in their little black velvet bags. From that moment on, responsibility obviously weighing heavily on their little shoulders, they went back to their normal well-behaved selves. They followed Karen to join Ryan and Peter to complete the procession, meek as little lambs.

Daniel and Ben made their way across the estate to the Somerset Suite. This was it. Daniel took a deep breath as he entered the tastefully decorated room. The light brown carpet and walls were nicely set off by the darker wooden window and door frames. Spot lights in the white ceiling gave the impression of sunlight despite the fact that the sun had set around four thirty. Blue and yellow flowers everywhere helped give the room a festive atmosphere.

The other guests had already arrived and had taken their seats in the half circle of ten comfortable cloth-covered arm chairs that were all facing the double doors to the deck. Keeping the fir and slate fireplace to his right, he walked through the space that had been left in the half-circle and walked up to Reverend Emmons already standing at the front.

Daniel suddenly had difficulty swallowing past the lump in his throat. Shaking his and Ben's hand, the older man with the fluffy white beard smiled at him reassuringly, his gold rimmed glasses sparkling. He looked impressive in his Unitarian robes, but his twinkling eyes and grandfatherly smile ensured that he still seemed as approachable as he'd been during lunch and their first discussion in person.

Daniel's parents sat at the front, on *his* end of the circle, just beaming up at him. Ophelia and Joseph Updyke were next to them and looked elegant in a dark green suit for her and a tux for him. Wow, they'd gone all out. Cordell was next, looking amazing in a white tux that emphasized his dark skin even more. Acton sat next to him holding his hand, wearing a stylish gray suit and occasionally smiling up at Cordell.

Jack and Stephen were next in the circle, both in tuxes as well. Two empty chairs, one for Karen and one for Nicole, completed the big circle.

The photographer had installed herself in a corner and took a few pictures of those present before leaving to record Ryan's approach. When the hotel employee in the other back corner started the music Daniel's heart soared to the uplifting sounds of John Stanley's Trumpet Voluntary.

Karen walked in first, a light yellow dress with a narrow skirt emphasizing her petite frame. She was carrying a basket with flowers, throwing them left and right with an impish grin, clearly loving her job as *flower girl* before quietly sitting down next to Jack.

The twins were next, proudly carrying the velvet bags with rings inside, both grinning from ear to ear. They looked truly adorable in their little tuxes and stood front and center as directed by the Reverend. Peter had followed them and stood behind the spot where Daniel's groom was going to be a few moments from now.

Daniel's breath hitched when Ryan finally walked in on Nicole's arm. The way he filled out his tux made Daniel's pants feel suddenly tight. Tall and proud, he stood next to his sister in her pink dress, bright emerald eyes immediately focusing on Daniel and staying there. Nicole kissed him on the cheek once they were fully inside the suite and stepped aside to let him walk toward Daniel on his own.

He only started breathing again when Ryan took his hand and clasped it more tightly than ever before. His eyes were suspiciously moist, as were Daniel's. When the music stopped they both turned to face Reverend Emmons, never letting go of each other's hands.

"Before we start with the official ceremony, there is someone here who wants to give you a gift, Ryan." Reverend Emmons grinned and pointed behind them.

They turned around to see Mom and Dad approach, holding a rolled piece of parchment with a big red bow around it between them. The grins on their faces were the biggest he'd ever seen. What was going on?

"We want to give you one of our gifts early." Mom took one of Ryan's hands and lifted it palm up to deposit the parchment onto it,

never letting go of his hand. “We think you deserve this after everything you’ve been through.”

“You’ve already shown that you are your own man when you walked in here alone.” Dad put his hand over the parchment and winked. “This document gives you the legal right to make that claim. Well, until you get married.”

“What?” Ryan’s eyes were big as saucers.

“Come on, open it sweetie.” Mom smiled a very motherly smile at Ryan.

With trembling hands Ryan took the gift and pulled the bow open. He unrolled the parchment and held it up so they could both read it. It was a court decree giving Ryan the right to use the last name of Miller as of January 1, 2008. Officially signed and sealed.

Ryan’s knees buckled and he slid an arm around his waist to hold him up, Dad catching the parchment as it started sliding from Ryan’s trembling hands.

Daniel had tears in his eyes as he watched Ryan’s face go from complete shock to utter delight. It was as if the sun had risen inside the room.

“Mom, Dad, I don’t know what to say.” Ryan pulled himself together. “This means so much to me....”

“We know.” Mom kissed him on the cheek.

“Just say ‘I do’ when the time comes, Son.” Dad winked and took the parchment, neatly rolling it up again. “We’ll keep this safe for you.”

“But how?” Ryan handed back the bow.

“A good friend of ours is a family court judge.” Mom smiled. “When we told her your disappointment about having to wait for a year, she offered to make a special ruling.”

“And she did.” Dad turned serious. “We know how much you hated the fact that you’d still have to use your old last name even though you have effectively *divorced* your biological parents. This just means you don’t have to.”

“Thank you from the bottom of my heart.” Ryan’s breath hitched as he embraced first Mom and then Dad. “This is the best gift you could have given me.”

“You are welcome.” Mom took Dad’s hand and led him back to their seats.

Ryan took a deep breath and smiled his gorgeous smile at Daniel before they turned back toward the Reverend, holding hands again. Everything was even more perfect now and the radiant smile on Reverend Emmons’s face confirmed that.

“We are gathered here in the presence of the witnesses you have chosen for the purpose of uniting in matrimony you, Ryan Miller, and you, Daniel Miller.” Reverend Emmons grinned at them and then lifted his eyes to look at each person in the circle behind them while he spoke.

“We are here so that Ryan and Daniel may celebrate and consecrate their spiritual union. It is by their love that they will be united here today. They wish to celebrate this in the presence of your love and support and to share their joy in each other with you, their family and their friends.” Reverend Emmons smiled and looked back at Daniel and Ryan.

“The contract of marriage is most solemn and is not to be entered into lightly, but thoughtfully and seriously with a deep realization of its obligations and responsibilities. Please remember that love, loyalty, and understanding are the foundations of a happy and enduring union. No other human ties are more tender and no other vows more important than those you are about to pledge.” The Reverend folded his hands.

“Do you, Ryan Miller, take Daniel Miller to be your husband for life?”

“I do.” Ryan’s voice was loud and clear.

“Do you, Daniel Miller, take Ryan Miller to be your husband for life?”

“I do.” Daniel’s heart was about to beat its way out of his chest with joy.

“You have written your own vows and will speak them to each other in a moment.”

“Would the ring bearers please come to the front?” Reverend Emmons had bent around them to look at the twins.

Eric and Edward moved to stand next to them, looking nervous but proud.

“Will the ring bearer with Ryan’s ring please give it to Daniel?” Reverend Emmons’s lips twitched as he watched Edward struggle with the bag’s strings until he managed to pull out the ring.

It was a golden double triangle ring, a single row of small emeralds sunk into the outside on one half and a single row of small sapphires running around the other half. They’d picked the design together a few weeks back, and he still loved the symbolism as much as he had then.

“I give you this ring in token and pledge of my everlasting love for you.” He placed the ring on Ryan’s finger. “I promise to listen to you and support you and not to rescue you without your consent. Thanks to you I am no longer alone, and I laugh and dare to dream again. I look forward with great joy to spending the rest of our lives together. I will care for you and nurture you, respect you and be there for you in everything life will throw at us. I vow to be true and faithful for as long as we both shall live.”

“Will the ring bearer with Daniel’s ring please give it to Ryan?” Reverend Emmons watched Eric go through the same struggle as his brother, finally passing an identical looking ring to Ryan.

“I give you this ring in token and pledge of my everlasting love for you.” Ryan placed the ring on Daniel’s finger with a slightly shaking hand. “I promise to stand by you because we are stronger together than alone. I agree to the occasional rescue as long as you let me rescue you back when needed. Thanks to you I am no longer alone and know what it is to be truly loved. I look forward with great joy to spending the rest of our lives together. I will care for you and nurture you, respect you and be there for you in everything life will throw at us. I vow to be true and faithful for as long as we both shall live.”

They both had tears in their eyes when Reverend Emmons asked the twins to step back. Then he took their clasped, newly ringed hands in his.

“Now that you have joined yourselves in matrimony, may you strive all your lives to meet this commitment with the same love and devotion that you now possess.” Reverend Emmons let go of their hands and stepped back. “By virtue of the authority vested in me by the province of British Columbia, I now pronounce you husbands for life.”

Daniel was frozen in place for a moment, he was so happy. A few tears of pure joy rolled down his cheeks, and he smiled hesitantly at his new husband. Ryan was doing no better, shyly smiling back.

“You may kiss the groom.” Reverend Emmons’s voice woke him from his reverie.

He opened his arms, and Ryan stepped right into them, pink lips parted in welcome as he covered his husband’s mouth with his own in their first tender kiss as a married couple. It was the best kiss they had ever shared or would ever share, as long as they lived.

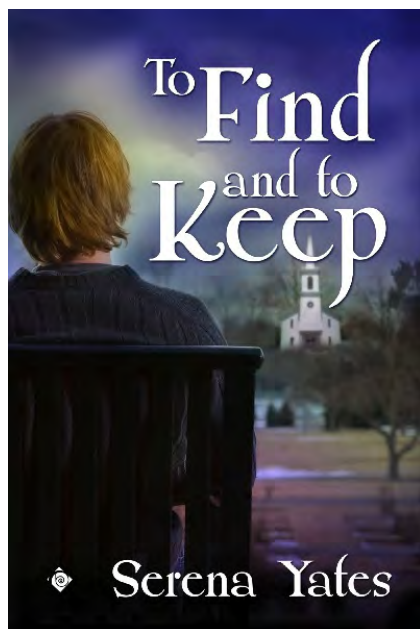
SERENA YATES is the pen name for a night owl who starts writing when everyone else in her time zone is asleep. She has loved reading all her life and spent most of her childhood with her nose buried in a book. Although she always wanted to be a writer, financial independence came first. Twenty-some years and a successful business career later she took some online writing classes and never looked back.

Living and working in seven countries has taught her that there is more than one way to get things done. It has instilled tremendous respect for the many different cultures, beliefs, attitudes and preferences that exist on our planet. Serena likes exploring those differences in her stories, most of which happen to be romances. Her characters have a tendency to want to do their own thing, so she often has to rein them back in. The one thing they all agree on is the desire for a happy ending.

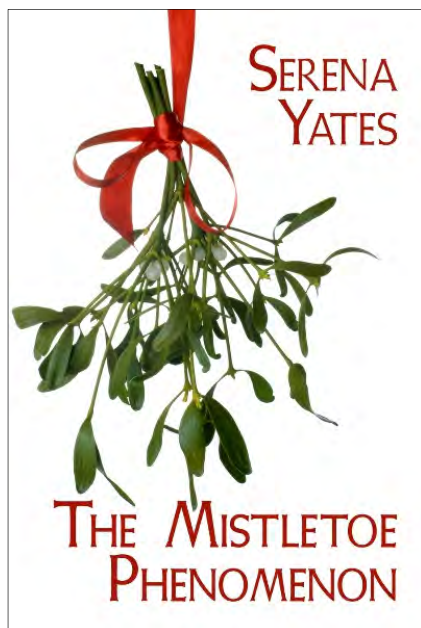
She currently lives in the United Kingdom, sharing her house with her vast collection of books. She likes reading, traveling, spending time with her nieces and listening to classical music. She has a passion for science and learning new languages.

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Start at the beginning of Ryan and Daniel's story...



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