



A MATTER OF TIME

BOOK III

By

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ROCKING WOKE ME. The room was light and then dark and the third time it illuminated I realized I was in a van. I had to work to get my mind to focus so I could figure out what was going on. The last thing I remembered was my boyfriend Sam's partner Dominic Kairov stepping out of the shadows next to my apartment to talk to me. He had started out by telling me that he wanted to apologize to Sam for the way he had acted. When Sam had told him that he loved me, Jory Harcourt, another man, Dominic had freaked out. So when Dominic appeared and told me that he wanted to fix things with Sam, I was so happy. I had invited him inside to wait for Sam but when I turned my back, he grabbed me and knocked me out. Now I was his prisoner. Why I had been taken was a mystery. Sam Kage was a vice detective and so was Dominic Kairov, as far as I knew cops didn't kidnap people. So what the hell was going on?

I could tell from the speed that I was on a freeway but there was no way to gauge a direction. The fact that I was freezing didn't help my focus one bit. I realized the reason was that my coat was gone. All I was wearing were my corduroys and sweater from earlier in the evening. My hands and feet were tied behind me and I was bent backwards in an arch. It was uncomfortable but not painful. I was afraid of what my ankle would feel like when I was released since I had sprained it days earlier. Would I even be able to stand on it? And then I wondered if I would be released. How did kidnapping work? What could I expect? Having never been kidnapped before I had no idea. For some reason I thought about my brother then, what would Dane say if he could see me now? It would be one more stupid mess that Jory had gotten himself into. And then I thought about Sam and how much I loved him. Funny all the things that swept through my brain.

The van stopped and I could barely breathe. The door slammed open and I was faced with Dominic and a man who looked familiar but was not instantly recognizable. He was dressed well in a three-piece suit, topcoat and a long scarf.

"See," Dominic gestured at me. "You send me and the job gets done."

The other man nodded. "I do see, very good. Now I want him shot and—"

I gasped and he scowled before he turned sideways and saw what I did, Dominic holding a gun to his head. He reached for the gun at the same time it went off. There was blood everywhere and I screamed.

"Shut the fuck up," Dominic yelled at me as two other men came to stand with him. "Toss that asshole in the ravine but don't forget to put Jory's coat next to him."

I watched him wipe his face with my coat before he leaned over to wipe my thigh with the coat. Only then did I see that my pants were torn and I was bleeding.

"Don't worry J it's only a flesh wound. You're not gonna bleed to death or nothing."

So odd that he was talking to me like we were buddies. He tossed the coat to a guy wearing gloves and then slammed the door of the van shut after he got in with me. He sat down as the van started moving again.

“You’re wondering why the hell you’re not in the ditch too right?”

I nodded.

“Well ‘cause I still need you to show to Roman’s old man. Once I tell him that you killed his son he’s gonna gut you and I’m gonna get out from under all this bullshit.”

I just stared at him.

“Do you have any idea how much Maggie hates Sam?”

It was a weird segue way but I went with it and shook my head.

“She hated him so much that she agreed to call him for me and get him over to her place.”

I was silent, just keeping my eyes on him.

“You know with you dead J, Sammy’s gonna go back to being the way he was. With Roman gone all evidence of my involvement goes with him. So see I get my life back, my partner back—everything with just you and Roman turning up dead.”

I winced and he smiled.

“Your ankle hurts huh?”

I nodded.

“Sorry. I’ll untie you when we get to the warehouse. I’ll get you some blankets too. I don’t want you to freeze before you see the old man.” He studied me. “You know just so you’re prepared—the old man—he might not kill you fast. He’s got some old world ideas about revenge and with you being the one that killed his kid an all...you might be in for a long night.”

I felt my stomach heave.

“I won’t be around for that J. It’ll be weird though to know for the rest of my life what happened to you and never tell Sam. He’s gonna be so happy to get me back when all they find is pieces of you.”

Hard not to break down, but if I did I was afraid of what would happen. It seemed like he got off on seeing others suffer. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction...at least not until I absolutely had to

“Sammy’ll be all devastated and I’ll be there to see him through it. I’ll even find him a new girl.”

My eyes filled instantly. It hurt my heart just thinking of Sam ever loving anyone but me.

“Faggot piece of shit,” he snarled at me before he leaned forward and drew back his fist. I never even felt the punch.

* * * *

MY WHOLE BODY HURT. I felt cold even through two blankets because the wall I lay beside was like a block of ice. I could hear things scuttling around in the darkness and knew it could only be rats. I tried to calm down so I wouldn’t hyperventilate. I felt the rope between my hands and saw that it ran behind me to the wall. It was knotted over my head to a pulley. Looking at it I realized I could be strung up by my wrists if someone wanted it that way. Moving my legs I felt my ankle throb with renewed pain before I felt in my pockets for my phone. It wasn’t surprising that it was missing. What kind of cop would Dominic be to miss my cell phone? I lay back down because my head was pounding and I was dizzy. I didn’t want to throw up. I closed my eyes so I wouldn’t faint. It didn’t work.

* * * *

I WAS NUDGED AWAKE and when I looked up Dominic was standing over me. He had a gallon of water and a bucket. When I lifted my head up off the floor he squatted down and put both close to me.

“Drink this and use this to piss in.” He smiled lazily. “Don’t mix ‘em up.”

I looked at him.

“Are you hungry?”

I shook my head.

“You will be,” he passed judgment. “And I have something to ask you...did Sammy meet with IAD?”

“What’s IOD?” I asked deliberately.

“IAD,” he corrected me. “Okay guess not. IAD is internal affairs division J.”

Again it was funny that he was calling me J like we were buddies, like we were just sitting around talking, not at all like the life and death situation it was.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yeah.”

He chuckled. “You know my buddy Marco says if you blow him he’ll get you some more blankets. I think ya should. It’s like thirty degrees or so in here J. I mean we’re sittin’ in the office where it’s warm. Down here in the warehouse you’re gonna fuckin’ freeze your ass tonight.”

I shook my head.

“Come on J think about it. You’re not gonna see Sammy again anyway. He’d want ya to at least be warm.” He said like it was obvious. “And what’s suckin’ a little dick to a guy a like you. I’m sure you’ve blown hundreds of guys.”

“No.”

“C’mon J, I bet you give a great blowjob.”

“Sounds like you wanna know,” I said to antagonize him. I was afraid that the way we were going I would be forced.

“Fuckin’ cocksucker!” His voice went flat and cold before he stood and kicked me in the ribs.

I rolled up into a ball and saw his boot coming for my face. I felt my head explode and then it was dark all over again.

* * * *

I WAS SO COLD. I couldn’t remember ever being so cold. My teeth chattering woke me. Sitting up almost made me vomit, but I bit back the nausea and when I moved my hand to touch my hair I realized that it was caught in something. I pulled and used my other hand to free it. Like a heavy tight fitting bracelet that slipped painfully off, chafing, but the recovery taking only seconds. I jerked suddenly and held up my hand in front of my face.

“Oh shit,” I gasped realizing that the rope was off my right wrist. In the cold, my hands had shrunk and the rope that had been tight was no longer so. It took only seconds to get it off my other hand. This then one of the many benefits of being a small guy, ropes and handcuffs had to be constantly tightened.

I found that I couldn’t stand. Even sitting up almost made me swoon. So I crawled to the edge of the wall and moved through the darkness. The floor was covered in gravel and sand and smelled like manure. There were furry bodies moving just feet from me but I heaved silently, determined not to vomit. When I felt the blast of cold air on my face I looked out and saw the moon washed snow and the car. And I thought that running would be good at the same time I knew that I was already cold

and outside would just be that much worse. Staying with Dominic would get me killed but so would wading through snow in just my jeans and a sweater.

When I brushed up against a rope, heavier than the one I had been tied with, I felt up the length and there was a knot—a foot above that another and then another. I couldn't follow it in the darkness but it had to lead somewhere. It was dicey though. I could barely stand let alone climb and depending on how far up—I might fall. These were decisions that I had never evaluated even in my wildest dreams. Did I climb the rope ladder or stay where I was? The decision was made however when I heard a heavy door slide open and a shaft of light cut through the darkness. When I looked, I saw no one in the doorway so I rose to a hunched position and sprinted back to where the blankets were still piled next to the wall. I collapsed onto the floor hard and saw the lights in front of my eyes. My body felt heavy and the waves of nausea pounded through me.

“Hey.”

I rolled my head and dimly saw the man looming over me.

“I'm bored,” he said before he grabbed me.

I tried to move but I was useless. He outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds and his weight on my chest, his knees on my arms, pinned me easily. He thumbed open the button of my corduroys and flipped me over hard, winding me.

I was shoved face down on the floor and my sweater was pushed up as my pants were yanked down. I squirmed but the knee that was driven into my back stopped me. He grabbed a handful of the back of my hair and yanked my head up sharply before showing me the long jagged hunting knife.

“It goes in your ass or my dick does. You decide.”

I went completely still.

“Yeah I fuckin' thought so,” he said, his hand sliding across my bare skin. I felt him shift and he yanked me to my hands and knees before I heard him spit. “Gonna tear up that sweet little ass of yours.”

I felt him there against me, ready and hard, felt the knife in his hand against my ribs, felt him nudge forward before he would lean back and then forward again to bury himself in me. In that instant was advantage. He was bigger but even hurt I was sure I was faster. I dropped my left shoulder, which put him off balance and with my left hand, grabbed the blade of the knife and slipped it out of his hand. I rolled over on my back and he couldn't stop his fall or slow his momentum. I was going to stab at him; catch him in the throat, but at the last second, slid sideways out of the way. There was a crunch as his face hit the floor and I saw the spreading pool of blood around his head. The whole ordeal had lasted only seconds but felt like a lifetime. It was so quiet and in that stillness, I decided not to sit there and wait.

I pulled up my pants, grabbed one of the blankets and bolted back across the room. Adrenaline is an amazing thing. You go from tired and weak to Superman in seconds. With the blanket tied around my neck, I even had a cape. It was funny, I had never climbed a rope ladder in my life but it seemed self-explanatory. You put your feet on the bottom knot, put your hands above the next knot and pulled yourself up. It was an upward crawl, like a worm. Up, down, little by little. When I heard the guy who had tried to rape me stirring, I moved faster. I watched him move to his knees, feel his face, swear and realize I was gone. His roar was loud; it bounced off the walls, echoing in the huge space. But me he couldn't see as I was high enough up that I was cloaked in darkness. I froze until he left, not wanting the rope to move and climbed faster when he ran from the room. I started to panic when I kept going up and there seemed no end but there was suddenly a beam in front of me and I saw the shelf. I reached for it realized I needed to be higher, and climbed above and dropped down inside. I pulled the rope ladder up fast and sawed through it with the knife so I had the length of it in a pile beside me. I had just enough energy left to wrap the blanket around me before I passed out from exhaustion. I had never been so tired.

* * * *

IT WAS LIGHT; the grey sky visible through the windows that I could now see from my perch. Obviously a fire or some other disaster had taken the floor that used to exist between the ground and where I was. What I was lying on was what was left of a loft. Perhaps it had once been a barn or some kind of production plant, I didn't know, I just hoped that what I was lying on would hold as in the daylight it was just wooden planks that looked flimsy and creaked with the wind. I could see through the slats to the floor and I was a long way up. A fall from this height would easily kill me. The wind outside would kill me too and that was what Dominic was sure had happened. I had run when Marco tried to rape me and the wind had done away with me, and all traces of my movement through the snow. It made sense. The hole in the side of the wall was big enough for me to climb through and they had searched everywhere else. Outside was the only plausible solution.

I watched them come in and out, heard Dominic yelling at Marco before the firecracker sounds outside and the silence except for the wind. In the darkness that night as I put the blanket between my teeth to keep my teeth from chattering, I knew I was going to die. My only solace was that I had not been raped. I would just fall asleep and not wake up. It was almost comforting because I ached everywhere and I had never been so thirsty in my life.

"Jory!"

I was startled awake and looked down through the slats to the floor. Dominic was standing in the middle of the floor, hands on his hips, staring up at the ceiling. I knew he couldn't see me but I was terrified anyway.

"Jory you fuck I know you're in here somewhere. There's no way you got more than twenty miles from here in any direction and I've got no body so I fuckin' know you're here!"

I shivered hard.

“When I find you I’m gonna slit your throat you sonofabitch!”

I froze convinced that he could hear my breathing. I tracked him with my eyes until he left. I laid my head back down and closed my eyes, letting the panic drain out of me. In the logical part of my brain I realized that if what Dominic had initially said was true, he still needed me to show Roman’s father. I was still valuable. He wanted to find me because without me, he was in trouble.

I didn’t realize I had fainted again until I heard the tapping and it woke me up. I rolled my head and saw Dominic an instant before he broke the widow out and screamed at me. Just for a second, I was petrified. He looked like I figured the devil would. With his hair whipping around from the wind, his eyes hard, the way his face looked when he screamed at me—I thought my heart stopped.

“Jory!” he roared and shoved his hand through the window and shot at me.

But he was across a space of at least forty feet, he was balanced on a ladder, either a huge one leaned against the side of the building, or one that was built into the wall and he was holding on. He couldn’t keep still enough to fire and I crawled back against the far wall.

“Jory!” he shrieked and I started to hyperventilate. I couldn’t breathe and even when he disappeared I kept expecting him to just suddenly appear at the edge of the loft. That was the scariest moment of all. When there was no movement for several minutes, I put my head down, hard to stay anxious and ready indefinitely.

* * * *

THE SOUND WAS CONSTANT, like a beeping siren almost and I had to make it stop. I rolled and there was a light in my face. I screamed but I couldn’t move, my body was done and there were not even tears to be shed.

“Jory,” the voice was loud, close as a gloved hand slid over my chest. “Don’t move Jory. Lay still. This could collapse at any second.”

I squinted through the light; saw the shape of the hat, the colour of the jacket. Fireman. I started to shake.

“It’s okay Jory we’re going to get you down. Just don’t move.”

I lay there listening to the creaking wood, the howling wind, the sound of a chainsaw and the hydraulic motor of something big. When I realized they were cutting their way to me, I started to shake.

“Jory!”

The yell I knew. The voice I knew. I rolled over and everyone roared at once for me not to move. Through the slats I saw a sea of people, the ground flooded with light, Dominic on his knees with

three other men, uniformed officers standing over them. Directly below me, Sam was pacing. I tried to scream his name but there was no sound only a rasp came out of me.

“Jory don’t move!”

I felt the sway, knew I was going to fall even before the crash and the sudden sinking. That I was tethered suddenly caught like a fly in a web was wonderful and frightening at the same time. I wasn’t sure if it would hold and that part, being so close to rescue but not quite, the waiting was the scariest moment of all.

When I touched the floor, my back, on top of the rubble from the splintered shelf, I finally took a breath. Suddenly there were so many faces and I was lifted so gently, moved to solid ground.

“Jory.” Sam dropped to his knees beside me, his eyes red and swollen, he looked ragged. “Oh baby.”

I shivered hard and everyone heard the shout at the same time.

It was a blur. Dominic was on his feet and he had a gun. When he spun around my only thought was for Sam. Because there was nothing to lose, he was caught and he would take his last retribution on the one he thought had abandoned him.

Dominic turned his head, panning to the right and then came his arm with the gun in it. He didn’t hesitate or speak or threaten. He did what I knew he would, aimed and fired on his best friend, his partner for half his life. The little in me that was left I used and ended up in Sam’s arms.

“Jory!” he shrieked out but he didn’t sound mad. He sounded terrified.

My head snapped up and I was staring into his wrecked eyes. “Sam.”

“Oh God,” his voice broke and he put his arms around me tight.

There was heat spreading through me and it was searing and painful.

“No!” Dominic shouted from behind me and when I turned there was a pop and he went down to his knees. There were police officers behind him and their guns were drawn.

“Don’t kill him!” I screamed but when it came out it sounded more like a whisper.

He looked at me and then he turned and raised the gun.

I tensed for the impact but he was buried under a pile of policemen. I was so relieved I started to shake. If people were holding him down, he had to still be alive. I heard him swearing and let out a shallow breath before I closed my eyes. I was so tired.

“Jory—baby please open your eyes.” Sam pleaded with me. His voice cracked and I could feel him trembling. “Baby please.”

I tried to do what he asked me, I really did.

“Please baby...please...” He was crying and I had never heard him do that before.

I was going to assure him that I would be all right but the heat was replaced by a numbing that was followed by a chill. It was like falling into a cold, dark well.

CHAPTER TWO

I SHIVERED AND OPENED my eyes. It was dim but I could make out enough to see that I was in a hospital. The thing the IV hangs from, the weird lights, the nurses, I understood where I was. I heard the machine beeping next to my bed. I blinked several times to try and clear my vision and then was rewarded when I saw him.

Sam was there on my right, his head resting on his folded arms, slouched forward in the chair, asleep on the bed.

“Oh, hello sweetie you’re awake.”

I turned toward the faint, soft voice and found a smiling nurse. Her smock had little clouds all over it.

“Well Mr. Harcourt I’m so happy to see you.”

I grimaced but she beamed back at me. I moved my fingers to get her attention and then pointed at Sam.

“What do you want dear? Should I wake him?”

I closed my eyes for no but then opened my hand.

“Oh,” she nodded, smiling wide. “I got it. I’m very good at charades you know. It’s part of the job.” She lifted my hand and placed it very gently in Sam’s hair. I moved my fingers and watched the copper pieces twine around them.

My sigh was very deep.

“Oh I knew this was the right one.”

I was puzzled and she read it on my face.

“This one’s your partner isn’t he?”

I nodded.

“And is the architect your brother or is the doctor?”

I held up a finger for number one. My brother, Dane Harcourt, was one of the top architects in Chicago where we lived. He wasn’t just *an* architect he was *thee* architect.

“The architect...all right then this is making sense. He’s been in and out, the architect, been adamant about your care and the doctor—the doctor’s been vigilant I’ll give you but this one,” she

sighed, looking at Sam. “This one wouldn’t leave your side. The others have all come and gone but not him. He hasn’t left the hospital in eight days.”

My eyes widened.

“Yes sweetheart, eight days you’ve been here in intensive care.”

I looked back at Sam. I wanted him to wake up and hold me.

“And that man is not in good shape.”

I nodded.

“Hopefully now that you’re awake he’ll cry because I don’t think I can stand to look at his face another day. I have never seen such wounded looking eyes.”

I nodded again.

“Maybe we should wake him so he can go home.” She smiled at me, her face hopeful. “He only eats when his mother makes him and like I said, he hasn’t left the hospital even once.”

I shook my head no.

“You two must make a handsome couple.”

I tried to smile.

“And you’re very lucky guy because not only is this a man who loves you but he is also just beautiful to look at.” She sighed. “And so is your brother by the way. Reminds me of one of those matinee idols from the forties not that I’m that old mind you.”

I tried to smile.

“And you sweetheart,” she smoothed my hair back from my face. “You’ve got to be about the prettiest boy I’ve ever seen.”

I groaned.

“Man,” she corrected herself, smiling warmly. “I meant man.”

I rolled my eyes and she chuckled.

“I’m going to call your doctor now that you’re awake so we can get this show on the road.”

Alone with Sam I tried for a minute to say his name before I gave up and fell asleep.

* * * *

I WOKE UP AND after I focused a minute, saw Nick Sullivan. Funny that he was there, a man I had been on two dates with, a man who was barely my friend. I had set him up on a blind date that went very well. He should have been with his new love interest not keeping vigil over me. He was standing beside the bed looking down at me, arms folded across his chest looking oddly uncomfortable.

“What are you doing here?” I asked and my voice was scratchy.

He swallowed hard and continued to stare at me.

“Nick?”

He took a deep breath and looked me up and down. There were tubes and cords, there was the monitor clipped to my middle finger. “I want to hold you but I’m not sure how.”

Hold me? “Are you all right?”

“No I don’t think so. I just want to be close to you.”

I tried to smile because that wasn’t what I wanted. I went for diversion instead. “May I please have a drink of water?”

He jumped to do it for me.

“Jory.”

I turned and saw Sam coming toward the bed. I tried to shift, to sit up.

“No-no, don’t move,” he ordered, reaching the bed. He leaned down toward me, lifted my right hand and then put it on his back. His arms slid around me gently but tight enough so I could feel the warmth of him through his t-shirt. Gently, slowly he manoeuvred under everything so he had his head on my chest as he stretched out beside me. I had no idea how he did it as big as he was, all six-feet four of him, but he managed. He felt so good next to me and he smelled like soap and his hair was damp. I made a noise that was half whimper, half sigh. I was so content. I kissed his forehead and stroked his hair. I didn’t remember closing my eyes.

* * * *

THE VOICES WERE MUFFLED and soft but I heard them.

“I don’t understand,” her voice rose suddenly.

“Mom don’t wake him up.”

“Maybe he should wake up Sam. Maybe if you looked in his eyes you wouldn’t be able to leave.”

“I’m leaving because of him; if I looked in his eyes it wouldn’t make any difference.”

“You’re a coward.”

“Mom.”

“You are! You’re running away because you don’t want people to know you sleep with a man! That’s the only reason you’re doing this.”

“No it’s not. You haven’t been listening.”

“Sam,” she drew in a breath. “You tell me you love him in the same breath that you tell me you’re going away. How else do I interpret that but as cowardice?”

“You don’t understand...I can’t work like this? I can’t be like this.”

“Like what Sam? You’re not telling me anything.”

“Mom.” I heard the chair shift on the floor; scrape across like nails on a chalkboard. “My life is under a microscope. If anyone finds out that I was seeing Jory while there was an investigation going on...if IAD actually looks at me I’m dead. Do you even get how deep the hole is that I’m in Do you have any idea?”

“Sam—”

“It won’t stop with being thrown off the force, I could be charged with interfering in an on-going investigation. I could...there’s just so much that go wrong. They could even throw me in jail.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Only because you’re not familiar with the law. I screwed up big...you have no idea.”

“Sam—”

“But Mom...if I go away, do what my captain wants and join the task force and go undercover...” I heard him let out a shaky breath then drag in another. “Everybody knows what I did and everybody’s deliberately ignoring it. They’re all concentrating on Dominic instead. I’m so lucky—you have no idea how much. They’re giving me an out and I gotta take it.”

I tried to speak, to yell, to scream but there was nothing; I couldn’t even get my eyes to open. There was no way to move or reach out. I felt like I was encased in cotton.

“But you love Jory.”

“I do love Jory but what use will I be to him if I resent him for not letting me be a cop anymore.”

“Sam—”

“Mom,” he groaned. “I’ve got to help find the man responsible for putting the contract on Jory’s life. If we don’t find—”

“You’re lying to yourself Sam if you think you’re doing this for Jory. You being with him will keep him plenty safe. You want to distance yourself to make it look like you’re not in love with him right now.” Her voice cracked before I heard the whimper of impending tears. “You—”

“Mom I have to go. And yeah some of it is because I’m too close and I can’t protect him when I feel like this. I mean all I can think of is losing him and how I would feel if that happened. When he was bleeding and I was holding him and...Jesus there’s no way to remain objective through that.”

I felt the tears slipping down my cheeks but no one saw me. They were talking about me but no one was actually looking at me.

“I can’t let anything happen to him Mom. I dunno what I’d do.”

“He took a bullet for you Sam. He loves you so much that he would give his life for yours. I could never ask for any more for you, for any of my children...your father feels the same.”

“Mom this is about taking the information that Dominic is giving us and using it to bust a huge drug syndicate. I—”

“It’s about Jory and you not wanting people to know that you’ve been sleeping with him since you met.”

“It’s not. I already told you it’s not.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Jesus Mom don’t—”

“Shut up!” She yelled suddenly. “Just tell me this, when you return can you be with Jory?”

“Yes.”

“And how long will you be undercover?”

“I don’t know.”

“You won’t see him before you go?”

“I’m here now.”

“But—”

“I’m leaving right now.”

“Sam,” she started crying. “Please don’t go.”

If I could have screamed I would have. How could he leave me?

“Mom if I go I get to keep my job and I get to keep Jory off everyone’s radar. He’s gonna be better off without me for just for a few months. We need to let everything settle down.”

“I want you to say goodbye to Jory.”

“I did. I sat with him for an hour this morning watching him sleep. It’s better that he sleeps.”

“Oh Sam.”

“Mom,” he soothed her.

“And what if it’s a long time Sam? What if...what if Jory finds someone else to love?”

“I can only do what I think is right and I think this is right for the both of us. He loves me because of who I am and if I can’t be that guy...what’s the point anyway?”

I felt my body heave. How could he leave me?

His lips were suddenly on my forehead. “I love you baby.”

But he didn’t. Not really. How could he leave me if he loved me?

“I’ll be back for you.”

I tried to lift up but already I was sinking instead, the darkness pulling at me.

“I’ll see ya soon.”

But even before I was swallowed in sleep I knew it was a lie. There was no way of knowing when or where I would lay eyes on Sam Kage again.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROOM WAS COVERED in roses. Pale dusty rose-colored petals were strewn over everything, the lighting, the colours, everything giving you that romantic soft-filtered, feeling of femininity. It was stunning. The string quartet, the champagne, the servers in crisp white, it was all so elegant and completely lost on the rest of the men at the table. They looked rung out and I understood why. Three days of wedding was an uphill grind and we were only on day two.

I had no idea who had ever decided that a bachelor party should be the night before the rehearsal dinner, but I was pretty sure that person was a sadist. Having barely recovered from staggering home as the sun came up, Dane's groomsmen had been expected to be sober and high functioning the following day by five, to be put through the repetitive practice of walking in and out of the church. They were also supposed to be impressed with the lovely room and intimate setting when all they wanted to do was drink away the remnants of their hangovers. I was glad I had taken the time off from work for my brother's wedding, since if I'd had to keep up my usual schedule of appointments I would have turned instantly to ash. When I was hounded to accompany them out carousing for the second night in a row, I snuck out instead, declining by way of absence, and went home to bed. It was the coward's way but I could have never kept up. They were all much better drinkers than me.

The following morning when I reached the suite with my tuxedo draped over my arm, I was not surprised to find them still in their clothes from the night before. There was one on the floor, one on each couch, one in the wingback chair and Jude, Dane's best man, alone in the bed drooling. It was a sight to behold. When the door opened and it was Aja Greene, Dane's fiancée and not the man himself come to roust the boys, I felt really sorry for them. It was her wedding day and they looked like road kill. This was not the way to get on her good side.

"Are you kidding me?" she shrieked in the silence.

The moaning and whimpering made me smile as I started pouring coffee and water. I had brought a large bottle of Tylenol with me.

"Hey," Rick Jenner said softly as he gestured me over to him. "What time is it?"

"It's ten." I smiled down at him. "The wedding's not for another eight hours."

"Then why is she screaming?"

"She's not actually."

"It sounds like it to me."

"Yeah but you can probably hear paint peeling," I suggested.

He only groaned.

“She’s only concerned that you guys aren’t gonna look pretty for pictures.”

“Owww,” he winced, patting the couch beside him. “Sit.”

“It was the last shot of Tequila off the girl’s navel that did it,” I teased him. I could only imagine what the second night of debauchery had degraded to.

“How d’ya know?” He tried to smile, putting his head on my leg as soon as I sat down.

I smiled at him as I was bumped from the other side and hands gripped my shoulders.

Lance Simmons and Alex Greene, Aja’s brother, had joined me.

“Hey fellas,” I teased them, looking sideways at Lance’s profile. “You guys all done barfing?”

“No,” he whined, his head on my shoulder. “Tell me what we have to eat for dinner.”

“Liver and onions,” I cackled evilly.

“Oh screw you,” he retched, leaning over to lie down on the couch. The leather had to be cool on his hot face. “Liver my ass.”

“Alex,” I called his name softly.

“Mmmm,” he barely made a noise, his forehead against the back of my neck.

“Do your eyelids hurt?”

“If I straighten my head I think it’ll explode.”

“Your sister’s coming.”

He whimpered before she yelled. “You guys need to get up!”

Her voice was like getting whiplash, fast and painful. I felt it run down my spine.

“Oh God,” Alex groaned from behind me and we all laughed when we heard the bump as he hit the floor. “I think my eyes are bleeding.”

“Guys!” We heard Jude whine from the bedroom. “Will you shut the hell up!”

She whirled around to go see him and at that moment I thanked God that I was not Jude Coughlin. There was not enough money in the world.

“Do something J,” Rick begged me. “You’re the only one she loves.”

“J you gotta make her stop yelling,” Alex begged me from the floor on the other side of the couch. “I seriously think it could kill me.”

“Is it really liver?” Lance moaned into the couch.

We all heard Jude give out a high-pitched girly scream from the bedroom.

I couldn’t stop smiling.

“I think I’m gonna puke,” Rick said from my lap, covering his face with one of the throw pillows.

“I will kill you all if you do not get up!”

“J,” Lance almost cried, “make her stop.”

“Make her stop,” Rick seconded.

“Please make her stop,” Alex begged me.

“She’s your sister,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, but she loves you more than me.”

“Do you hear me?” she roared from the other room, obviously still torturing Jude.

“Ohmygod just kill her,” Lance whispered; face down in the couch now. “Why did you guys let me sleep folded up like a pretzel? I think my spine is broken.”

We all heard Jude scream again before there was a crash and a thump.

“I bet she dumped him out of bed,” Alex sighed from the floor.

“I’m okay,” he called out to us.

“Asshole got the bed,” Rick whined. “He deserves what he gets.”

“Where’s Rick?” she shouted as she came charging into the room.

He whimpered. “J she’s gonna hurt me.”

“This is what comes of partying like rock stars.” I chuckled. “When you’re not.”

“Owww,” Alex whined.

“Where’s the ice bucket?” she yelled from across the room.

“J...” Rick trailed off.

I called to her gently but loud enough so she could hear me.

Aja Greene came striding across the room to me. “What?” she snapped out.

“How’re you this morning pretty lady?” I smiled wide, looking up at the only other woman, besides my partner Dylan Greer that I could say I truly loved. In my life there had been my grandmother, my partner and my brother’s soon to be wife. These were the women that meant the world. “You feel okay?”

Her sigh was deep as she passed Lance and slapped him as hard as she could on the ass. He almost howled.

“Yes baby.” She stopped in front of me, shoving Rick up, moving him before she leaned down to give me a kiss. “I feel great.”

I lifted my head and the kiss I received was feather light on my lips.

“Jory.” She smiled, hand sliding under my chin, over my jaw. “Come to my room really fast I want you to meet my folks and Dane’s people are there.”

Which meant that the Reid clan, Susan and Daniel Reid, Dane’s biological parents, and his siblings, two brothers and one sister had arrived to attend the wedding.

“Okay,” I said, stifling the yawn and getting up.

“And you guys need to pull it together and get ready,” she snarled at the others. “Now!”

The muffled groans made me smile as she took my hand and tugged me after her toward the door. I heard them behind us and then Rick asked if anyone knew where his sunglasses were. Funny to think that a CEO, a CFO, a partner at one of the major law firms in the city, and a bank manager could so resemble hung-over frat boys.

“Look how beautiful,” she commented, raising our hands.

Her flawless smooth caramel skin against my permanent golden tan, we looked good together. People told us all the time.

“Hey.”

I looked at her.

“Did you ever think that your brother would marry a black girl?”

“Are you black?” I asked her.

She smiled wide and I saw the dimples I loved.

“Actually,” I sighed. “The minute I saw you I knew you were the one.”

“You lie.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“You asked him to dance.”

She sighed deeply. “I did didn’t I?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I knew what I wanted.”

“And you’re perfect for him.”

“Why?” She was fishing.

“‘Cause you’re smart, school principals hafta be, beautiful, wicked mean—”

“Mean?” She gasped in mock shock.

“You know you’re mean. You nearly killed those poor guys.”

“They’ll be lucky to live,” she growled, brows furrowing.

“You’re adorable,” I assured her, hand on her cheek. “And you are completely self-sufficient. You want Dane but you don’t need him.”

Deep sigh. “Make no mistake Jory I need that man desperately.”

“Yeah but you’re your own person. Your whole world doesn’t revolve around him.”

She thought a moment. “No, that’s true.”

“See. You love Dane, I know that, but you’re gonna be Aja Harcourt not Mrs. Dane Harcourt.”

She nodded. “That’s true too.”

I shrugged. “That’s how I knew. All those other women just wanted to disappear inside him. You we’re still gonna be able to see.”

She stopped suddenly and stared at me. “You have been amazing since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“I wanted you for my brother,” I assured her.

“And I’m so glad you’re going to be mine.”

“But you gotta be sweet to the one you already have.”

She frowned again. “He better shape up because if he ruins my wedding...so help me God I will ruin him permanently.”

“Okay now you’re gettin’ a little spooky,” I chuckled.

“Oh Jory.” She sighed. “I just love you. Come with me.”

And I did.

* * * *

AJA’S EYES WERE HUGE and her mouth hung open. Her mother had an identical expression, as did all her bridesmaids and her maid-of-honour. It was probably the dancing. Her father, Judge Greene and I were doing the twist to Fats Domino music and singing along as we did it. Currently, *My Girl Josephine* was bouncing out of the speakers.

“Miss Aja,” I heard her best friend Candace laugh out loud, “look at your father girl.”

“Jory,” she called over to me and I heard the deep chuckle. “Baby what—”

“Leave him alone,” the Judge cut her off playfully. “We’re busy.”

“Kenneth Greene what in heaven’s name are you doing?” Aja’s mother asked her husband, the smile making her eyes sparkle.

Instead of answering, he motioned her over. Immediately, she went to him and seconds later he had her in his arms dipping her low, dancing her around the suite.

Dane suddenly filled the doorway beside the woman who would be his wife by the end of the day. It was funny to see his expression as he looked across the room to where I now danced in a circle of beautiful women. He tipped his head at me and I smiled back. I watched him put an arm around Aja’s shoulders and pull her close before he kissed her cheek.

“Jory,” he called my name.

There were hands in my hair, on my back, sliding off my shoulders, clutching at my shirt before I got free to cross the room. As I stepped in front of Dane, he put a hand on the lapel of my dress shirt and pulled me forward into his arms.

“Thank you,” he said, face down in my shoulder.

My eyes flicked to Aja’s as he let me go and left as suddenly as he’d come.

“What’s going on?” she asked quickly.

I coughed once. “Mr. Reid came in here asking questions about you and your Dad took offence.”

“I’m sorry what?”

“It was no big deal,” I lied.

“Questions? What kind of questions?”

I shrugged. “He doesn’t know anything about you and Dane didn’t even invite them to anything but the wedding and reception so... I guess they wanted to find out about you.”

“I see.”

“Well your Dad didn’t see. You can’t really blame him.”

She smiled at me. “It’s not like my Dad to get upset about a few innocent inquiries.”

“It was a lot,” I defended her father. “I was uncomfortable too.”

She nodded. “So what happened?”

“Your Dad said that the only family of Dane’s he worried about was me.” I grinned at her.

“Oh.” She nodded. “Since you and Dane are the only Harcourts in the place.”

“Right.” I smiled wide, leaning close and kissing her forehead. “At least until six o’clock.”

She sighed deeply.

“You’ll be the new Harcourt down front in the gown right?”

In answer I got arms wrapped around my neck and she hugged me tight. “What did you do?”

“I went and got my iPod and asked your Dad if he still had moves.”

I felt her shaking in my arms.

“As you can see the man’s still got it.”

She clutched me tighter, her head back as the laughter bubbled up out of her.

When I glanced back at her folks, I was rewarded with the warm smile of her mother.

It had been tense; Dane’s parents especially his father, questioning the judge about his daughter, having started out so benign, just chatting before quickly deteriorating into an all out inquisition. They knew nothing about Aja and wanted to know everything. It had been well intended but had come off as critical, biased and almost racial. Dane and I were just walking back from our racquetball game and we heard the raised voices from the hall. We interrupted and Dane insisted on showing the Reids to his suite upstairs, away from the communal one being used, so the wedding party could visit with guests or get something to eat before the ceremony. He took his parents as well as his brother Caleb, Jeremy and his sister Gwen, so the judge could recover and collect his thoughts. The look he had given me as he left had been so pained that I felt my chest tighten just looking at him. The last thing he wanted to do on his wedding day was upset his future father-in-law with people that were of minimal importance to him. The truth was he simply liked the judge better than his biological family. I had to fix it. I had to restore the ease that the day had begun with, this then what Dane’s look had conveyed on his exit. And I had accomplished it by dancing around the suite like an idiot with Aja’s dad.

“Jory, what would your brother do without you?” Aja asked me, again squeezing me tight.

“I dunno but we’ll never hafta find out.”

“No.” She shook her head just barely. “We won’t.”

“Jory!” the judge called for me.

I ran back to him and he showed me that he could still do the bump. I thought Aja’s mother was going to pass out. That everyone was laughing was a very good thing.

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THE CHURCH WAS FILLED with a sea of people that all stood as the bride posed with her father at the end of the aisle. She was breathtakingly beautiful, simple and chic, and the pride on her father’s face made everyone smile. Dane’s parents and siblings sat in the front row on the right, Aja’s mother and grandparents on the left. Her extended family filled the first three pews and after that were family friends and friends that were like family. Dane and Aja now shared a lot of the same people; those that would be sharing their lives with them. The nearest and dearest of all were there with the groom on the stage as they awaited the bride to join them. Candace Jacobs stood regal and stunning, head raised as she watched her best friend in the world walk toward the man she loved. All Aja’s bridesmaids were perfection in their strapless pewter mermaid gowns; long graceful lines with upswept hair, flawless smooth skin resembling delicate, graceful swans. They were luminous.

Jude was resplendent in his Armani tuxedo, and stood beside Dane proudly, looking as though he had stepped from the pages of a magazine. I had never seen him look better. Dane's friends had come together to stand at his side, all of them crisp and pressed, simply gorgeous, causing a stir when they had walked out to take their places on the stairs, descending down to me. I had worried at being included, not wanting to tarnish his moment being, as I was, without the same height, breadth of shoulder or chest. Dane had not worried. He was less concerned with the perfect picture and more with his brother on stage with him. Aja with the same desire had drowned my objections. And as I watched them, their hands entwined, speaking the words that would join them forever, I was thankful to be there sharing their moment. It was humbling to be at the beginning of a new life, the one they would share together. I closed my eyes and breathed when they were presented. Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt, husband and wife. The picture etched in my mind forever of Aja lifting her head to receive his kiss, her eyes filled with him, his hands on her face, drawing her close as he bent to seal their lips together. Her arms went around his neck and he clutched her to his chest. They were stunning together, the picture of what love looked like. There was the eruption of applause when they parted and were introduced as husband and wife, the thundering sound that consumed the silence from seconds before. I could not imagine a more perfect moment.

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THE RECEPTION WAS LAVISH. Money that I could not dream of ever even having being spent to give Aja the day she had dreamed of since she was ten. There were six courses of food accompanied by wine and champagne and any beverage a guest could request. People were in awe of the orchestra and the full dance floor and the thousands of candles that cast a warm glow through the room. The first dance for the bride and groom was fluid precision and mesmerizing to watch. They went naturally together, blending seamlessly because they fit. When Aja danced with her father, no one did anything else but stare at the dashing man and his daughter. Dane floated across the floor with Aja's mother and the same was true. Obvious from the way they all hugged afterwards that this was a union that had both their approval and support. Not surprising as it was hard to imagine any parent not wanting Dane for a son-in-law.

I knew that Mrs. Reid had wanted the mother-son dance with Dane that he had given to Aja's mom. In the end Dane had invited his birth parents along with his sister and two brothers to come to his wedding but it was me, without benefit of blood that stood at his side. I was the one with the same name; I was the one he hugged tight after the ceremony. I was the one that his wife called her new brother and her parents saw as the entirety of the family that he brought to the marriage.

I listened to the speeches. I was moved by Candace's words to the bride, laughed at Jude's to Dane and when Dane and Aja stood and thanked the crowd for coming and celebrating with them, I was so happy for them that I stood and gave them the standing ovation with everyone else. When all seats had been retaken, Dane took a breath as Aja leaned into his side. I waved to the photographer and he caught it before they moved apart. I had a feeling it was going to be one of the best of the night. Before anymore happened, Alex stood and directed all attention to the screen to the side of the dance floor. When the curtain drew back, the images and the music began the montage of Dane and Aja, their families, their friends, and their times before meeting

and after. The last shot of Dane on his knees in front of Aja as he held a rose up to her. They both looked at me, in an instant remembering the trip to Carmel and the picture I had snapped. I was pleased with the tears in the bride's eyes and Dane's clenched jaw as Aja's favourite Stevie Wonder song filled the room. The applause came like a roar as the audience went wild. Aja's mother was up and out of her seat in one fluid movement, rushing from her table to mine to take me in her arms. She understood at last why I had needed to go through her photo albums with her. When she let me go, I turned to the bride and groom and gestured for them to take the floor. Dane led his wife passed me, his hand lingering on my cheek for a moment before he walked by.

After midnight the orchestra retired and the DJ came in to keep the dancing going until the wee hours of the morning. Jackets and bow ties were shed, high heels were discarded and the serious dancing began. I would have joined in but there were small details that needed attention. I had to hand out the swag as Aja called it, going from table to table to personally make sure everyone got a keepsake from the wedding, coordinate with the catering manager, and arrange for all the disposable cameras on every table to be picked up.

When I felt the arms wrap around my waist, I turned in her embrace, found the bride.

"Come dance with me." She smiled.

I smiled back and we went together to the floor. Always the two of us together could not remain serious for even a minute. In her dress and my tuxedo it translated to an over the top waltz. There were spins and dips and we basically had everyone laughing and clapping and calling for the encore when we were done. She told me over and over how much she loved me and when Dane came to part us instead of taking her into his arms, he wrapped an arm around my neck and led me from the crowd back to the table.

We sat together, leaning forward, elbows on knees, talking quietly.

"So it goes without saying but still...I have the woman I love, the brother I love, friends I love...there is no one more blessed than me."

I looked into his dark grey eyes, saw the warmth there and nodded. "I'm sorry Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt couldn't be here today to be with you."

He nodded. "They are."

"They would be so proud of you Dane."

His eyes absorbed me. "My family, the people who mean the world to me...are Aja and you."

I smiled at him.

"I need you with me always."

I nodded. "Same here."

Hand on the back of my neck he squeezed tight before he let go and stood. "Love you," he said as he walked away. He barely got it out.

I sat back and watched him go and there came a sudden feeling of absolute peace. I let my head fall back; my eyes close and just breathed.

"Take that."

I heard the click of a shutter and opened my eyes to find Aja hovering on the other side of the table with Candace and another bridesmaid. I glanced at the photographer before returning my gaze to the bride. "What're you doing?"

She let out a deep breath but said nothing.

"Jory," Candace said, drawing my attention. "Baby I had no idea you were so pretty."

I chuckled and looked again to Aja.

"You are you know."

"What?"

"Beautiful," she told me, motioning me over to her. "It's funny because you worried about standing up with the others and the truth of the matter is that Jory honey you are the beauty of the bunch."

"You love me." I smiled wide, wrapping her up in my arms. "You're a little biased."

"I do love you but that doesn't make you any less gorgeous."

I chuckled and squeezed her tight and she buried her face in my shoulder.

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CANDACE BUMPED THE BOUQUET into Jude's girlfriend's arms when Aja deliberately threw it at her an hour later, and the look on his face when he realized she had was priceless. The surge to the door to watch Dane and Aja leave in the Rolls Royce limousine pushed the wedding party from the front to the back. There was no way for any of us to even get close. Dane held up his hand for me and Aja blew me a kiss. I had my orders. In the three weeks they would be gone on their honeymoon, I had to coordinate movers. All her things, all his things needed to be in the new house in Highland Park by the time they got back. It was all me. I had promised to get it done even with my busy schedule. My brother was counting on me.

People started to trickle out and the music changed to oldies that everyone could dance to and sing along with. I went and said goodbye to the Reids, gave Caleb a hug and was surprised when Dane's father made a point of saying how much he appreciated me putting a photo of their family in the montage.

"Of course." I smiled at him.

He patted my back as I was squatting between him and his wife's chairs.

"Jory you're such a good boy." Mrs. Reid sighed, the tears welling in her eyes. "Dane certainly picked a wonderful brother."

I leaned up and kissed her cheek and her hand stayed pressed to the side of my neck until she could breathe without crying. I thanked them all for coming and Caleb told me how lucky Dane was to have me. I told him that I was the lucky one.

I worked my way slowly through the crowd, doing the last check, moving from table to table before I found the catering manager to thank him. Finally done, I changed back into jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, converse sneakers and headed toward the door. The end of the night songs, slow for that dancing that barely qualified as such, more hugging as you swayed back and forth together. I weaved through the crowd to say my last goodnights to the wedding party and quickly kissed and hugged all the women. I found Rick, Lance and Alex sitting together and stopped at their table.

"You wanna wait and catch a ride J?" Rick asked me.

I smiled at him and shook my head.

"What're we gonna do without him?" Jude breathed out as he walked up to lean on the back of one of the empty chairs. "He's the first to fall."

"We were always together," Rick said softly, looking around at all of us. "It's weird. It's like the end of an era or something."

"I feel like I should mourn my friend."

I smiled at them as I hooked myself up to my iPod.

"You think its funny J?" Rick asked me.

"No." I took a deep breath, stepping away from the table. "But you gotta grow up sometime."

"I'm not ready to get married," Rick insisted. "And I definitely don't want to be anybody's father."

"Okay," I agreed, my eyes slipping over each of them in turn. "You guys take it easy. I'll see ya round."

“Gimme a call J,” Rick insisted. “I’ll kick your ass at some racquetball or something.”

“Sure,” I lied before I pivoted around and headed for the door.

It was nice that outside it was crisp but not cold, a beautiful night, or early morning now, for the first week of October. It was funny but unlike his friends, I felt nothing but contentment for Dane and a sort of peacefulness for me. I had seen my brother through a milestone in his life. I was very grateful.

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE WERE A GREAT many things I was good at. Picking out screws at the hardware store the following Sunday night was not one of them. On the phone with Chris, I told him for the millionth time why I should have stayed home with Dylan and he should have been the one looking in bins marked with fractions. They all looked the same to me.

“Don’t be such a whiny bitch,” he snapped at me.

I grunted.

“C’mon boy use that Y chromosome for something,” he teased me.

“You’re hilarious,” I grunted at him. “What are you doing anyway?”

“I’m watching TV and making your dinner.”

I chuckled. “Very domestic.”

“Just hurry up. If I don’t get the damn crib put together today my life is gonna be hell.”

“Fine I’m coming.”

“Don’t forget the half gallon of paint and the staple gun.”

“I won’t.”

“And that blue tape that you use when you’re painting.”

“You mean the painter’s tape?”

“Screw you smartass,” he grumbled as he hung up.

I was smiling as I turned and stepped into someone.

“Sorry.”

“Jory.”

My head snapped up and I was face to face with Sam Kage. He reached instantly to steady me but I was faster and stepped back before he could.

His hands went deep into the pockets of his jeans. “Hey.”

I stared up into his eyes.

He took a quick breath. “How are you?”

“Good. You?”

“Good,” he nodded. The way he was looking at me, uncertain and curious at the same time. Funny. “What’s it been? Three years?”

“Somewhere around there,” I agreed with him.

We were silent several minutes before he squinted at me. “You know this might sound weird but you don’t seem that surprised to see me.”

I smiled at him. “No. I saw you like a year ago at a street fair downtown.”

“You did?”

I nodded. “Yeah and right after that I did some work for your brother’s firm and he caught me up on the events in your life.” I spoke fast, “not that I asked, he was just making conversation.”

“Was he?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. So then you know I’ve been back for a while?”

“Yeah.”

“But you never...”

I shrugged. “No but you didn’t either.”

His eyes narrowed. “No...I didn’t.”

“Okay so I’ll see ya.” I smiled again, stepping around him.

Hand on my arm and he stopped me, shifting back into my path. “What is it you do now?”

“Oh,” I breathed in. “Well I don’t know if you remember my partner Dylan Greer, but—”

“I remember her,” he assured me.

“Yeah, well she and I have our own business now it’s called Harvest Design and we do logos, branding, company concept, identity that sort of stuff.”

“Sounds good. You like it?”

“I do. I mean it’s not like a million dollar business or anything but we do okay.”

“Dane set you up?”

I was irritated instantly. He thought maybe I had borrowed the money from my brother to start my business because I was such a charity case. “Actually no,” I said curtly, realizing he was still holding onto my arm. “Dy and I took out a business loan together and had it paid off within three months of being open.”

“That’s great.”

Like he cared. I rolled my shoulder and his hand dropped away.

“Sorry,” he said under his breath.

I held up the tape and the plastic bag full of screws. “Well I gotta jet I’m in the middle of a project but it was—”

“What’re you doing?”

“I’m helping Chris build a crib.”

“Chris?”

“Dylan’s husband.”

“Oh,” he nodded. “Is this their first child?”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “We’re finishing up the nursery today so I gotta get there.”

“Sure,” he agreed.

“I’ll see ya.” I sighed before turning and jogging away.

I didn’t care if it looked like I was running. I wanted to put the distance between us. I had closed and locked the door on Sam Kage and the mess my life had been a long time ago. I wanted it to stay that way. Obviously he did as well. If he had wanted it any other way, the first time I saw him, after the time I had seen him in the hospital, would not have been as he strolled laughing with friends and a woman I didn’t know. His life, I was sure, was as he wanted it.

“Jory.”

I turned and there was a stranger.

“Hi.” he smiled sheepishly. “Brandon Rossi. Do you remember me?”

I shook my head. “No, sorry.”

He cleared his throat. “I was at Bigelow and Stein when you and your partner did the logo for their new community outreach program a few months ago.”

“Oh that’s right.” I smiled wide. “You guys wanted the big scary clown on their logo.”

The smile made his eyes twinkle behind the wire-rimmed glasses. “Well I for one didn’t understand what you guys were saying about the tree until I saw it in print.”

I nodded.

“C’m on,” he chuckled, reaching out, giving me a pat on the shoulder. “I just didn’t get it. I couldn’t see it in my head like you could. I’m not an artist.”

“Neither am I,” I said adamantly, laughing at him. “But clowns creep me out.”

He scowled at me but the smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Don’t make fun of me. I’m not at all creative. That’s why I became a lawyer.”

“Oh I think the interpretation of the law is plenty creative.”

“Sarcasm.” he nodded. “Super.”

He had warm eyes and a great smile that I didn’t remember seeing before. “So what brings you to the hardware store on a Sunday night?”

He cleared his throat. “This confession will hopefully not scare you.”

“Uh-oh,” I teased him. “What?”

“I was across the street and I thought I saw you run in here. You’re driving a really ugly green jeep and—”

“The jeep is not ugly,” I defended Chris’ pride and joy. “And it’s not green. It’s gunmetal. You just can’t tell at night.”

He snorted. “It’s green. It’s like greenish-brown and—”

“You know nothing about colour.”

“I do too.”

“Oh yeah? What’s your favourite colour?”

“Black.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah but not black as in the absence of all other colour, but black as in lots of paint colours mixed up together to make black.”

“I see,” I said like he was nuts.

“You’re not freaked out that I saw you and followed you in here?”

I shrugged. “You just wanted to say hi and give me a little crap about my ride. That’s all very understandable and kinda nice.”

He nodded and I watched his eyes slide over me. “You think maybe you’d like to grab some dinner with me?”

“I can’t tonight,” I said quickly. “I’m putting a crib together but I will take a rain check if that’d be okay?”

“Yeah that’s okay,” he smiled, pushing the glasses up on his nose. “Is dinner tomorrow all right ‘cause if it’s not we can—”

“Tomorrow night’s great,” I cut him off. “Why don’t you call me at work and we’ll figure out where we wanna go.”

His smile was huge. “That’s perfect.”

I nodded. “Okay so I’ll expect to hear from ya.”

“You will. Thanks.”

I squinted at him. “Thanks for what?”

He shrugged. “Saying yes.”

I grinned at him and I heard his breath catch. It was very flattering, his reaction to me.

“I’ll see ya soon.”

“Yes you will,” he said from behind me as I walked away.

As I was pulling out of the parking lot I saw Sam getting into an SUV with blacked out windows that was even bigger than his old one, close to Hummer size. I stopped and called over to him. When he turned I smiled wide. I just couldn’t resist.

“Is it big enough detective?” I teased him.

The smile I got in return was the same crooked one I remembered. “No.”

I nodded as I flipped on my radio and Fontella Bass came screaming out. “Did your Mom tell you about her job?” I yelled over the music at him.

“Her what?”

I waved at him before I pulled out into the street and drove away.

Hours later I told Dylan all about seeing Sam and my date the following night with Brandon Rossi. She pretended to go into labour, which scared the hell out of both her husband and me. It was just plain evil. I was still harping on her about it as we walked into work together the next morning.

“I could do it again.” She wagged her finger at me. “So don’t push me J.”

“Do what again?” Sadie Kincaid asked me as she walked into our office with two coffee cups.

I loved our perky little receptionist from Kenosha, Wisconsin. She was funny and smart and had a scathing sense of humour that matched Dylan’s perfectly.

“She pretended to go into labour again,” I told her.

“Why?” She looked at Dylan. “Did the bakery only have one chocolate chip muffin?”

“Oh for crissakes,” she snapped at us. “Fake your water breaking one time and you’re branded for life.”

We both laughed at her.

“Oh no,” Sadie moaned suddenly, walking over to me. “What did you do to your beautiful hair?” she asked me as her fingers slid through it.

“I got,” I stopped and looked at Dylan. “What colour is it again? Baby’s Breath Blue?”

“Yeah.”

I looked back at Sadie. “I got Baby’s Breath Blue in it. I had to do the ceiling of the baby’s nursery. Chris screwed up the corners.”

“I see.” She smiled at me and there was something different about the way she did it, almost loving. Dylan’s sigh brought me back to her.

“What?” I asked her

“Nothing,” she chuckled before she sighed deeply looking at me.

They were both being so weird. “What?”

“I said nothing,” Dylan snapped at me. “Let’s look at the proofs we did for Trotter.”

We spent most of the morning going over current accounts and then our work ethic dissolved into office chair races by ten. We took a cab to meet a new client for lunch and on the way back Brandon called me. I told him I had been getting worried that he was blowing me off.

“No Jory,” he breathed into the phone. “That will never happen.”

“You are very good for my ego Mr. Rossi.” I chuckled.

“I’m going to be good for you period,” he said flatly. “How about Brava at seven?”

“That sounds great. I’ll meet ya there.”

“Okay,” long exhale. “See ya there.”

When I hung up Dylan was scowling at me. “What?”

“Who is this guy?”

“I think we did the logo work for his old law firm. I got the idea he moved.”

“From where? You didn’t say where he was in the first place.”

“He was at Bigelow and Stein.”

“I don’t remember anyone but Chelsea Connors from Bigelow and Stein.”

“That’s because you only remember the people who write us the check at the end of the job.”

“So what?”

“That’s not good business.”

She only grunted as her frown darkened. “You need to let me meet this guy.”

“Oh I don’t think so crazy hormonal lady.”

She growled at me.

“You see that’s what I’m talking about right there.”

Dylan, Sadie and I were coming back from our afternoon yogurt break when we turned the corner and found Sam Kage leaning against the locked glass door of our office. I shoved my half eaten bowl at Dylan and sprinted down the hall toward him.

“Hey.” I smiled quickly. “What’re you doing here?”

“I talked to my Mom and I talked to Michael.” He nodded slowly. “It was interesting.”

I heard Dylan and Sadie walking into the office behind me but I didn’t turn and introduce them to Sam. I didn’t want to extend the visit.

“Jory?”

“Sorry. You said the talk was interesting, how so?” And I could have kicked myself for talking to him in the parking lot the day before. There were times when I blurted things out because I craved praise. I really was far too externally motivated for my own good. I liked to be told how great I was. Not all the time but enough that it was a problem. In this instance if I had kept my big mouth shut I would have not had the follow-up visit from Sam Kage.

“Hey.”

I looked up realizing that, as usual, my mind had been drifting. “Yeah?”

“You got my Mom her job.” He stared at me. “She’s the host of Date Night Friday Night on Channel five”

And I had needed him to know it, which was just plain lame. “They wanted a concept from me and Dy and I gave them her.”

He nodded. “She loves it ya know.”

“I know.”

Every Friday night they screened a classic romantic movie like *From Here To Eternity* and Regina gave out tips on what to cook or what wine to serve. It was fun and she loved it. The reviews were really good. People loved her and made a point of staying home with their loved ones and watching her and the movie.

“I had no idea. I mean I’ve been back a year and she never once told me that you’re the reason she got the job in the first place.”

“Why would she? It has nothing to do with you.”

“She could have at least mentioned it.”

I shrugged. What he found odd I saw nothing wrong with at all.

“She misses you; she said she hasn’t seen you in almost six months.”

“We’re both busy,” I commented. “I’ll call her though. Maybe we can grab lunch soon.”

He nodded.

I walked further down the hall away from the office. When I turned to face him he was closer than I thought, having followed right behind me. Before I could take a step back he grabbed a handful of the front of my turtleneck sweater.

“What?”

He just looked at me as his hand dropped away.

I tried to keep things light. “What’d Michael say?”

“He said his firm hired you and that you and Dylan were phenomenal. He didn’t really get a chance to talk to you alone much and he was sorry about that.”

“Me too.”

He took a breath and stepped closer to me. “Can I talk to you?”

“We are talking.”

“I mean I’d like to sit and...I just wanna sit if that’d be all right.”

I stepped back slowly. “I’m not trying to be a dick or anything but why? I mean what’s the point?”

He cleared his throat. “You must have questions about what happened and—”

“No I know what I need to.” I forced a smile. “A couple of detectives came to see me when I got out of the hospital.”

“Oh yeah? Tell me what you know.”

I took another step back from him. “Well I know you got to Maggie’s place that night in time to save her and in time for her to tell you that she was a diversion to get you away from me.”

He nodded.

“Except the detectives didn’t know about you and me of course, they just said that Dominic used her to get you over there.”

His eyes didn’t move from mine.

“There was actually no mention of our relationship in any official report.”

He nodded. “No there wasn’t. If there had been I would’ve been thrown off the force.”

“So that was good.”

“Yeah.”

I cleared my throat. “So how is Maggie?”

“I have no idea. I never saw her again after that night.”

“She never called?”

“I have no idea. My life went a little bit crazy after that.”

“Yours.” I arched a brow for him.

His smile was quick. “Okay you win.”

We were silent a moment, just our eyes locked together before I looked away.

“Hey.” His voice so soft I barely heard it. “Look at me.”

I was nervous and edgy and I had no idea why. Why the weird reaction to Sam Kage? “So I heard that Dominic went into protective custody and then into the witness protection program like my friend Anna. Do you know where either of them are now?”

He shook his head. “No. I did hear that Anna got remarried though and she’s expecting a child. They told me that when Dom went in. You should be happy for her.”

I nodded. “I am. I really am.”

“What are you thinking?”

My eyes flicked back to his.

“I can always tell when your brain’s workin’ overtime.”

I smiled at him. “It’s just weird...I used to think I’d always know Anna, just run into her from time to time ya know? Funny how nothing turns out like you think it will.”

“Yeah it is.”

“So you just came by to—”

He took a step closer to me. "If you saw me that day in the street why didn't you come talk to me? That seems strange that you didn't."

"You were with a lot of people and I didn't wanna intrude."

He nodded, easing forward again. "And you saw my Mom, you saw Michael...why not ask about me?"

"They told me without me even having to ask." I sighed, leaning back against the wall to put distance between us.

"I guess they thought you cared. Sorry about that."

"I did care," I said softly. "I still do."

His eyes were locked on mine.

"They said you were working homicide now. You like it better than vice?"

He nodded.

"Good, I'm glad you're happy. I wish nothing but the best for you Sam you know that."

He exhaled slowly. "I do know that."

"So see." I grinned as I walked by him back toward the office. "Everything worked out."

"Hey."

I turned at the door.

"Would it kill you to eat with me?"

I smiled at his phrasing. "No. When?"

"How 'bout tonight?"

"Sorry I've got a date. How's tomorrow?"

"Date huh? With who, that guy from the hardware store yesterday?"

"Yeah. How'dya know?"

He shrugged. "I saw ya talking I figured 'cause the way he was lookin' at ya."

"Okay," I chuckled.

“So you’re just dating right now? Nobody serious? I figured by now there’d be somebody serious.”

“I’m picky.” I smiled at him.

“What about Aaron Sutter?”

My head snapped up. “How do you know about Aaron?”

“I’m a detective,” he said, giving me the crooked grin.

“That’s right.” I said over my pounding heart.

“So what happened there?”

I just looked at him, feeling my brows draw together.

“What?” He chuckled. “We’re just shootin’ the shit right. Spit it out.”

I shrugged. “He wanted me to move in and I thought it was too soon.”

“You guys still friends?”

“No.” I shook my head. “It was an all or nothing deal and when I picked nothing that was pretty much it.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Some people stay gone Sam,” I teased him, turning to duck back inside my office.

“J.”

I leaned back out.

“Can I get your number so I can give you a call?”

“Your Mom’s got it,” I told him. “I’ll see ya.”

“Yep,” he said as I closed the door behind me.

“Jory!” Dylan yelled for me from the other room. “Get your ass in here and explain to me why in the hell I just saw Sam Kage!”

“Who’s Sam Kage?” Sadie asked me softly. “The hot guy in the hall?”

I waved my hands at Sadie to shut her up.

“My God Jory that man could do whatever he wanted to me.”

“You’re not helping,” I whispered at her.

“Jory!” Dylan almost screamed. “Get in here now!”

I groaned and went to explain to my best friend why shrieking was good for neither she nor her baby. I had to talk really fast to convince her that hurling her Rolodex at me wasn’t an acceptable solution either.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT TURNED OUT THAT the place where Brandon invited me to meet him was a block from his office. All the lawyers hung out there after work, swapping stories, getting drunk and dancing badly. At the table I was sitting at with my date, they were talking about a case at work and I was drinking. There was not one attempt to include me in the conversation or segue way into a new one. After a few more minutes ticked by, I pulled my phone out of my leather-racing jacket and posed the question to Dylan, Evan, and my pal Tracy. Why was I attending happy hour instead of being out on a date?

When I looked up the waiter was back and I ordered another Mojito. I slipped him a twenty and asked him to separate my bill from the rest of the table. My phone gave out a catcall whistle to let me know I had messages and I found out that Evan thought he was showing me off because I was so pretty. Dylan thought he was the kind of guy that needed the approval of his friends on who he could or could not date, and my buddy Tracy said that he was out to make his friends jealous because I was not only hot but also talented and successful. I told Evan that he was on crack, sent Shane the same and agreed with Dylan. The man for me would not have cared what his friends thought as Brandon so obviously did.

“Are you okay?” Brandon asked, leaning in beside me, hand on my leg. “Can I get you another drink?”

Maybe his friends had to see me first before he even decided whether to waste time taking me out to a real restaurant or not. I sent that back to Dylan.

“Jory?”

“I’m good.” I sighed and saw that I had a picture from Dane of he and Aja on some beach drinking. They were both smiling into the phone.

“Good.”

It was rude to sit on my phone and text so I sent Evan one last message asking him if he and Loudon wanted to have dinner with me on Friday. I got a yes back with a promise that Loudon had another friend for me to meet. I couldn’t stifle the groan. The last guy Loudon McKay, Evan’s partner of the last two years, had me meet ended up having a cat with some kind of weird skin disease. There was ointment that needed to be applied every four hours. I had run like hell.

“You all right?” One of Brandon’s friends asked me.

“Super,” I grunted, shoving my phone back into my jacket as it hung on my chair.

The music changed from whatever weird electronic down tempo crap they had on to classic seventies. I was very happy. When I started singing along, I looked down the table and saw the girl at

the other end signing along with me. The shy smile was very appealing. So were the dimples. And she knew all the words for *Rich Girl* by Hall and Oats just like I did. I waved and she waved back.

I got up and walked down to the other end and squatted down beside her chair. She turned to look at me, one rusty coloured brow arched up high.

“Hiya.”

She smiled slowly and her fingers brushed the hair out of my face. “Hiya back.”

“Would you like to dance with me?”

“I would.”

She took the hand I held out for her and I led her to the dance floor.

“I’m Jory.” I smiled at her.

“Aubrey.”

“Beautiful name, beautiful lady,” I said as I dipped her low.

She didn’t giggle, she laughed and it was deep and throaty. “Right backatcha pretty boy.”

I chuckled as I brought her back up to her feet and we started to dance. It was fun and she followed me as we moved around each other like idiots. Twenty minutes later she called a timeout for alcohol and I followed her back to the bar. It quickly became a routine, dance a little; drink a little, repeat again and again. We both lost track of how many we had. I bought a round, then her, then me again...and there was still more dancing until we took a long break to sit down and put our numbers in each other’s phones.

The dance music came pounding out of the speakers and we went back to the floor. It was fun and I didn’t care what had gotten me there anymore, I was just looking forward to getting to know my new friend. I saw us shopping for matching sequin tube tops or something equally ridiculous. When I spun her around and dipped her in my arms, she laughed so hard I thought she was going to pee.

When we were both tired out and liquored up, we decide to sit for a while. I had her in my lap when her date, Adam Myers came and grabbed her arm. She yanked out of his grasp and when he did it again, harder, she lost her balance, slipping off my legs to the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled at him, kneeling down on the ground to make sure she was okay.

“She’s embarrassing me and you’re embarrassing Bran. God, do you guys not get that this is where all the associates hang out after work downtown?”

I looked at Aubrey and she shrugged.

She pointed back at him over her shoulder. “I just finally gave in because this guy’s been asking me out for a month and half.”

“Are you okay?” I said, helping her to her feet, checking her over, realizing she looked no worse for wear. It was more a bump than a fall.

“Yes honey,” she sighed, smiling at me, standing up and straightening her wrap shirt

Straight woman, gay man...we were a match made in heaven.

“Where do you work?” I smiled back at her.

“At a company called Barrington. We do—”

“I used to work at Barrington.” I smiled wider. “But I left to start my own business. I run Harvest Design now. I work with—”

“Oh shit.” She laughed and launched herself at me. “Jory, I’m Abe.”

I pushed her back so I could look at her. “You’re Abe Flanagan that’s coming to help me while Dylan’s out on maternity leave?”

“Yes,” she nodded, laughing, grabbing me again, and hugging me tight. “Holy shit the world is just a teeny little place.”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah it is. C’mon, let’s go get some food.”

“I’ll get my bag,” she said, pulling away.

But as she turned Adam barred her path.

“What?”

“One of the partners at my firm is on his way over here and you need to wait and meet him.”

“Like hell I do,” she said like he was high.

“Jory.”

Brandon grabbed a handful of the front of my shirt. “Could you not try and completely embarrass me?”

“Shouldn’t have invited me if you didn’t wanna be embarrassed,” I told him. “You can’t take poor white trash like me and Abe anywhere.”

Aubrey giggled, ending with a snort, which made me start laughing.

“Shit,” he whined, looking at Adam as Rick Jenner stepped in front of all of us.

I instantly understood that Brandon Rossi and Adam Meyers worked at Riley, Jenner, Knox and Pomeroy. They were petrified and Rick wasn’t even looking at them. The twinkling green eyes were all for me.

“Hey.” I smiled at him.

“Hey,” he grinned back, completely at ease. “What brings you to the lawyer haunt J?”

“I brought my friend Abe.”

He turned his attention to Aubrey Flanagan and his smile widened. “Well hello there Abe.”

She smiled wide at him. “Hello back um...”

“Richard Jenner, Attorney At Law,” he said fast, making his voice deep and serious.

“I hate lawyers,” she baited him, again arching that gorgeous copper coloured brow.

“Really.” He smiled and it was wicked as he took her hand and drew it through his arm.

“Yes really,” she breathed out as he eased her close to him.

“I can fix that.”

Her eyes narrowed and I saw his jaw clench.

“Call me Rick.”

“Okay,” she said, her eyes absorbing him, the thick black hair, the cleft chin, the laugh lines in the corner of his sparkling emerald eyes. “How do you know Jory, Rick?”

“He’s the little brother of one of my best friends in the world.”

Adam and Brandon went absolutely ashen and I bit my lip so I wouldn’t smile.

“How do you know Jory, Abe?” he asked, vastly amused, just staring at her, riveted.

“We work together,” she said, her eyes meeting mine.

“That’s right,” I assured him.

“Well you guys want to come with me and get some dinner?”

“Actually,” I said quickly. “I’ve gotta go but Abe is free.”

“Well not free,” she teased me. “But dinner sounds like heaven.”

Rick’s smile was warm and he was obviously taken with her, the energy that you could feel, taste in the back of your throat, the passion that radiated off her and the glowing smile that lit her face. The girl just had it. That *it* factor where she was so animated, so there in the moment that you just knew that if you missed her it would be a shame. I was crazy about her already. I loved her hair, long and curly, the colour of copper, red and gold at the same time, completely wild and her freckled skin and smiling rosebud mouth. When she took the lacquered chopsticks out of her purse and put up her tresses, pieces tumbled out, stray curls falling down the back of her long neck and forward into her lovely pale blue eyes. Rick reached out and twisted a piece around her ear. He was drowning in her after only moments.

“I should cut it all off,” she sighed, looking down and then quickly back up into his eyes. The long lashes looked like they had been dipped in gold.

“Oh no,” he assured her, taking her hand again, this time slipping his fingers between hers, keeping her close to him. “Never.”

She grunted. “We’ll see Mr. Jenner.”

“Yes we will,” he said quickly, pointing at me. “You’re good?”

“Yessir,” I said fast because I knew he wanted out. He was desperate to get the lady alone. Take her to dinner so she could see what a gentleman he was. Have her ride in his car so she could see he had money. Hopefully show her his house so she could see the life he could provide. At twenty-six I knew love-at-first-sight when I saw it. Cupid had just hit Rick Jenner with a Mac truck. It was funny that it usually happened that way. Some guy went along dating for years, a real catch, like my brother Dane, the eligible bachelor of the century, then suddenly he met the girl, the one that would be the mother of his children and usually within six months they were married. Guys went from player to Dad in like a year after meeting *the one*.

As I watched Rick walk out with Aubrey Flanagan on his arm, talking a mile a minute to her I had an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment. It had nothing whatsoever to do with me, in actuality Adam had been the instrument of love and not me, but still, I felt good. I had introduced them after all. It was my lap she had been in.

“Jory.”

I looked up at Adam. “Hey I—”

He clapped my shoulder hard. “Thanks man you saved my life.”

Funny that he had no idea how amazing the woman was that he had just let walk out of his life.

“No problem,” I said softly, pulling on my jacket, turning to leave.

“Jory.”

I let Brandon walk around in front of me.

“What a screwed up evening. I’m so sorry for—”

I shook my head, pulling out my phone as it rang for the second time. “Don’t worry about it.” I smiled at him. “Thanks for inviting me I’ll see ya round.” I finished before I stepped around him and answered my phone. “Hello?”

“J?”

“Oh hey Sam.”

“Sorry to bother you while you’re on your date and all but—”

“No it’s okay. I’m done.”

“You’re done? Whaddya mean you’re—”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’d love to hear it.”

I grunted instead.

“So then you’re doing what now?”

“You mean tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Nothing.”

Quick breath. “Okay so can I take you to eat?”

“Sure but I’ll buy. What do you want?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m downtown. You want just like a sandwich or something?”

“That sounds great I’ll just change and—”

“You’re at home?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’s that now?”

“Don’t laugh but it’s in the exact same place.”

“Oh that’s right Jen told me that.”

“Jen?”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “You know...your sister Jen.”

“You still talk to Jen?”

“Off and on. Rachel too.”

“Jesus Christ. Nobody says shit to me about anything.”

“Why’re you mad?”

“Cause I just...I wanna know when somebody in my family sees you.”

“Why?”

“I just do!”

That made no sense. “But it has nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me! My whole family’s still crazy about you.”

“I wouldn’t say they’re—”

“I would. Shit. Nobody—”

“Did you know that Dane and your Dad and Michael golf together?”

There was a long pause. “I’m sorry?”

I chuckled.

“What’d you say?”

“I said your Dad and Michael and Dane golf together. Did you know that?”

“No I—”

“Yeah. Just every three months or so.”

“For crissakes J nobody tells me anything!”

“Why would they?”

“Why would they what—mention that they all see you and I’m the only one who doesn’t? Oh I dunno lemme think.”

I had to laugh. He was so indignant. “You were gone a long time Sam, we all got used to you not being around.”

“But I’ve been back more than a year and nobody said shit to me.”

“They probably didn’t want to make your new girlfriend uncomfortable by talking about me.”

There was a quick pause. “What?”

“Oh no I’m sorry. Your wife then.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I saw a woman with you that day at the street fair. I assumed while you were undercover you probably met someone and—”

“You know you watch way too much TV. Undercover doesn’t work like that.”

“Huh.”

He chuckled and it was a warm sound. “You sound disappointed.”

“I’m a romantic at heart.”

“I know,” he sighed heavily. “Lemme come get you.”

“So who was the girl?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“I dunno—probably one of Jen or Rachel’s friends...why?”

“No reason.”

“You sure?”

I would not be drawn back in. “You know what Sam maybe this isn’t such a—”

“No it’s fine. C’mon.”

“You don’t get to decide what’s fine or not Sam,” I said fast.

“No I know,” he sighed. “But just c’mon.”

I was silent, thinking about what I should do.

“Please J. Just eat with me.”

What could it hurt? “Okay fine. Do you know Carmine’s?”

“Yeah sure.”

“Great. I can meet you there in fifteen minutes?”

“I’m leaving now,” he said and hung up on me.

I walked to the curb as I heard my name called. Brandon Rossi was jogging toward me as I opened the door of the cab.

“Jory please don’t—”

“Thanks again for inviting me,” I indulged him as I got in the cab and closed the door behind me. I didn’t look back.

* * * *

I WAS LEANING AGAINST the wall to the side of the hostess station where I had checked in when I felt a hand on the small of my back. It was a very familiar place to touch and when I looked up from texting Dylan I found Sam.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” He smiled back, gesturing me close.

“What?”

“I dunno, what do I hafta do to get a proper greeting from an old friend?”

He was right. I pocketed my phone and stepped into him, reaching up to wrap my arms around his neck. I squeezed tight and instantly, he hugged me back. He buried his face in my shoulder, his arms holding me close, pressing me against him, and breathing in deeply before the long exhale.

“It’s good to see you J.”

I hugged him because I used to love him and he felt good in my arms.

“I missed you,” he said, and the shiver ran through him fast.

Better to gargle glass than respond.

He pulled back and looked down at me, into my eyes. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” I said, stepping free.

“You look good,” he said to the floor.

“Yeah?” I fished because he was not one to dish out compliments.

“Yeah,” he said under his breath, his eyes flicking up to mine. “Really good.”

“And you look tired,” I passed judgment as I looked him over. “Maybe we should do this another—”

“No,” he cut me off, his brows furrowing.

“Have you been sleeping?”

“I wanna sleep with you,” he said slowly, his voice deep and gravelly. “Come home with me.”

It took me a second to respond as my heart was in my throat, but I forced the dry chuckle. “Just like that?”

“Could we maybe have a summit meeting tomorrow? Right now I’m beat, I want you to come home with me and lay down so I can lay down with you.”

I watched his eyes, heavy-lidded as he stared down at me.

“I swear to God I haven’t really slept since I saw you last.”

“I thought you would have...” I trailed off because I had started speaking without thinking.

He let out a deep breath as I took a step back. “Would have what?”

I shook my head.

“Talk to me.”

“I just figured you’d go back to your life.”

“Meaning what?”

I cleared my throat. “C’mon let’s eat.” I smiled, gesturing to the hostess who was trying to get my attention. “I’m starving and I had a lot to drink.”

“You did?”

“Oh hell yeah.”

“Tell me all about your date.”

I smiled as we followed the hostess to the table. We were in a booth toward the back and I wondered if Sam had requested that or if she was just trying to tuck us away because we looked like trouble.

“So talk,” he ordered me, sliding over until his knee bumped mine.

I chuckled as I recounted my adventures at Brava.

“The girl sounds nice.”

“She’s the kind of girl you need.”

“I got what I need right here,” he said flatly.

I tipped my head to look at him. “It’s been a long time Sam.”

“So what? You told me there was nobody special.”

“Maybe I lied.”

“Well I don’t see a ring on your finger.”

Ridiculous argument. “Gay men don’t wear—”

“Oh the fuck they don’t,” he dismissed me. “Who says what they can or can’t do?”

“Sam—”

“You’re gonna wear a ring for me.”

I rolled my eyes and turned my attention to the waiter. I ordered a club sandwich and soup and Sam ended up having the same. Alone again, Sam slid closer, putting an arm around the back of the seat.

“Listen J,” he began, the deep sigh making me smile. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“What? C’m on.”

“I just never in my life thought I would see you again.”

“That is funny,” he squinted at me. “Cause I never once doubted that you would.”

I was silent before I went at him from another angle. “Sam isn’t your life good right now?”

“Yes it is.”

“See so why you wanna—”

“Only you give me this much crap.” He cut me off. “You’re the only one who fights with me.”

“We’re not fighting.”

“But you’re trying to and you’re the only one I know who does.”

I squinted at him.

His deep rumbling laughter, “I don’t scare you at all huh J?”

“Are you kidding?” I scoffed.

His big lopsided grin then, eyes twinkling as he stared at me. “I scare a lot of people J.”

“Okay,” I indulged him.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“You cut your hair.”

“Yeah.” I smiled at him. “Long time ago.” My hair that used to hit my shoulders was now short like everyone else’s. It was still longer on top, strands fell into my eyes, got tangled in my lashes occasionally, but it was not the mane it had been.

He made a noise in the back of his throat and I looked at him.

“Sam?”

“It’s just good to see you,” he said, his voice deep and low, his eyes so very dark.

I couldn’t speak around the lump in my throat.

He chuckled softly. “Nothing to say?”

“It’s good to see you too.”

He reached out and ran the back of his fingers up and down my throat, stroking over my skin so lightly. “Eat your food so I can take you home.”

“You don’t know where I live,” I teased him, trying to steady my pounding heart. The familiar response to Sam Kage flared through me.

“No baby,” he exhaled. “You’re coming home with me.”

“Sam—”

“J—”

“I’m not your baby,” I assured him, brushing his hand away. “I’m nobody’s—”

“You belong to me,” he said flatly. “Always have, always will. Deal with it.”

I was silent.

“Speak...you look like you’ve got—”

“Screw you Sam. You left me. You left period and its fine ‘cause I understand why ya did but...make no mistake, I will never step back into that shit with you again. I’m done.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah that’s right. In fact I have a date on Friday.”

He nodded. “Huh.”

“You don’t get to decide my life for me Sam.”

“Okay.” He grinned quickly. “Don’t flip out right here. Eat your food.”

I was stunned and it probably showed on my face. He was being so reasonable and if I was being honest, I was disappointed that he wasn’t going to fight with me for me. It was for the best, but still, it stung that he would give up so easily.

He made the conversation I was used to providing, telling me about his family and what it had been like to come home after two years away to his old life. He had friends to reconnect with and a job to relearn and all that had taken time. He wanted to focus on all his external priorities before he came for me.

"I'm sorry what?" My thoughts had been drifting but I had caught the last part.

"You heard me J."

"You're actually sitting there telling me that you want us to get back together."

"Yep. I told you what I wanted before we sat down."

"Yeah but I thought you were just playin' around."

"No you didn't but you're pretending you did."

He still knew me well. "Okay but just a second ago you...I thought you were letting this go?"

"When did I say that?"

"But—"

"I wanted to wait to see you until I had my life back. Now I do so here I am."

I squinted at him. "Life doesn't wait until you're ready Sam. You—"

"Are you done?"

"No I'm not done. You think you can just—"

"With your food dumbass," he cut me off.

"Oh...yeah." I deflated, reaching into my jacket for my wallet.

"I invited you I'll buy." He smiled at me.

"No I said I would. I'm not a charity—"

"Anything to fight me," he teased me, leaning forward to kiss the side of my neck.

I tried to slide away from him but his hand under the table, like a vice on my thigh, kept me where I was. His lips on my skin were scalding. When my eyes flicked to his, he smiled lazily. It was very sexy.

"Three years looks good on you J."

To keep from responding to him I tried to provoke him. "You don't want me Sam. You're just like all those other guys that just wanna get laid."

"Is that all I want?"

“Yeah.”

“Huh.”

I shrugged.

“It’s lucky you’re pretty because you’re not real bright.”

I stood up, pulled three twenties out and dropped them on the table. “I’ll see ya.”

He coughed and I looked at him. The smile had fallen out of his eyes.

“I can get home my—”

His voice was low and flat. “So you know if you try one of your usual dramatic exits I will grab you, throw you over my shoulder and take you right outta here.”

I just stared at him.

“If you don’t want to be the floor show that they’ll be talking about for years, I suggest you stand there and wait for me and walk out of here like a grown-up.”

I crossed my arms and waited.

He smiled up at me. “You’re cute when you pout.”

I smirked at him and the snort of laughter almost made me smile back.

Outside the front door I realized I was faced with his monster car, the SUV from hell.

“Okay,” I sighed, shoving my hands down into my pockets. “So it was good to see ya.”

His scowl could not have been any darker. “I was serious inside. I wanna take you home.”

I shrugged. “Well I was serious too so...no.”

We stood there staring at each other and when he finally took a step toward me I took one back.

“I can make you if I want.”

“Sure,” I agreed.

The muscles in his jaw corded tight. “Can I just say something before you walk away?”

I stared into the smoky blue eyes and he stepped closer, his hand lifting, going to my chest and settling over my heart.

“I want you, only you and not just for tonight.”

I was silent.

“Did you hear me?” He asked, his hand sliding around behind my neck as he stepped in against me, staring down into my eyes. “I want you.”

“But—”

“I did what I said I would. I made sure you were safe and then I came back. I figured out what I can do, what I can’t, and it took a while longer than I thought.”

“Sam you—”

“But now I’m done. I’ve got everything I want except the one most important...I want you.”

“But you’ve been back Sam and you never came to—”

“I came as soon as I could.”

“Bullshit.” I tried to step back but even though I was bigger than I used to be, more muscular, I was still no match for his strength. His grip was like steel and he had me.

“I did. Everything had to be settled and now it is.”

I shook my head, tried to pull back again.

“And I’m lucky ‘cause that guy Aaron pushed too fast too hard and you ran.”

My head snapped up. “That was just ‘cause it was—”

“Don’t say it was too soon J ‘cause we both know you’ve got no problem with too soon when you know something’s right. You didn’t love him so you didn’t move in. Simple as that.”

I just stared up into his eyes.

“You know who’s right for you and who isn’t.”

“Sam, you can’t just come back after three years, tell me you’re ready for your life to start, and have me back. It doesn’t work like that. I’m different, you’re different, just let it go.”

He raised his other hand, cupping my face as he stared down into my eyes. “I can’t. I want you back...I need you.”

I lifted my head out of his hands and stepped away from him. “There’s no way. You almost...” And I was going to confess that he had almost killed me when he left. I had been so desolate at being

abandoned. Only Dane and my friends and work had moved me through all the heartbreak and the loneliness and the grief. I could never go back there and open myself back up to the pain. I was stupid but I wasn't a masochist.

"I almost what?" He pressed me, reaching out for my jacket only to have me step just beyond his fingertips. "Tell me."

"Nothing," I sighed, trying so hard to smile even though my eyes were blurring. "I'll see ya."

I turned and found I could breathe again as I started down the street.

"J!"

I swung back around to look at him. He was standing there, hands in his pockets, his jaw clenched, just staring at me.

"Can I call ya?"

I nodded because words were beyond me.

"Okay." He smiled and I turned away before he could say another word.

It took everything I had not to run.

* * * *

WHEN I WAS HALFWAY home my phone rang and I smiled when I checked the display.

"Hey," I was happy to hear from him because I thought I never would again. It had been six months of silence that I thought was permanent.

"Jory," he breathed out.

"When did you get back?" I asked, keeping it light.

"Couple days ago."

"How was Hong Kong?" I asked Aaron Sutter. "Did the hotel go up on time?"

"Of course," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "This is me we're talking about."

"Sorry." I chuckled. "So tell me everything."

"How about I tell you over a late dinner?"

I hesitated. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“But I...I thought you didn’t wanna see me.”

The cough was barely one. “Listen I did a lot of thinking while I was away and I realize that you were right...there’s no reason in the world for us not to be friends. Just because we want different things shouldn’t make us strangers. We spent a year and half together why would we just throw all that away? It makes no sense.”

“This was my argument,” I reminded him.

“I know and I’m sorry for the things I said. I just, I’ve never asked anyone to live with me before and I was certain that you would say yes. The no never even entered my thought process.”

I sighed deeply. “I’m sorry too. I wish I could’ve said yes.”

“Well so you know, there’s not a time limit on the offer.”

“But you said—”

“I know what I said. I’m telling you now; if you change your mind...please tell me. I would love to know if you do.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay.”

Long exhale of breath from him. “Good...now when will you eat with me?”

“When do you want me?”

“Tonight. I have new chef who makes a wonderful risotto.”

“No, I ate already. How ‘bout tomorrow?”

“How about now?” he chuckled. “I’ll eat and you can tell me all about Dane’s wedding. I’ll meet you at Serenade instead.”

“That’s a cocktail bar Sutter. What’re you gonna eat?”

“Are you kidding? They make great steaks there J. Don’t worry I’ll eat.”

I let out a quick breath. “Okay.”

“Yes? You’ll meet me?”

“Sure.”

“That’s great. I thought I’d have to fight with you.”

“No, I’m all argued out.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Do you remember me telling you about the police detective I was involved with a while back?”

“The one you were in love with? The one who left you?”

I stifled a groan. The one who left me sounded bad. “Yeah that’s him.”

“Yes I remember.”

“Well he’s back and I saw him tonight and—”

“And he wants you back.”

“Yeah.”

“Of course he does. Makes sense.”

“Does it?”

“Yes,” he breathed out. “So can you be there in a half an hour?”

“Probably sooner I’m still downtown.”

“Great I’ll see you in twenty minutes.”

“Yep,” I said and hung up my phone. I was surprised when it rang again. “Hello?”

“Hey.”

“Sam. What—”

“Do you still drink tea?”

Weird question. “Yeah.”

“Good. How ‘bout I make you some?”

“When?”

“Now.”

“I can’t. I’m meeting Aaron. We’re gonna catch up.”

“You left me to go see him?”

“No. I left you because there was nothing else to say. Aaron just got back from Hong Kong and wants to hang out. It’ll be good. I could use the diversion.”

“Cause of me.”

“That’s right.”

“I see.”

“I’ll talk to you—”

“Don’t hang up,” he cleared his throat.

“Why? What’s the point of—”

“I don’t want you to go sit and talk to Aaron Sutter. If you’re gonna sit with somebody sit with me. I’m the one who wants to talk to you.”

“Yeah but Aaron just wants to—”

“What happened to some people stay gone?”

“I guess in my life everybody comes back.”

He laughed and the sound buzzed right through me.

“So I’ll—”

“Listen lemme see you tomorrow all right?”

“No. How ‘bout Saturday or Sunday?”

“How ‘bout Thursday instead?”

“Sam.”

“C’mom.”

“Sam I’m on my way to see—”

“Yeah I know. Just call me when you’re done talking to him all right?”

“No, that’ll be like midnight or—”

“I care. Just call.”

“Sam—”

“Where are you going? His place?”

“No to Serenade,” I told him before I thought about it.

“I know where that is.”

“Yeah but don’t—”

“Call me soon so I don’t show up all right?”

“Oh for crissakes Sam you can’t just—”

He cut me off when he hung up. It was just plain rude. I tried to stop scowling before I got to the bar.

When I turned the corner onto the street where Serenade was, I saw Aaron leaning against the side of his black Mercedes, in his charcoal cashmere topcoat, looking like some ad in a magazine. Immediately when he saw me I got the smile that lit his eyes. As always I noticed the warmth in them. Aaron’s beauty came not as much from physical appearance as from what radiated from the inside. He was the kind of person people instantly liked, instantly wanted to touch and be close to. He brought it out in everyone and it was from there that my initial attraction had sprung.

I had met Aaron Sutter when Dylan and I had done some corporate identity work for his company. They wanted to create a logo that embodied their commitment to the culture of the area they built in, their commitment to the environment, as well as speaking to the ideal of their mission statement, which was their constant strive for excellence. Dylan and I had been unable to come up with something that hit every concept they were shooting for, but Aaron had insisted on taking us to lunch anyway. Later that same day he came by the office when I was alone and asked me to dinner. I turned him down flat. I did not mix my business and personal life. He told me it was all right since I didn’t work for him, but I held my ground and gave him the second no of the night. When he left I was relieved. I was not in a place where I could date anyone. I wasn’t ready to do any more than I was, going out and going home with a different stranger every night. Having returned to the club scene six months after Sam left, I was in an endless cycle of drinking and one-night stands. I was toxic and it wasn’t fair to subject a nice guy like Aaron Sutter to that.

Aaron might have been nice but he was also relentless. I got constant calls from him. Would I like to go to the ballet with him? Would I like to go to a baseball game with him? There was an art exhibit opening, there was a new club opening, a new restaurant downtown...would I go with him? The answer was always no but he was so gracious about it, never angry, never resentful, only hopeful each and every time he asked, promising me that surely next time I would say yes. I told him he should concentrate on someone worth his time and he assured me I was.

I saw him at a club on Halloween dressed like a gladiator and I was falling down drunk. I stumbled over to say hi and he ended up taking my hand and sitting me down in his lap. It had to have looked funny since I was dressed like a pirate, but his hand tangled in my hair felt good as did the arm around my waist anchoring me to him.

"Please Jory," he said, rubbing his cheek against mine. "Let me take you somewhere, anywhere. I'll take you to the movies and buy you popcorn. It doesn't matter I just want to spend some time with you. Please. I'll do anything."

And I gave in because he was so honest and Sam wasn't coming back. A year had come and gone without a word. I was holding onto a dream and I was lonely and depressed and just a wreck. Dane was on me constantly to start dating instead of just sleeping around. His new girlfriend Aja had lots of prospects she was dying to set me up with. It was time and I took the plunge. Five dates later when I realized that it was me who was going to have to make the move to get us in bed, I invited him over for spaghetti out of a jar and lots of red wine. He told me how great everything was and I rolled my eyes. The man had his own chef and my food was good? It was ridiculous but the way he watched me, never took his eyes off me, told me all I needed to know.

When we were sitting on the couch watching a movie, I eased him over against me so his back was pressed to my chest. His sigh was long and made me smile. When I slid my hand down his abdomen to his belt buckle, I felt the slight tremble run through him. When I undid first his belt and then the snap of his jeans, he scooted up higher so I could him reach more easily. The zipper went next and then my hand slipped under the waistband of his briefs to find him already hard. He bucked up into my hand, and his head went back on my shoulder.

"Jory," he moaned out, kissing over my jaw as my hand moved on him. "Please can I get in your bed?"

"Later," I said, shoving him off me. "First we see what you think of my blowjob."

"What?"

I liked that his voice went out on him and I liked how he could not keep his eyes off me. The panting and writhing that followed; how he begged me...I liked all that too. When he cried my name and had to have me in his arms, all that was good and nice it just didn't satisfy me.

When I made love to Aaron Sutter I never had to clench my jaw so I wouldn't scream his name. I tried not to draw a comparison to Sam Kage. It was pleasant enough and Aaron was a very considerate lover. I had appreciated him and when he told me that none of his lovers ever had any

complaints, I believed him. Such an attentive, compassionate man could never be called bad in bed. The thing was I craved dominance and strength. I craved Sam. I wasn't careful or inhibited when I was in bed with Detective Kage, I was myself and he knew the things he could do to me. So whereas Aaron would have worried if he were too rough, not wanting to ever hurt me, Sam knew better.

"Jory?"

I looked up and realized that my mind had been drifting.

"Come here."

I jogged over to him and didn't stop, lunging at him instead, wrapping him in my arms.

"Oh." He laughed softly, his face buried in the side of my neck. "Somebody missed me."

Turning my head to lay it on his shoulder, I let out a deep breath. I felt his hand on my hair, felt the other clutching my back, the way he was trying to press against me I understood instantly that this was a huge mistake. I pushed out of his arms.

"What?" He looked at me, his hand on my arm. "Why are you—"

"Let's go in," I suggested, taking a step toward the entrance.

"Sure." He forced a smile, his hand sliding down my back.

The lounge was not as crowded as usual since it was Monday night but it wouldn't have mattered if it were. Aaron Sutter was given the same preferential treatment as Dane or Rick Jenner. Money bought clout and if you were a patron of a certain place, when they saw you they moved fast to take care of you. The manager was fast getting to us and we were seated at a private table toward the fireplace, away from the noise of the bar. I ordered a Jack and Coke and sat there staring out the window as Aaron spoke to the waiter.

"Hey."

I looked back at him resting his chin on his hand just absorbing me with his eyes.

"It's a nice jacket."

"Thanks."

"Why don't you take it off and stay a while."

I smiled and shed the racing jacket, hanging it behind my chair.

"You look good," he said softly.

“You too.”

He breathed in deeply. “So tell me all about Dane’s big day, any juicy stories? Any women charging down the aisle after him screaming about not holding their peace?”

I smiled wide. “No nothing like that.”

“I’m sure Aja was stunning.”

“Yeah she was.”

“All right then speak.”

I told him all about the wedding and the reception and had his eyes watering with laughter over Dane’s groomsmen and the sorry state they were in. I drank and he listened and ate. I told him about the date I had been on with Brandon Rossi earlier in the evening and all about Aubrey Flanagan and Rick Jenner. I listened when he told me his war stories from Hong Kong and how bad he had mangled Mandarin while he’d been there. He had studied the language for a year before going but in actual practice he stunk. I was laughing as I listened to him tell me about the food he’d ended up eating because he got his nouns mixed up.

“I really missed you,” he said suddenly serious, his eyes locked on mine.

I smiled at him because it was a nice thing to say.

“Did you miss me at all?”

“Yes,” I said because I had missed him just not like he wanted.

“Come home with me.”

My eyes flicked to my empty highball glass instead of his face.

“Jory.”

I finally looked across the table into the clear turquoise blue eyes.

“You’re a mess,” he chuckled. “Let me take care of you.”

“I’m good,” I assured him.

“You drink too much Jory.”

It was an old argument that he was never going to win. I knew my tolerance even though no one else seemed to believe me. At Dane’s wedding for instance I had one glass of champagne with the

toast and that was everything I'd had for the entire night. People mistook me for an alcoholic and that wasn't the case.

"And I don't want you to end up in some guy's bed because you fell in."

This was what our last conversation had degenerated into when we broke up. He was sure I would end up in the gutter without him as that was, apparently, where I'd been when he found me. He had wanted to know why I didn't want my life to be good, why I couldn't let myself have nice things and why I couldn't leave the self-destructive party boy behind. It was time to grow up and start a life with someone. Time to make a commitment to being a boyfriend and a partner...I wouldn't be young forever. Drinking until all hours of the morning, sleeping with nameless men, how was that good for me? He was offering me a life people would kill for, why would I ever turn him down?

"Jory?"

I groaned, grabbed my leather jacket and stood up. "This was a mistake Aaron. It's too new. Maybe we can hang out down the road but not right now."

"I haven't seen you in months."

"Maybe it needs to be a year," I sighed, pulling out my wallet, looking for the bill I needed.

"What are you—wait," he put up his hand as I tossed a twenty on the table. "Just wait. I'll drive you just give me a—"

"Aaron!"

And I used to hate the way his friends always just showed up and interrupted us but at that moment they were a godsend.

"Jory," his friend Todd reached for my arm. "I thought you were history man. I thought Aaron finally tossed the trash out."

Oh! That was so my cue to walk out. "He did Todd," I slapped his arm hard, turning and walking out of the lounge.

Jacket on, I stood outside for a second and breathed in deeply. What a weird fragmented night. I needed to go home and go to bed and start fresh the next morning. Everything tilted for a second and then my head cleared. I felt the hand on my shoulder before Aaron stepped around in front of me.

"What?" I sighed, rolling my shoulder so his hand fell off.

"Jory," he grabbed my face in his hands. "I want to take you home with me. Let me."

"After all that? After what you said?"

“What did I say?”

And I realized he hadn’t said much of anything it was just a record that played over and over in my head. He thought of me one way and it was all he saw and all I heard.

“You don’t want me Aaron,” I sighed deeply. “You don’t even see me.”

“Jory,” he said, leaning in to kiss me.

I pushed him back and stepped away. “Let’s just take a break all right. You need to find yourself a nice boy that needs a home. I’ve already got one.”

“Jory, I just want to take care of you.”

“That’s not what I need.”

“You don’t know what you need!” he shouted at me. “You’re so hung up on me having money that you can’t see what I’m really offering you.”

I stared directly into his eyes. “Oh I know exactly what your offer is.”

“Fuck you, Jory,” he snapped and spun around and left without another word.

I watched him walk back inside.

“Nice mouth on the rich boy.”

I looked up the street and there, parked three cars down was Sam Kage. I jogged over to him before I even thought about it.

“You bring that kind of language out in everybody you know huh J?”

I smiled at him and shrugged. “What can I tell you? People go all poetic when I’m around.”

He sighed deeply before he grabbed hold of my jacket and yanked me up against him. I let my head fall back on my shoulders as I stared up into his beautiful eyes.

“He thinks I drink too much.”

“‘Cause ya do,” he agreed, his hand warm on my skin, his thumb stroking my cheek. “But that ain’t the way to get you to stop taking you to a fuckin’ bar. I’d keep you home in bed.”

I let out a snort of laughter as my eyes drifted closed and I leaned into his hand.

“Baby,” he said softly, and his lips brushed over the side of my neck. “Get in the car.”

“Not tonight,” I said, stepping back from him, my eyes opening. “I gotta work tomorrow.”

He took a step closer and I took another back.

“J,” he warned me, reaching for my jacket.

I sidestepped him, doing a half spin so he couldn’t get a hold of me. “I really gotta go,” I smiled at him, walking to the curb, hailing a cab. “But you take it easy.”

“You’re leaving me?” He was dumbfounded.

I waved before I got in the cab and was immediately halfway down the street. I gave the driver my home address and slouched down in the back seat. My phone rang minutes later.

“How ‘bout I take you to breakfast in the morning?”

I smiled into my phone. “No Sam. I don’t eat breakfast.”

“Then lunch. Meet me for lunch at The Chop House. I’ll get you a steak.”

“I have a lunch meeting tomorrow already.”

“Dinner. Lemme feed you. Please J.”

“Sam I can’t just—”

“Why you gotta be so difficult?”

“Hey.”

“What?”

“It’s fun you know flirting with you but really...we should stop.”

“Why?”

“Cause what’s the point?”

“The point is very simple, you belong with me.”

“No I don’t.”

“Yeah ya do. I’m the only one that’ll put up with your shit ‘because I love you.”

I could barely breathe.

“And you know you’re a pain in the ass.”

“I—”

“Jory-c’mon...you throw temper tantrums, you second guess everything, you have no patience at all, you want things to be instantly perfect without any work, you never listen, you jump to conclusions, you create more drama than ten people put together, you drink too much, you’re oblivious to shit that goes on around you and if things go wrong your first instinct is to run away as fast as you can.” He sighed deeply. “You’re a fuckin’ mess and you can’t deny it.”

“You’ve been gone a long time Sam. I’m not like that anymore.”

“The hell you’re not.”

“I’m not, but if you think I’m such a piece of shit then—”

“I never said that. I said you were a pain in the ass and you are. Ya know ya are,” he let out a long drawn out breath. “But so am I, that’s why we’re made for each other.”

“Sam—”

“Please lemme see you. I gotta see you.”

“Sam I—”

“I’m crazy about you...you know that.”

“Sam—”

“We’ll just hang out. No pressure okay?”

“Sam—”

“Let’s have dinner tomorrow. I’ll be there at six.”

“No,” I told him.

“We’ll just hang out,” he repeated, his voice softer, lower.

I sighed deeply. “It’s not a good idea Sam. It never—”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I yawned. “We’ll talk tomorrow. Call me if you want.”

“I’ll see you at six,” he said and hung up.

But I knew him and his job. There was no way he would show.

CHAPTER SIX

MY PROBLEM WAS THAT I had the memory of an elephant. So as I had laid in bed for hours thinking about Sam Kage, all I could remember was how I had felt when he left. So as much as my heart did leaps and flips thinking about him...my brain kept it together. No way, no how was I letting him near me ever again. It would break me a second time.

When I finally fell asleep I felt content in my resolve and in the fact that I wouldn't see him again. Sam was great at promising things he couldn't deliver on, so I put him out of my mind and concentrated on work. It was the last thought I had before I fell asleep. Well, second to the last. Sam's voice telling me he was crazy about me was the very last. My idiocy knew no limits.

Dylan was sick the next morning and so she called to get me to come over and work from her place. I took scones and hot chocolate for her, extra strong coffee for me. We were done working by eleven and spent the rest of the day shopping for baby clothes. You had to be really disciplined to be self-employed and lately we weren't really cutting it.

I went back to the office around four and returned calls and emails and set appointments for the following week. I was on the phone when Sam came through the front door. He was unannounced, as Sadie had already left for the night.

"Wow," I said, trying not to smile as he stopped in front of my desk. "What're you doing here?"

"You said we could eat."

"I didn't really think you'd make it."

"Why?"

"Cause of what you do."

"I have to make time for you J."

I stared at him as the phone rang on my desk.

"You gonna get that or just look at me?"

I answered the phone because I hated the smug tone in his voice.

"Jury its T," my friend Tracy said nervously on the other end. "Listen I know it's late notice but Wes just called and flaked out on meeting me."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at Shane's birthday party at the Hyatt."

"I'm not dressed for a party."

"You always look good J. I just need a wingman."

It was a choice of spending time with Sam, or taking the easy way out and cancelling going to a party with my friend in need. It was an easy choice to make. "Fine." I agreed.

"Thanks man I owe ya big. When can you be here?"

"In like fifteen minutes."

"Have I told you lately that I love you?"

I hung up on him and looked up at Sam. "I'm sorry but duty calls."

He nodded. "When you're done then."

"It might be late. Let's try again tomorrow."

He shook his head.

"C'mon. I'll meet you at Dundee's for dinner after I go to the gym. Say seven-thirty?"

"Okay."

I got up, smiling at him. "Thanks Sam I—"

"C'mon I'll drive you."

"Oh no that's okay. I can—"

"I'll drive you."

"It's not necessary."

But by the heavy hand on my shoulder I knew that to him it very much was.

* * * *

THREE HOURS LATER I told myself I shouldn't care. The man didn't belong to me. And yet every woman that walked over to Sam Kage and put her hand on his shoulder annoyed me. Every man that leaned on the bar next to him and checked him out irritated me even more. The fact that he was just sitting there, having told me that since he was at a bar he might as well have a drink, minding his own business was slowly driving me crazy. To try and numb the growing pain in the pit of my stomach, I was drinking.

When my friend Tracy walked up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, I rolled them so he'd have to let go.

"What's with you?" he snapped at me.

"Nothing," I said absently, standing up. "I think I'm gonna go though. I saw Scott and Jerry, you don't need me anymore."

"Yes I do," he said, shoving me back down into the chair. "I need you."

My eyes darted to Sam and I saw him leaning back against the bar, long legs crossed at the ankles. He was the picture of ease and I was all tangled up just looking at him.

"Jory honey just come dance."

"I don't feel like it." I forced a smile, draining my third Chivas and water. "I just wanna sit."

"You gonna let somebody sit with you?" he asked, tipping his head toward the seat beside me where my leather-racing jacket lay. "There's plenty of guys dyin' to come over here but you are definitely not being real inviting right now."

"Oh no?" I grinned up at him, the alcohol slowly seeping through my veins. "I feel pretty good."

"Yeah I bet," he nodded, leaning down to rest his forehead on mine. "But the way you're acting is not friendly. Your whole vibe right now is fuck off."

"Is it?"

"Yeah, I've counted nine guys that've tried to sit down and they've all been shut down hard."

I grunted, reaching up to put my hand around the back of his neck. "You wanna be number ten T?" I sighed, letting my eyes drift closed. "You wanna take me home and fuck me?"

"Jory you are such a cocktease," he snapped at me, pulling back as I chuckled. "We both know you'd never even let me kiss you."

I started on my fourth drink that the waiter dropped off. "There's always the first time."

"Jory—"

"Excuse me."

We both looked up at the tall, dark haired man hovering over us.

He pointed at the chair where my jacket was. "Can I sit there?"

“Sure,” I said, grabbing my drink, snatching my jacket off the chair and leaving fast. I walked to a different table, higher, with barstools around it and sat down.

“Jory you’re such a prick,” Tracy scolded me as he walked up beside me and leaned on the table. “That guy was really hot and he totally wanted to talk to you.”

“Whatever,” I grunted, leaning my chin on my hand to look at him. “So you wanna go get something to eat? I’m starving.”

“Jory, I’m here to pick somebody up. Unlike you it’s work for me. I—”

“No it’s not,” I assured him. “There’s no guy in here you can’t have.” I said, looking around, my eyes finding Sam Kage. “Except him. You can’t have him.”

He chuckled. “You can’t have him either J. He’s straight.”

“You think so?”

“Look at him,” he said like I was nuts. “Yeah J, he’s got the whole *breeder* vibe goin’ on.”

I checked out Sam Kage and my stomach did a slow role.

“Even you might let a guy like that sit with you huh J?”

“Maybe I would,” I said, as Sam caught me staring and smiled.

“Oh shit,” Tracy moaned, watching Sam lever himself off the bar and start across the room, his eyes on me the whole time. “You know him?”

“Yes I do.”

“God Jory how hot is he?”

“You have no idea,” I assured my friend.

He shivered as Sam Kage stepped in beside me; hand on the back of my neck.

“I want you to come outside and get in my car now.”

“I can’t do that,” I told him. “I’m here with friends.”

“This is bullshit. You made a date with me first.”

“And something came up.”

“This is not something this is you blowing me off.”

“Then go.”

“No.”

“Sam you—”

He growled. “Just come talk to me outside for a second. It’s hot in here.”

“It is a little,” I agreed, looking up into his dark eyes.

“C’mon.”

“What are you still doing here?”

He smiled slowly and I saw the flash in his eyes. “You’re still here.”

“Jory introduce me to your friend.” Tracy asked, interrupting us.

“I’m not his friend,” Sam corrected him. “I’m way more than that.”

I watched his eyes get huge. “I’m sorry?”

“He’s not,” I told Tracy.

Sam yanked my head back and stared down into my eyes. “The hell I’m not,” he said as he bent to kiss me, his hand tight in my hair.

I shoved him away and in the process lost my balance, nearly falling off my barstool. It was perhaps the most uncoordinated, ungraceful thing I’d ever done but he caught me, crushing me against him and patting my ass before he set me on my feet.

I was sputtering as he laughed at me. “You can’t just—”

“I love it when you get all worked up.” He smiled lazily. “You get all flushed and your eyes go all dark and wet...it’s really something.”

I deflated. How was I supposed to remain indignant when he was looking at me like that? Like I was the most amazing thing he’d ever laid eyes on?

Gently, he ran the back of his fingers under my chin. “Put your jacket on. I wanna go.”

“I—”

“C’mon baby,” he said softly, pleading.

I felt drugged and when I looked at Tracy I saw the completely enraptured smile.

“T?”

“God Jory he’s crazy about you.”

“Yes I am,” Sam agreed, taking a handful of my dress shirt. “Just come talk to me.”

“No, there’s no point,” I said, grabbing my jacket and my drink, ready to move again.

“Hey pretty boy.”

I looked over at the next table and there was a guy sitting there smiling at me. He was young, covered in tattoos and his shirt was open revealing toned pecs and six pack abs. The only word that described him was hot and the look he was giving me said that he was more than interested in getting to know me.

“C’mere I wanna talk to you.”

But there was no way I could walk away from Sam Kage, even if I wanted to, even if I was trying to prove a point. There was just no way.

“Not a chance man,” Sam said to the guy, his voice deep, menacing.

I sighed and looked back at Sam. “What do you want?”

“I told you...I want to talk to you outside.”

The way he was looking at me, how dark his eyes were...he would not take no for an answer. We would stand there all night if I argued with him. “Fine.”

I followed him through the crowd, moving slowly until we made it to the front door. Outside, I stood in front of him and waited.

“Let’s go eat. I know you’re starving.”

“I’m not—”

“J you drank your dinner. Lemme feed you.”

I just stared at him.

“C’mon,” he chuckled. “I promise to lay off.”

I continued to study his face for a second and nodded before suggesting we try the diner around the corner. He gave me a lopsided grin and started walking. It was nice when he started talking about nothing, making conversation about the last movie he’d seen, how he’d spent last Saturday cleaning

his mother's rain gutters and about a case at work where a guy had shot his best friend on the foot over a golf club.

"I am continually surprised by the things people do," I told him.

"You and me both," he chuckled, holding open the door for me so I could step inside the family run diner where Pot Roast was the special of the day.

Dinner was really nice. We laughed and talked and he kept our conversation light. When I was having a cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows for desert and he was having a slice of Pecan pie and coffee, he caught me staring.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"C'mon J," he said softly, coaxing, leaning close to me, his knee bumping against mine under the table, his arm behind my head, draped over the back of the booth. "Tell me."

I shrugged. "It's just you. You look exactly, the same. You haven't changed at all."

"I've changed a lot," he assured me. "I promise you."

I didn't want to delve. It sounded like a dangerous topic of conversation.

As we walked back toward the club, he asked me if he could drive me home.

"It's probably not a real good idea."

"Why not?" he asked as we reached his huge SUV.

"I thought we were having dinner tomorrow and—"

"I don't wanna have dinner again," he told me. "I want you to—"

"I thought you said you weren't gonna push?"

"Fuck this," he growled at me. "I'm done with you saying no."

I walked a few feet away from him. "It's not gonna be like you want so maybe you should just give up."

After a minute of staring at me he nodded.

"I just can't Sam." I said, swallowing hard, the lump in my throat almost painful.

“Okay.”

I let out a deep breath and turned to walk away.

“Hey.”

I stopped and looked over my shoulder at him.

“I’ll see you around all right?”

I smiled at him and continued down the street. I wasn’t sure how to feel. Relived? Sad? Steeped in regret, vindicated or hopeful. Hard to imagine that I would ever fall in love with another man the way I had been in love with Sam Kage. It was however not necessarily a bad thing. To be in that deep was really scary.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I WAS IN EARLY the next morning, and by working through lunch and staying after Sophie left that night, caught up on three days work. Dylan was very impressed when I called her that evening, even though she worried when I didn't eat.

"You're too thin now Jory," she sighed into the phone.

"Okay," I indulged her as I ate the Power Bar in my desk.

She promised to try and be in the following day if she felt better but I told her not to worry, I'd call if I got in any trouble. I made her play guess-who, to figure out who I had accidentally run into.

"I hate this game and you know it," she complained. "Who'd ya meet?"

"Abe, your friend Aubrey Flanagan."

"Really? How funny."

"I know it was totally random."

"Well that's great. Didn't you just love her, isn't she awesome?"

"She is."

"But don't love her more than me okay?"

"Could you be more hormonal," I asked her. "Like that's even possible."

"Good."

"That reminds me I gotta call her."

"That's my cue to get off the phone." She yawned and then burped.

"Lovely."

"Sorry," she sighed. "My stomach's all screwed up."

"Because it's been taken over by an alien."

"You're funny. You should do stand-up."

I smiled into the phone.

“God, I’m so sick of being sick. I need to have this kid already.”

“It’s just a couple of weeks more Dy. Just rest.”

She appreciated me trying to rally her spirits and told me she loved me before she got off the phone. I called Aubrey immediately afterwards. My pinch hitter promised to be in the office the following Monday morning at eight sharp. I told her I didn’t do sharp I did *ish*, as in nine-*ish*.

“Ish?” She giggled.

“So ish,” I assured her. “Dylan and I might be a little laid back but still...eight in the morning is just obscene.”

“Okay partner,” she sighed into the phone. “Nine-*ish* it is.”

When I asked how her date had gone with Rick Jenner she said it wasn’t over yet. Apparently they had been inseparable since they had dinner.

“Have you even gone home yet?”

She had no comment.

I chuckled and she groaned.

“He’s a good guy,” I championed my brother’s friend.

“He’s a phenomenal guy,” she corrected me, “and so damn hot.”

I grunted. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“And speaking of hot guys...who was the gorgeous guy I saw you leaving The Corner Diner with last night?”

“I didn’t see you.”

“No I know. I yelled but you were too far away but who cares! Who was the guy?”

“Sam.”

“Oooh,” she purred. “Do you realize you just sighed when you said his name?”

“I did not.”

“Oh I think ya did. Who is he?”

“He’s a police detective.”

“Well he’s totally yummy. I approve.”

“Stop.”

“And can I just say what a stunning couple you guys make? I mean holy shit, drop-dead, could-not-take my-eyes-off-of you guys gorgeous.”

“No we don’t but you and Rick on the other hand...really beautiful.”

“Well thank you very much,” she squealed suddenly and the throaty laughter filled my ears.

“Whatcha doin’ babe?” I teased her.

“Shut-up,” she laughed more. “Richard Jenner go away I’m trying to talk to Jor—”

A second later she was gone and I smiled wide. It would be interesting to find out what Dane thought of his friend’s new girl when he got back from his honeymoon.

* * * *

I WAS ALREADY HOME that evening, when my friend Sloan called, and invited me to dinner with she and her boyfriend Derek. Because I had turned her down the last five times she called me, I accepted and went to meet them at a steakhouse downtown. When I met them outside the restaurant and was introduced to three other people, among them Parker Strom, I understood that I was being “fixed-up”. I dragged Sloan to the bar with me where she confessed that because she loved both Parker and I that she hoped we would hit it off. When we rejoined the group, Parker had a glass of white wine for me. I took it to be polite even though wine gave me headaches. He stood close, asked me what I did, and complimented my leather racing jacket. I was listening to him answer all the questions he had posed to me when there was a hand on my shoulder. When I turned, I found Aaron Sutter.

“Hey.” I smiled at him.

“Jory.” He smiled back, hand closing on my jacket. “What are you doing here?”

“Just having dinner with friends.”

“Great.” His eyes were locked on mine. “Eat with us.”

“There’s like six of us Sutter,” I teased him, smiling wide. “How can you—”

“I’ve got a private room upstairs,” he said; hand on my bicep, easing me closer to him. “Come on I feel like crap about last time. Treat your friends, eat with me.”

And it would be a treat for anyone. Unless you lived under a rock, everyone knew Aaron Sutter. People saw his name splashed all over newspapers, read articles and saw his picture in magazines, understood that he was rich, powerful and connected. Partying with him was *Crystal* and caviar, nothing but the best. So there was no reason to say no when someone was offering to make a normal Wednesday night into an event. It was assumed that dinner would just be the beginning. The expressions given him were of wonder as he led the entire entourage through the crowded restaurant, one arm draped over Sloan’s shoulder, the other hand tight on my bicep.

Up the marble staircase to the second floor was a private room that had its own tiny dance floor and was set up like someone’s living room instead of a restaurant

“This is amazing,” Parker said, watching Aaron as he mingled with his friends.

“Yep,” I sighed, motioning the waiter over to me, passing him the full glass of wine and ordering a Chivas and water. “It’s all first-class with Aaron.”

“He’s even better-looking in person.”

The man was handsome period. Live or in print he looked exactly the same.

“Don’t you think so?”

“Sure.”

He stepped in closer to me. “So listen, before this evening goes on any further I would like to get your number so I can call you and ask you out on a real date.”

“Who’s going on a date?”

We both turned to find Aaron beside us, his hand on the back of my neck, fingers sliding up into my hair.

“I,” Parker began but faltered, and I saw him watching Aaron’s obvious show of possessiveness. “I wanted to thank you for inviting me Mr. Sutter.”

“Aaron,” he corrected gently. “And I’m sorry; did you want to ask Jory out?”

He swallowed nervously. “I did yes.”

Aaron nodded before he excused us both, leading me toward the table. “Sit with me.”

I chuckled. “That was kind of an asshole thing to do don’t you think?”

“No,” he breathed out. “He needs to know that if he wants you the line forms behind me.”

I smiled at him. “C’mon Sutter, order us all something to eat already. Everybody’s starving.”

“Yes dear,” he said, smiling, pulling me closer.

It was fun as it always was when Aaron was the host of his own party. He didn’t order off the menu but instead rattled off selections that the chef would prepare only for him. And normally I took offence to the making of assumptions about what I wanted, but I wasn’t in the mood to argue and so let him tell the waiter what I would have.

“Lemme take your jacket.”

I took it off and passed it to him. When he complimented the dress shirt underneath I gave him a look.

“What?”

“I look the same as always Sutter, don’t screw with me.”

He scowled at me.

“You on the other hand look great,” I assured him, my hand fixing the collar of his dress shirt under his V-neck sweater. “But you always do.”

“Do I?”

“Quit fishing,” I grunted.

“I just like it when you notice.”

I stared into his eyes and tried to understand, again, what it was that wasn’t there. Why I wouldn’t just change for him and be the way he wanted. Anyone in their right mind would. The man was perfect and yet...not for me. He wasn’t perfect for me.

“Try the wine J,” he breathed out, moving a piece of hair out of my eyes.

“I thought I drank too much?” I quipped, annoyed suddenly for no reason.

“Please... I don’t want to fight.” He sighed, his fingers stroking over my jaw. “I just want to feed you and maybe, hopefully...take you home with me.”

I let it go and tried the red wine. He was looking at me expectantly and I felt a familiar knot twist in my stomach. Always I could be counted on to let him down in these instances. He thought I knew wine and food and I didn’t. He imagined me a connoisseur because he was and all his friends were, but the truth was that I had simple tastes, always had.

“You like it?”

“Yeah it’s great.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, turning to look at Sloan, asking her to repeat her question about Dane. She wanted to know about the wedding and I was more than willing to give her details.

Later when a plate was set down in front of me, Aaron drew my attention to him with a hand on my knee.

“Try the steak J. Its Kobe beef you’re gonna love it.”

And I did like it when I tried it, but I didn’t want to be told that I *had* to love it. As usual I realized I was nitpicking at him and tried to stop. When my phone rang I excused myself to the opposite side of the room before I answered it.

“Jory.”

“Sam,” I sighed because I was so happy to hear his voice.

“Well,” he said softly. “That’s the best greeting I’ve gotten so far.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You sound good. Where are you?”

“I’m at dinner.”

“Dinner? What is it like ten now?”

I laughed at him. “Don’t be so regimented Detective. Dinner’s whenever you want it.”

“If you say so but I gotta tell ya, you keep some weird ass hours.”

I smiled into my phone. “Very true. Why are you calling?”

“You said I could.”

“Yeah but—”

“You know the other night when you said that all I wanted you for was to fuck, that was messed up. You knew it was crap even when you were saying it.”

“I don’t wanna talk about—”

“Cause the first thing I want is your heart.”

Jesus.

“I want you period.”

“Listen maybe you shouldn’t call—”

“Where are you having dinner?”

“It’s not—”

“Jory come sit down,” Aaron said as he walked up beside me. “Your food’s getting cold.”

“Who’s that?” Sam asked me.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said quickly.

“You don’t wanna hang up,” he warned me. “Cause I can find your cell phone J no problem.”

“Oh yeah?” I baited him and clicked it off. “Good luck.” When I turned to go back to the table I stopped instantly as Aaron was standing right there, barring my path, smiling at me.

“What?”

“Your temper Jory,” he sighed, his fingers sliding over my jaw. “It’s really something.”

I moved passed him to go back to the table at the same time that the waiter finally dropped off my Chivas and water. I thanked him, drained it before he could leave and quickly ordered another one before I even sat down.

“Jory, don’t ruin the evening just because you’re pissed off at whoever was on the phone.”

“I’m not ruining anything,” I said, cutting into my steak again. “Just drop it.”

But Aaron never could. “Why don’t we go?”

“I’m eating,” I told him, “and all my friends are here having a good time. You should too.”

“How can I when I know if you keep drinking that you might go home with someone else instead of me?”

“Don’t worry about it; I’m not going home with anyone.”

“Please,” he shook his head. “You always go home with someone Jory. You’re predictable that way. I used to watch you when you were out and you never left alone, every night a different guy. I’m sure nothing’s changed.”

I turned to look at him as the waiter dropped off my second drink. “What are you talking about now?”

He searched my eyes with his. “Before we started dating I’d see you at the club picking up a different guy every night. You leave with them and then the next night if the same guy came near you, you ignored them until they got the message. Nobody ever gets a repeat performance from you; you’re a one night stand kind of guy.”

I nodded, feeling my face getting hot. People were listening and pretending they weren’t, some of their faces showed embarrassment and others were just disgusted. Parker looked surprised. He was probably wondering why Sloan would have wanted him to date me, since I was so obviously just looking for a one-night stand.

“C’mon you know I’m right, you never sleep with the same guy twice that’s not how you operate. You sleep with them and forget them.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “And I bet it’s been even worse since we broke up. You’re like the biggest slut in Chicago and you know it.”

He was right to some degree. Before him, after Sam, there had been a lot of men. And before Sam there were too many to count. So I did sleep around a lot, but when I was with someone I was monogamous. My first instinct was to loyalty and wanting to belong to someone. If Sam wanted me I would...

I jerked hard startling Sloan who was sitting on the other side of me.

“Jesus Jory,” she chuckled, sliding her chair away from me, closer to her boyfriend Derek who was sitting beside her. “Just because you’re drunk don’t spill on me.”

But I wasn’t drunk. I hadn’t even finished my second drink yet. But everyone thought I was or would be.

“Did you hear me?” Aaron asked.

What was I doing thinking about Sam?

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah I’m...fine.”

“Look at me.”

I did as he asked.

“It used to piss me off, seeing you go home with all those guys after turning me down. It took me forever to get you to say yes.”

I heard his words but I wasn’t actually thinking about what he was saying. I wasn’t emotionally connected at all.

“When we finally got together...God Jory it was like winning the lottery.”

I was a prize then.

“Jory...”

I looked into his eyes, saw how hungry they were, how dark.

He leaned close to me so he wouldn’t be overheard. “You know people look at you and think you’re hot but they have no idea how great your body is.”

Always this had been Aaron’s need, for everyone to admire his things, to covet his possessions and I had been one of them.

When we used to go out with his friends he would buy me a shirt or a sweater, a gift he’d say, and I would put it on only to find that it was a size too small. Your body is gorgeous he told me; you should show it off more. If we were lounging by the pool he’d run his hand over my stomach in front of his friends, tell them that you could scrub laundry on my abs, sometimes yanking down the side of my swim trunks to trace the V-line from my hip to my groin. I would shove him off me, head for the house and he would catch me, say he was sorry, never meaning to embarrass me. I was just so beautiful, what was he supposed to do? I told him I wanted to be treated with respect. And he would promise to, even as his hand slid over my ass to the catcalls and whistles of his friends. The end result was logical; the people who mattered to him thought our relationship was a joke. They were sure that all I had to offer was what you could see.

We would go to expensive places and Aaron was reminded to buy me drinks or my meal since I couldn’t possibly afford it. My age was a constant source of amusement, my lack of a financial portfolio and property cause for concern. It was understood that he was slumming with me because I had a hot body and I was good in bed. And when we had broken up, leaving that part behind had been a huge relief. Funny that Dane’s friends never made me feel bad about myself. Maybe since they were all self-made men, not one of them a trust fund baby like Aaron’s ubiquitous posse.

“What are you thinking about?”

I shook my head, gulping down my drink.

He leaned in close and I felt his warm breath in my ear. “Jory I know you’re back to the clubs, sleeping with any guy who asks...so I’m asking...come home with me. Choose me tonight...please.”

But it was over and going back was just plain stupid. Just being with him, seeing the sneering looks from his friends, hearing him criticize me was annoying.

He turned my face to him. “I’m not trying to make you feel bad.”

“Yeah ya are,” I said, lifting my chin out of his hand and pushing back from the table. “But it’s normal for you and these assholes so I’m not upset I’m just done.

“But I don’t care that you’re like that,” he went on because he wasn’t really listening to me. “I just want you to—”

“I know what you want,” I said as I stood up and put on my jacket.

“What are you doing?” he asked suddenly.

It seemed obvious. “I’m leaving.”

“Why?” he asked, reaching out to grab hold of my wrist.

“I forgot how bad you and your friends make me feel about myself,” I told him, yanking my arm free of his grasp. “I’ll see ya later. Thanks for dinner.”

“Jory—”

“Bye,” I yelled at the table, smiling before I turned and left the room, dodging the waiters coming into serve more food and drinks. I made it down the staircase to the restaurant and then snaked my way through the crowd to the door. On the street I felt instantly better, less claustrophobic, like I could breathe.

“Jory!”

I turned and found Aaron.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Why? What did I say that’s not true?”

“Nothing,” I said, turning to leave.

“Jory!” he snapped, grabbing my arm tight, holding on. “I hate these damn dramatic exits. Just for once stay and fight. You always run.”

I shrugged. “So find someone who’ll stay. It doesn’t seem that hard. You get tons of guys hitting on you all the time, just pick one already. That guy Parker thinks you’re plenty hot.”

“Jory—”

“Lemme go Aaron,” I said tiredly. “I’m not the guy for you and you’re definitely not the one for me. Let’s just call it a day.”

“God!” he roared, the frustration just rolling off him. “Why do you have to fight me all the time? Why can’t you just listen to me since all I want is the best for you? You could be so happy! I could show you so many things and places and—”

I peeled his hand off me and took a step back. “I don’t need that.”

“What do you need? Do you even know?”

I didn’t, but I knew for certain it wasn’t Aaron Sutter. I had to trust in order to love and I didn’t trust Aaron. He wanted to change me and I was afraid if I stayed with him I would lose myself along the way.

“Jory? Tell me the kind of guy you need and I’ll be that guy.”

I shook my head. The only man I had ever loved so completely that every wall in me had come down was Sam Kage. And it was because he was strong enough to never break under the strain of being with me. I was a mess and he had been my rock. I needed that, I needed to be able to surrender and just be. But it would sound desperate and co-dependant if I gave voice to it so I just stood there silently.

“Jory please. I thought about you every day I was gone.”

When he took a step forward I took another back. I wasn’t going to let him touch me anymore...there was no point. I had my doubts if we could even be friends.

“Jory...honey.”

And Sam was an even worse prospect because as much as I wanted him, he was no good for me. It was funny, the guy I didn’t want would stay forever, and the guy I did want would end up leaving me again, if I allowed him the chance. I needed a drink.

“That’s your answer for everything.”

I hadn’t realized I’d said it out loud.

“What you need is to come home with me and spend the weekend. We need to talk.”

I was overwhelmed suddenly with sadness. This was really goodbye and I was ending forever yet another failed relationship. My track record was total shit.

“Jory,” he breathed out my name, trying to step in close to me, reaching for my shoulder.

I stepped back, turned around and ran. He yelled my name more than once.

I wasn’t ready to go home. I really needed to just sit somewhere, have a drink and clear my head. Someplace quiet where no one would bother me. And I knew exactly where.

* * * *

IT TURNED OUT THAT I was reaping some serious karma for God knew what. Or maybe it was someone else’s karma and I was just caught in the crossfire. There was a drug raid at my favourite piano bar, due to the fact that the owner of the club had apparently been moving quite a bit of cocaine in and out of his place for some time. And tonight, Wednesday night, vice detectives had picked to bust him. So I was sitting on the ground in a long row with everyone else that had been inside, when the police came swarming through the front door. There was a barricade of black and white cars blocking us from the other side of the street where a crowd had formed. It was the cherry on the cake of my day. When someone gently kicked my foot, I let my head roll back so I could look up. Turned out I had been wrong, here was the cake topper.

“Hi,” Sam Kage smirked down at me. “What brings you to this den of iniquity J?”

I groaned and his smirk changed into a full-blown evil grin. He was enjoying this to no end.

“Since when do you do drugs?”

“I don’t and you know it.” I shot him a look. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Better watch how you talk to me,” he said, crouching down in front of me. “You could be in a lot of trouble here.”

I stared into his eyes. “What are you even doing here? You don’t work vice anymore, you’re a homicide detective now.”

He didn’t answer me.

“Sam?”

“Get up.”

As soon as I was on my feet he grabbed me hard, fingers digging into my shoulder before he walked me away from the others, down the street and around the corner to his car. I pulled free of his

grasp and turned to face him, but before I could say a word, he shoved me up against the side door and pinned me there. He held me still with just one hand on my chest.

“Jesus Sam,” I barked at him. “What the hell are you—”

“Shut-up,” he cut me off, stepping forward so we were only inches apart.

The heat radiating off the man was amazing. I caught my breath I couldn’t help it.

He made a noise in the back of his throat. “Some things never change huh J?”

I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of speaking to him.

“Look at me.”

I lifted my head to look up into his eyes and found that he had bent toward me at the same time.

When he spoke I felt his warm breath on my face. “What are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to sit and relax a little before I went home.”

He nodded, dipping his head lower, inhaling me. “You’re shaking you know.”

I knew. Nothing I could do about it.

“Maybe I should search you for illegal substances.”

I swallowed hard trying to get my body to calm down.

“Or maybe I’ll just put you in the back of my car and fuck you ‘til you pass out.”

Just the thought of him holding me down had me desperate for it. When I caught my breath his knee wedged between my legs and then his thigh as he leaned into me.

“Listen, I want you to meet me around the corner at the River Road Bar.” His voice was deep and sexy, sending ripples of heat through me. “You go there and wait and as soon as I’m done here I’ll meet you.”

But my brain kicked in and my head cleared.

“Did you hear me?”

I had no intention of meeting him anywhere. The illustration of his power over me was terrifying. No other guy could get me panting and writhing in seconds. No one else had such dominion over me. I wanted to run away as fast as I could.

He grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked my head back hard uncaring about whether or not it hurt. "Do not even think about ditching me."

"No."

He kissed the base of my neck. "Your heart is beating so fast baby."

I shivered hard.

"Fuck it, get in the car."

"You're on duty," I reminded him.

"No I'm not," he told me. "I was just driving home and heard the call. I figured I was close to where you were so I could check in on you after."

"How did you know where—"

"I can track your phone, I told you."

Police Detective. I forgot sometimes. "Lemme go," I ordered. "You're hurting me."

"I am not," he said, his hand moving from my hair to my throat. "I could never hurt you."

"Get off me," I snapped, wriggling in his arms, trying to lever myself off the car.

He stepped back and I moved quickly away from him.

"Walk to the bar J. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

I turned to go but before I was out of his reach, he grabbed hold of my shoulder and spun me back around to face him.

"God what?"

His expression was dark, brows furrowed, jaw clenched. "Be there."

I just stared at him a long minute before I started walking backwards.

"You're not gonna meet me there are you?"

I shook my head.

"Why?" he yelled down the street, the space between us significant enough that even if he bolted he wouldn't reach me.

“Cause of what you just did.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

I shrugged.

“You loved every second of that.”

And if we were being honest I had, but we weren’t being honest. He stood there watching me and I turned and walked away.

My body was flushed and hot now that Sam had ignited my libido, so I caught another cab and headed toward one of my usual haunts to pick somebody up. I needed a stranger with no strings attached to quench my desire.

At the lounge they were playing Billie Holiday standards and the singer had a deep, sultry sound to her voice. I ordered a snifter of Hennessy and sat at the end of the bar listening. When I drained my glass another one was right there to take its place. Turning my head I found a very handsome man smiling at me.

“Finally you show up.”

“I’m sorry?” I smiled at him.

“You don’t remember me?”

I didn’t.

“You picked me up here like a month ago.”

I had no idea who he was. “Sure.”

He smiled slowly. “You don’t remember but that’s okay...I remember you.”

I took a sip of my drink.

“But you haven’t been around in a while and you wouldn’t give me your number.”

I nodded. I hardly ever gave out my number.

“I kept thinking if I hung out here I’d bump into you again.”

“And now you have.”

“Now I have.”

“Is that a good thing?”

He nodded, leaning forward. “It’s a very good thing.”

“You live around here?”

He nodded. “Yep, real close.”

“Thanks for the drink.”

“You finish it then you can have another at my place.”

And I was ready to take him up on his offer. My body was basically throbbing with pent up desire and he was as good as the next guy. At least we liked the same kind of music. It was something. So I smiled at him and would have continued our flirty conversation but the hand that slid up my left thigh turned my head in the opposite direction. Sam Kage was there, leaning on the bar, staring at me, and just waiting.

I was stunned. “What are you—”

“Excuse me,” the guy began, leaning in close to me. “I was talking to—”

“Fuck off,” Sam said flatly before returning his eyes to mine. His smile was huge. “He’s with me.”

And because it was Sam Kage talking, the guy disappeared. I turned my head to say something nice to my admirer and he was gone. The detective was just too big and scary.

“Look at me.”

I exhaled sharply and dragged my eyes to Sam.

“Can I sit?”

I shrugged.

“It’s nice in here,” he said softly, sitting down on the barstool beside me, pushing my drink out of my reach. “You like this kinda music huh?”

“I don’t come here for the music,” which I didn’t. It was a meat market and that was why I was there. “I came to pick somebody up.”

“I see.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked quickly, my voice coming out sharper than I wanted.

“You’re here.”

“But we both know that this isn’t—”

“Lemme drive you home.”

“Absolutely not.”

He leaned close to me, invading my personal space, his knee against mine. “Why not?”

“How did you even know I—”

“Did you know I’m a police detective? You know I find people all the time?”

“Shit.”

He chuckled. “You can’t ditch me J. Come home with me.”

“Sam you shouldn’t waste your time.”

“I don’t consider any time spent with you a waste.”

“But Sam you—”

“What honey?” he said, looking at me, his eyes locked on my mouth.

“It’s doomed to fail Sam.”

“I don’t accept that,” he said, his hand slowly reaching for me, giving me time to move away if I wanted.

“You don’t really care Sam...not really.”

“I don’t?” He touched my chin lightly, tipping it gently up so he could run the back of his fingers down my throat. “Cause...I think I do. Because unlike all the rest of these guys, I wanna keep you.”

I lifted my head away and he let me. “You just wanna fuck me.”

“Oh I wanna do that too,” he chuckled warmly. “But that’s only part of it.”

“How can it be? Sam you don’t even know me or—”

“You have no idea about anything,” he breathed out, searching my eyes. “I dream about you.”

I looked down at the bar.

“It’s killing me that you won’t just give in.”

I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead into my hand.

“And you’ll let some stranger take you home and fuck you but me...me you won’t let near you. How does that make any fuckin’ sense at all?”

“A stranger won’t hurt me.”

“I won’t either.”

I scoffed, smiling wide as I lifted my head up and looked him in the eye. “Fuck you Sam.”

He shrugged. “Go ahead, vent at me I don’t give a shit.”

I drained the drink the guy had bought me in one gulp and slid off the barstool. I was halfway to the front door before my arm was grabbed hard. I froze as he walked around in front of me.

“Let me drive you home.”

I moved by him and took a deep breath as soon as I was back outside.

“Do you care that I missed you?” Sam said as he appeared at my side.

“No.”

“Liar.”

“Sam I can’t do this, I won’t,” I said, shoving my hands in my pockets. It was cold and late and I could see my breath when I spoke. “I’d have to be crazy.” I walked faster, hoping he’d just let me go.

He grabbed me again, yanked me around so fast I almost fell. “You’ve always been crazy.”

“Let go!” I tried to twist free but he had me. The harder I pulled the harder he held. He was going to leave bruises on my skin.

“No.”

I stopped fighting and stared up at him. “Just go away.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeated, “Well for starters how about that bullshit in the street? You think it turns me on to be treated like some piece of ass that you—”

“Yeah,” he cut me off, his eyes full of heat. “I think you get off on the idea of me making you do whatever I want. You’re dying to submit to me.”

I shook my head, tried to tug my arm free but he wasn’t letting me go.

“We both know you want me.” His voice was calm but the muscle in his jaw was flexing. “And I want you J with me not just in my bed.”

I stared up into his eyes. “If you wanted me so bad, if I was so important...why’d you never call me or write me or send me a damn email? You left for three years Sam, three goddamn years! You can’t expect us to just pick up where we left off after all this time just because you’re ready. That’s total crap!”

“I was gone; I was out of the country for two years J. I didn’t talk to anyone. I—”

“Fine, you’ve been back a year then, you even said it’s been a year—so...why am I only seeing you now? We meet accidentally at a hardware store and you’re what, overcome with emotion, and now you’ve gotta see me again? It’s bullshit.”

He grabbed my other arm and shook me hard. “I didn’t know what to do. I never know what to do about you. When I got back I went to see you and you were with that guy Aaron.”

I was stunned. “You saw me with Aaron?”

“Yeah,” he said, letting me go, letting me take a few steps away from him. “You looked happy and you deserve to be happy so...but I had to check and then I saw he wasn’t around anymore and you...you give yourself away. Why do you do that? Why do you go home with anybody who asks J?”

I looked away because I couldn’t tell him.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to watch you go home with a different guy every night?”

“See,” I said, shrugging, still staring off down the street. “I’m trash Sam...why even bother with me?”

“Look at me.”

But I didn’t.

“Look at me,” he growled, grabbing my arm, yanking me back to him.

I tried tugging free, but his grip was like iron, no way was I going anywhere.

“You’re not trash, it’s just that none of those guys are right for you.”

I had no snappy comeback because what he thought was exactly how I felt. Silence seemed the best option so I went with it.

“I think you wanna belong to me and if it ain’t gonna be me you don’t want anybody.”

I turned back to look at him. “That’s crap and you’re full of shit.”

He shook his head, reached out and put a hand on my cheek. “Nope, I’m right.”

“Sam—”

He closed the small distance between us. “Why are you trembling?”

“‘Cause it’s cold out here.”

“But that’s not why,” he said, running his fingers over my jaw, smiling.

“Sam—”

“You need me bad.”

How did he know? My skin felt prickly, itchy, my muscles tense, I could barely breathe. Everything in me was ready, waiting for him. I ached for him even as my flight reflex was choking me. I wanted to run away at the same time I wanted to stay.

“And I don’t just mean in bed.”

He knew me so well, even after so long he still knew me.

“Your eyes are a mess J.”

I wanted to give in but I was drowning in fear. He could shred my heart so easily.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come for you the minute I got back.”

“You don’t hafta—”

“But I’m here now.”

“Sam you—”

“Jory!” he yelled at me. “I’m right here.”

I shook my head.

“I want you back.”

Everything blurred as my eyes filled. “You can find another guy.”

“I don’t want another guy, I want you.”

“You’re no good for me.”

“Yeah I am and I can’t wait to show you.”

“Sam,” I sighed, “do you really think that after all this—”

“I don’t want anybody else to have you from this second on, I can’t...I won’t.”

I opened my mouth to tell him it was too late, but I was off my feet and in his monster SUV before I even realized I was moving. The door was locked behind me and I sat there, waiting, while he got in. When he slid in behind the steering wheel he immediately turned and smiled at me. He looked very smug.

“Stop.” I tried not to smile, so close to just giving in. “Lemme out.”

“You’re drunk, you can’t even walk.”

“I’m so not drunk.”

“I wanna take you home.”

I groaned and he chuckled.

“C’mon baby.”

“I am not your baby.”

“Yeah ya are,” he breathed out, smiling lazily. “You know ya are.”

“Sam—”

“You never stopped belonging to me.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Nope. It’s the truth.”

“And so what?” I was exhausted already.

“So lemme take you home.”

“Fine,” I threw up my hands in defeat. “Drive me home.”

“Okay.” He smiled, starting the car.

“Wait, to my home,” I clarified.

“I don’t know where you live.”

“Are you kidding me?” I muttered. “You’re unbelievable.”

He started laughing.

“You’re lying. I know you know where I live. You’re a detective after all.”

“It’s outta my way.” He shrugged, his laughter giving him away. He was so lying through his teeth. “You can come to my place instead.”

“No.”

His smile went from smug to wicked that fast. “Like you can do shit right now.”

I groaned again but I couldn’t stop smiling. It was insane that I could still feel this way... still crazy about Sam Kage after all this time. He had ruined me for other men. It was ridiculous.

“Jory...baby,” he sighed deeply, reaching for me to put a hand around the back of my neck and pull me forward. “Stop fighting with me. Just give in.”

“Sam—”

“I see how you look at me...you want me.”

“Of course I want you Sam but that doesn’t mean I should.”

“Baby—”

“This scene is so familiar, me in your car, you promising things will be different this time—me believing you...we’ve done this before and it never works out. We need to call it a day.”

“You’re fighting so hard ‘cause you’re so scared of getting hurt.”

“No I just—”

“Baby,” his voice was so warm, so soothing and gentle. “Stop...give in...I love you.”

“No, you’re just trying to—”

I felt his warm breath on my face a second before he kissed me. The wave of heat flooded me and when his tongue pushed between my lips I opened for him. His mouth sealed over mine and I

felt his hand slip around my throat to keep me there. The noises of pleasure that came out of him made my stomach flutter as he pushed in deeper, his tongue tangled with mine, tasting me, taking his time, devouring me. It lasted so long, the heat, the need, just building and I felt his hands on me, one tangled in my hair, the other having slid up under my shirt, now rubbing circles on my back. He would kiss me for hours if I let him. When I tried to pull back, he leaned with me until I put my hands on his chest and shoved hard.

“What?” he asked, his voice full of gravel, his eyes heavy-lidded and so, so dark. No way to miss how turned on he was, a study in lust.

“Drive me home.”

“After that kiss...after the way you just responded...no. No way.”

“Sam c’mon. I don’t wanna make—”

“Just come home with me. I wanna talk to you.”

“I know exactly what you wanna do,” I assured him.

“Just c’mon. I promise to keep my hands off ya.”

“You’re so full of shit right now.”

“Just right now?” He winked at me.

I leaned back in the seat.

“So?” He teased me.

“You’re gonna do whatever you want anyway.”

“This is true.”

When I closed my eyes I felt his hand on my thigh. “You said you’d keep your hands off me.”

“Yeah I lied.”

And I knew that of course.

* * * *

HIS APARTMENT LOOKED EXACTLY the same. I walked it, reacquainting myself with where everything was. The teacups I bought were still in the cabinet. It was funny.

“Weird right?”

I looked around, then back at him. “Yeah,” I said, looking at all the same framed pictures on the shelves next to the TV.

“Take your jacket off.”

I threw it on the couch and continued my inspection.

“You want some water or something?”

“No but I appreciate the concern for my sobriety.”

He chuckled before he crossed the room and reached for me, cupping my face in his hands.

“What are we doing here Sam?” I said softly. “It’s too late.”

“It’s never too late.” He smiled into my eyes, his fingers sliding over my jaw, my lips. “Can I kiss you before I put you in my bed?”

“What?” I pulled away from him but he moved with me, hands fisted in my shirt.

“I want you,” and his voice was husky, filled with need.

“Well you can’t have me.” I told him and even to myself I sounded pitiful. There was no power behind my words. The promise was empty.

“Oh no?” he asked, his strong hands gentle as they slipped over my throat.

“No,” I said again, making no attempt to move an inch away from him. “It’s too late.”

“Is it?” His voice was so low; I felt my chest heave just looking at him.

“Yes.” I protested weakly, and I couldn’t even imagine how lame I sounded.

“You’re lying.” He smiled slyly. “You’re hard for me right now.”

I lifted my chin to protest and his mouth came down and covered mine. I trembled in his arms because the kiss sent a charge straight to my groin. He burned me up and I was reminded that the man really knew how to kiss me. No one before or since had been able to deliver a kiss that I could feel race through my entire body like liquid heat. It was annihilating, all that desire and passion directed at me, he was so big and strong; the force of him overwhelming as he crushed me in his arms and kissed me hard and deep. I wasn’t passive; I tangled my hands in his hair as the sensations raced through my body. I ravaged his mouth. When I thought my head was going to explode, I broke the kiss to take in some air.

“Jesus you taste good,” he panted, his forehead against mine.

I put my hands on his chest and tried to push him back away from me. He didn’t budge.

“Baby,” he breathed against my mouth, his hand under my chin, his thumb on my bottom lip, sliding over it. “Kiss me again.”

And it was useless not to because I wanted to so badly. I burned for him so I lifted my chin and his mouth was on mine, sucking, biting, kissing, claiming my lips. He swept his tongue inside my mouth and I hit the front door before I realized he’d been moving me backwards into it.

“Better,” he growled. “Now I’ve got you.”

I shivered with just the sound of his voice as he kissed his way down my throat to my collarbone.

“Can’t wait,” his voice was so low, so full of need.

“Sam,” I got out. “Maybe we should slow—”

He grabbed hold of my shirt and yanked it open. I heard the buttons as they bounced off the floor. His mouth was all over me, my chest, my nipples, down over my abdomen, biting, licking, and leaving a wet trail that made me shiver when the air hit it.

“God baby your skin,” he groaned out, his hands on my belt buckle, fumbling with it fast, before moving to the snap of my jeans and my zipper.

“Sam...I...”

My jeans went down, my briefs following. His effect on me obvious, I moaned loudly as he knelt in front of me, hands on my hips, and took me inside his hot mouth, swallowing me down his throat. I was frozen to the door, my hands and fingers splayed behind me as the desire tore through me. I wouldn’t last, couldn’t last, too turned on from earlier, this now a continuation of foreplay he had begun in the street.

“Sam,” his name coming out as a whimper as I stared down at him.

He looked up at me; leaning back to smile and it was wicked and dark. “Gonna make you scream my name. Make you mine all over again. Never gonna leave me ever.”

Like he had to do anything to get that. I never wanted anyone the way I wanted him. Instantly I had gone back to where his touch was like air I needed to breathe.

He rose after long minutes, spun me around and shoved me face first up against the door. He kicked my legs apart and I heard the crinkling of foil behind me.

“The condom’s got lube on it,” he breathed into my ear sending a shiver through me. He nibbled and licked his way behind my ear and then down the side of my neck. “Gotta have you, gotta show you you’re still mine.”

“Sam,” I could barely think let alone form words.

He pressed himself against me and sucked on my shoulder hard. His skin was so hot. When he pushed himself inside of me, filling me, I thought I would die.

I heard him catch his breath, felt his hand like a vise on my hip, the other around me.

“Baby,” he growled into my shoulder before he bit me. “You feel so good.”

It went way passed good. I was in heaven. His mouth was wet on my skin; his one hand stroking me sent waves of pleasure through me.

“So good,” he rasped out. “Jesus J you’re so tight and hot.”

“Don’t stop,” I begged him and I felt his teeth on the back of my neck.

He drove into me over and over as hard as he could and I braced my hands on the door.

“Mine,” he growled, his voice so sexy, so raw. “My baby.”

I trembled under him. Just imagining him fully dressed standing behind me, and me practically naked, the dominance and submission, only he had ever been able to make me do what he wanted. He could be rough with me but he would never hurt me. He was made for me.

“I love the little noises you make when you’re happy.” He licked my shoulder, the side of my neck, tasting me, biting me, all the time thrusting so deep, his hands restless as they moved over my skin.

“Sam,” I breathed out.

“How do I feel baby?” His voice was so low and sensual it shot right through me.

“I missed you,” I answered breathlessly, trying so hard to think.

“‘Cause you love me.” His hand was on my stomach, pressing, me back against him.

“No,” I managed to get out.

“Yes,” he insisted, clutching me tight, his fingers digging into my abdomen, feeling the muscles working.

“I’ll always love you,” I placated him.

“No, you love me. Not like over, like forever.”

“No.”

“Say it.”

“No.”

“Say you love me.”

“No.”

“Yes. Say my name and tell me.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No. I won’t go down this road with you again.”

“You’re already on it.”

“The hell I am,” I chuckled because it was ridiculous that we were having a conversation while he had me pinned up against his front door. Only he and I could ever be this stubborn. “It’s just for tonight.”

“Bullshit,” he growled at me, sliding his hand over my ass. “You’re mine.”

I struggled half-heartedly because I was ready to start screaming right then and there. My heart was pounding so hard I could barely hear him.

“Now, say my name and tell me.”

But I was lost in my body’s reaction to him, all my muscles tightening at once, clamping down, my head rolled back on his shoulder, my palms pressing against the door as I cried out.

“Jesus God,” he roared, as my legs went out from under me.

The sizzling heat raced through me but Sam held tight, clutching me to him as his body bucked and shuddered, so deep inside me that we were fused together.

“Christ...I could die from this,” he whispered into my shoulder.

So could I. The mix of the pleasure and pain was excruciating and intoxicating at the same time. I never felt better than when I was with him.

“Jory...baby...”

I had to concentrate on staying vertical.

He let me go as my breathing evened out and then slowly, gently, turned me around to face him. Not that I could bring myself to look at him since for all my protesting I had surrendered so quickly. I had no willpower at all.

“Jory...” he said before he tipped my chin up and kissed me long and hard. I made the whimpering noises in the back of my throat because I couldn’t help it. He deepened the kiss until I thought my heart was going to burst.

“Say you love me J, tell me the truth.” His breath was warm on my face before he wrapped me in his arms, holding me tight to his pounding heart.

“Sam...”

“Say it,” he ordered, running his fingers up and down my spine.

I looked up at him, bumping his chin with the top of my head. “You know I love you. Don’t be stupid.”

“And that’s why Aaron got a no,” he persisted, his hand slipping up the back of my neck, his fingers buried in my hair.

“That’s why,” I agreed, my voice ragged. I sounded drugged. “I need to—”

“Lie down?” He teased me, easing back to look down at my face.

“I—”

He chuckled. “Let’s get your shoes off.”

I watched as he knelt and pulled off my boots and socks, slid my jeans and briefs over my ankles and then rose and grabbed me, throwing me over his shoulder. He carried me to his bedroom. I hit the cold sheets that he pulled back and he stood there looking down at me as I hurried to cover myself with the blankets.

I watched him strip out of his clothes to slowly reveal the rippling muscles and big hard body that I knew. The man was massive.

He smiled down at me wickedly. “You look good lying in my bed.”

“It’s only for tonight.”

“Whatever you say.” He smiled down at me before he lifted the covers and slid in beside me.

The heat in his eyes made me catch my breath.

“I’m keeping you. If you were smarter you’d get that this is a done deal already.”

My brows furrowed and he bent to kiss the bridge of my nose.

“You’re so adorable.”

I tried to push him off me but he was too strong, his mouth slanting over mine, his tongue slipping deep into my mouth.

“Jory...baby,” he sighed as he pulled back to look into my eyes. “I love you so.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him back down to me. And his weight on me felt like coming home.

“I know you’re scared I’m gonna go away or something’s gonna happen ‘cause our track record is for shit and I know you have no reason in the world to trust me but you just...you have to is all. I can’t be without you. I think about you all the time.”

I just stared up into his beautiful eyes.

He shook his head just barely, brows furrowing like he was dismissing something. “Knock it off. You love me, who’re you kiddin’?”

“Sam I—”

“You’re not gonna love anybody but me you know you’re not.”

“I’m not?”

“Fuck no.”

He was so eloquent. I couldn’t keep from smiling.

“I’ll just tie you to the bed.”

“That’ll go over well with your superiors,” I said, rolling over on my stomach, closing my eyes, my body getting heavy.

His hand slid down my spine and before I could slip away to sleep, his lips followed the same path, and then his teeth. The moan rose up out of me.

“I missed all this gold skin.”

I was so relaxed, so sated, so ready to sleep.

“You gonna stay here with me forever?”

I sighed deeply.

“Good,” he said, his hand sliding over my ass before his mouth closed on my right cheek.

“Stop.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause you’re gonna kill me.”

He bit me hard and it stung before he swirled his tongue over it, sucking and bathing it at the same time. He would leave a huge mark.

“Feel good?”

Of course it did. “No.”

“Liar,” he said and I could hear the smile in his voice before he rolled me to my back.

“Sam,” I gasped out as he slid his hands down my legs from ankle to thigh, holding me down, allowing only for the writhing but no escape.

“Baby you’re never gonna leave me.”

I could only look at him with narrowed eyes as he leaned over to his nightstand and pulled another condom out of the top drawer. He used his teeth to rip the wrapper open.

“Maybe I’m not ready to go again.”

He chuckled and it was deep and husky. “You’re always ready for me.”

Which was true.

“Put your legs over my arms.”

In his bed we moved slower, taking our time and it was as gentle and loving as the first had been rough and mauling. I went from consciousness to sleep so seamlessly I didn’t remember making the transition until my phone woke me in the middle of the night.

I heard it from inside a dream and woke to the reality of it going off in the living room of Sam’s apartment. With him plastered to my back, holding me tight even in sleep, it was hard to get untangled. After several minutes, I managed to get free of both him and the covers on the bed. I staggered around the rooms that were both familiar and alien at the same time and found my phone

where I'd left it. My jeans hadn't moved they were still crumpled up by the front door. It was like a neon light pointing to my surrender.

"Crap," I grumbled before I answered, raking my hands through my hair trying to wake up. "Hello?"

"Jory," Chris breathed out. "It's Chris."

"I know." I yawned. "What's wrong?"

"Dylan."

"Dylan what?"

"She's in the bathroom and she won't come out. We need to go to the hospital—I think maybe she's in labour but she won't...her Mom and Dad are here—my folks are here her sister I—she won't come out and Jory I need you now. Right now!"

"Okay," I rubbed my eyes. "Okay. I'm coming. I'm coming. Hold tight."

I was pulling on my boots, zipping up the first one, when the light came on. Sam shuffled over to the couch and leaned on it. He was naked, clearly not awake and his hair was sticking up in tufts. He looked adorable all sleep tousled and bleary eyed.

"What are you doing?"

"I gotta go."

"No," he whined. "You promised you'd stay here with me forever."

I chuckled, pulling on the second boot. "I never said any such thing."

The noise he made in return was half whimper half moan.

"Sam," I said softly, standing up, pulling on my shirt, realizing it was useless since I could no longer button it. "Shit. I need a sweater or a t-shirt or something."

"I need to get my gun," he grumbled, opening his eyes wide to try and wake up. "A bullet will slow you down some."

"Sam," I said as I walked passed him back to his bedroom. "Dylan's in labour, she needs me."

I was alone in the bedroom for several minutes before I heard him fumbling around behind me. When I turned to look at him, he had his underwear and jeans back on.

"What're you doing?"

“What?” he grunted, scowling at me.

“You’re not going anywhere. Go back to bed.”

“Tell me again who called.”

“My friend Dylan, my partner, she’s in labour and it sounds like maybe she’s having a bit of a meltdown,” I explained, continuing with rifling through the drawers in his armoire. “I need to get over there and help her poor sweet husband before he has a meltdown too and they’re both scarred for life.”

“Dylan called or her husband?”

“Her husband.”

“Okay.”

I found a long sleeved grey t-shirt. I held it up. “Who’s is this?”

“It’s Jen’s or Rachel’s.” He yawned, smiling slowly. “They were here a lot while I was gone.”

I arched a brow for him.

“Not like that,” he snapped at me. “Jen doesn’t bring guys here anymore.”

“That you know of.”

“Screw you J,” he said with mock anger before he suddenly gave me a snort of laughter. “Did you see the front of that shirt baby?”

The word Diva was large and airbrushed on in pink metallic ink. But I would have to deal with it; there was nothing else in Sam Kage’s closet that was going to work. He was six-four, I was five-nine, he was a mountain of hard bulging muscle, I was small and lean, and none of his clothes were going to fit me. It was this or nothing because my dress shirt no longer had buttons.

“Maybe next time you won’t ruin my clothes,” I complained.

“Sorry,” he shrugged but he obviously wasn’t.

I yanked the tag off, turned it inside out and pulled it on. It clung to me but it covered me. “Okay,” I said, raking my fingers through my hair a few times. “I gotta go. I’ll call ya.”

“The fuck you will,” he snapped at me. “Just wait I’m going with you.”

“No Sam you can’t do that. Dylan hates you—you bein’ there won’t help.”

“It’ll help.”

“No it really won’t.”

“Listen,” he said, walking over to me, his hand heavy around the back of my neck. “You’re mine. I go where you go and anywhere that you go at three in the goddamn morning I do too.”

He had no idea what he was even saying but it was very cute and so I wrapped my arms around him, squeezed tight and told him to button his jeans and find a shirt. I slapped his ass hard when he turned away from me.

He muttered to himself all the way back down the hall.

* * * *

THERE WERE HURRIED INTRODUCTIONS made when we arrived at Dylan and Chris’ apartment and Sam was my boyfriend if only for the one night. We all took turns at the door. I tapped on the bathroom door and tried to talk my best friend and partner out of the bathroom. She wouldn’t budge. Her husband was so sweet, I thought Dylan’s mother was going to cry, his own giving him the look like he was the second coming. The door didn’t even crack. Her father tried, then Chris’ father tried and then her sister went with the funny, sarcastic approach. We all laughed, even Sam smiled but nothing from Dylan but her screams as the contractions ripped through her.

“Can I try?” Sam asked me from where he was leaning next to the china cabinet. Arms crossed, ankles crossed, he looked very calm.

“Sure,” Chris invited him with a sweeping motion of his hand. “Come one come all.”

Sam pushed off the wall and moved across the room to the door. He tapped gently and we all watched him, riveted.

“Hey Dylan it’s me Sam. You know Detective Kage. The one you fuckin’ hate.”

I really needed to work on his swearing.

“Don’t you have something you wanna say to me?”

And the reaction was instant. The door slammed open and she came roaring out of the room. “How dare you even speak to him again you selfish sonofabitch! I hate you for hurting him I hate you even more for leaving and I hate you most of all for coming back! You ...don’t... deserve him! Get the hell out of his life you poisonous manipulating asshole!”

The room was silent except for Sam who stepped close and took her chin in his hand and lifted it so he could look down into her eyes.

“Oh ho, the lady’s a tiger.”

She breathed deeply, staring up at him.

“Feel better?”

She shivered once and there was water on the floor beneath her.

Sam didn’t even flinch.

“My water broke,” she said in the tiniest voice I had ever heard.

“Yep,” he nodded, the lopsided grin there I loved. “So let’s go to the hospital.”

“I can’t walk,” she said, looking at her husband, then her Dad, then me.

“It’s okay,” he said, and scooped her up in his arms. Like she weighed nothing at all.

There wasn’t another man in the room that could have lifted her even if he had help. He was at the door seconds later, holding her cradled against his chest, her arms wrapped around his neck, her face lying on his shoulder. Even nine months pregnant, she looked tiny and fragile in comparison to the big and strong that he was. The picture of them together would be forever engrained in my memory.

“J get a trash bag for Dy to sit on in the car and the bag she packed for the hospital. C’mom Chris let’s do this.”

Chris seemed rooted to the spot he was standing in and just stared back at Sam.

“Let’s go buddy,” he coaxed him.

“But I was going to drive her in—”

“I’m a cop; I have a cool blue light and a siren in my car. Who’s gonna get you there faster?”

“Okay you win,” he agreed, rushing around the house, hurrying everyone out as we all followed Sam down the stairs.

Four flights down carrying a very heavy pregnant woman and he wasn’t even winded as he put her gently in the passenger seat after I spread the trash bag. The SUV was huge but all the parents still had to take a separate car. Three in the back seat was all the room there was.

“Why do I need the trash bag?” Dylan asked as Sam pulled away from the curb, blue light going off like a strobe. “My water already broke.”

He chuckled, reached out and touched her cheek, petting her. “Oh sweetie you’re so pretty.”

She had to smile, no way not too.

“That’s amniotic fluid dear that doesn’t stop until the baby’s out.”

“Oh,” she said, looking over her shoulder at Chris. “Did you know that?”

“No.”

She questioned her sister Roxanne and then me. None of us had any idea. When she turned back to Sam she had lots of questions for him.

I was surprised at the amount of things Sam knew about babies. He had himself delivered four when he was a uniformed officer, one in a bank during a robbery, two in cabs and one in the back of his squad car. All his sisters had kids and had recounted their birth stories to him and the rest of his family in grisly detail. He had her laughing as he talked about his sister Jen’s birth video and how it had accidentally turned up at the local video store. When she had a contraction he made her count through it, and told her how well she’d done when it was over.

As we were all climbing out of the SUV in front of the hospital, I felt a hand on my back. I was faced with Roxanne and she was smiling at me.

“You keep that man Jory,” she sighed deeply. “Gorgeous and built like that...God! Those arms of his and the way he carried Dy...Christ. Does he have a straight brother?”

I laughed because basically before me Sam was that brother. Chris caught my arm and pulled me in beside him as we walked behind them through the parking lot.

“I wish I could carry her like that.”

“He’s just big so he can.”

“I wish I was too.”

He sounded so sad and I got it as we stopped at the nurses’ station and they looked up at Sam all doe-eyed and sighing. It was so romantic, the man carrying his wife into the hospital, able to stand there forever bearing her weight, and so gentle as he lowered her into the waiting wheelchair. They were disappointed to learn that Chris was Daddy instead of Sam.

Dylan made them wait to take her as she grabbed Sam’s hand and pulled him down so they were level. His eyes glowed as he looked at her.

She sighed deeply. “I hate you.”

He nodded, tipped his head toward me. “I know. He hates me too.”

“Don’t think we’ve bonded because we haven’t bonded.”

“Okay,” he said, leaning forward, kissing her forehead as he rose to tower above her. I realized then she was still holding his hand.

We all sat down to wait and Sam put his arm across the back of my chair and his hand in my hair. When he kissed my temple before getting up, I found all eyes on me.

“What?”

“Jory,” Dylan’s mother smiled at me. “You and Sam make a beautiful couple.”

“Thank you.”

“You do,” Roxanne chimed in. “And I don’t mean this to be taken the wrong way but he’s very much a man’s man and you’re prettier than most women I know. It fits. It makes sense that if a man like that is gay that a man like you would be his partner.”

I wasn’t sure how to take all that.

“Like I said,” Dylan’s mother spoke softly. “You make a striking couple. He so obviously adores you.”

That part I liked hearing.

Sam returned with hot chocolate for everyone and when he took his seat back beside me, he slouched down low, laced his fingers with mine and closed his eyes.

“Sam they’ll be out any minute,” I assured him.

“It’s her first baby right?”

“Yeah.”

He chuckled. “Wake me when she delivers.”

“Wait, what?”

He snickered, raised my hand, kissed the palm, and then settled back and sighed deeply. I thought it would be like the movies. No such luck.

It was still faster than it could have been and ten hours later Mica was born. He was wrinkled and he had a lot of hair and I could see his Japanese ancestry very clearly. Dylan pointed out that all babies were born looking Japanese. When I looked at Sam as he held the baby, he nodded.

“Okay so I get it,” Dylan sighed, watching Sam hold her son as I sat beside her in the hospital bed. “He’s absolutely beautiful and gorgeous and every other word you wanna use but seriously you need to watch yourself and not get too involved too fast. Go slow.”

"I can't," I confessed seriously. "I'm already in love with Mica."

She rolled her eyes. "Please don't make me smack you I don't have the energy."

"Okay." I smiled at her. She was radiant. I had never seen her look better.

"We both know I'm taking about Sam Kage."

I grunted.

"Jory, honey...please take it slow with him this time."

Too late, I thought but said nothing.

She sighed heavily, her head on my shoulder, her hand in mine. "Thank you for rescuing me. I was a little out of it."

"It was Sam."

"Make no mistake," she kissed my cheek. "You make him like this."

Like she could know what my effect on Sam Kage was. I watched him pass the baby to Dylan's mom and his eyes were on me.

"You know it's really a big deal that he was here with us," Dylan told me. "It feels like he's going to be permanent this time doesn't it?"

And I didn't tell her that I had been thinking the exact same thing.

"What are you wearing?" She had finally noticed the inside-out Diva T-shirt.

"Just never mind."

It was nice to see her laugh.

* * * *

MY EVENTFUL NIGHT ENDED with Sam and I cooking breakfast together at four in the afternoon having been up since three in the morning. Sam checked in at work, having called out earlier in the day and I got hold of Sadie and told her that I'd be back in the office the following morning. She was still at the hospital visiting Dylan and told me that she had checked email and phone messages and had rescheduled all my appointments for the following week. The office was closed on account of the baby. I told her Aubrey Flanagan was coming in on Monday and she responded truthfully that she couldn't care less. She just wanted to hold Mica.

Sam made omelettes and we sat and talked. Afterwards I did the dishes. He passed out on the couch around six and I left to go home and shower and change. I made sure to leave a note.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE KNOCKING ON MY front door brought me from my bedroom in only my jeans. I was surprised to find Brandon Rossi on my doorstep.

“Hey,” I said, pulling my T-shirt on as I looked at him. “What’s up?”

“I called your office earlier and your assistant said you were all out today.”

I was guessing Sadie had routed the office phone to her cell for whatever reason. “Yep. We’re closed due to the baby.”

He gave me a ghost of a smile. “I have no idea what that means.”

I grinned back. “My partner Dy, she had her baby last night.”

“Oh, well give her my congratulations.”

“I will.”

“Your assistant gave me your address, I hope you don’t mind.”

“No,” I lied. I would have to talk to Sadie about that.

He cleared his throat, smiling sheepishly. “Look Jory I just wanted to come over here in person and say how sorry I was about the other night. Adam and I just completely lost track of what we were doing.”

“Sure.” I smiled at him. “Don’t worry about it.”

“But see I really wanted to spend some time with you and Adam he...he’s crazy about that girl and—”

“Adam’s done man.” I smiled slowly, seeing a familiar head of hair appear as he climbed the stairs. I loved his hair, the golden brown waves, how thick it was, and all the colours in it, streaks of copper, wheat, and bronze.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that Aubrey Flanagan is now dating Rick Jenner. Adam needs to let it go.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No.” I smiled over his shoulder at Sam. The way he was looking at me with his dark eyes brought back the night before. I felt the heat in my face.

“Are you okay?” Brandon asked. “You’re all flushed.”

“Fine,” I said.

“What?”

“What?” I was listening now.

“Jo—”

“Excuse me,” Sam yawned; stepping around Brandon to walk past me into my apartment. He slapped my ass hard on his way by and I couldn’t contain my gasp or the smile that followed.

“Who’s that?”

“That’s Sam.” I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “So I’ll see ya round. Thanks for coming by to apologize that was really nice of you.”

“Jory.” He reached for me as I tried to retreat into the apartment. “I want to take you—”

“C’mon Brandon,” I said softly, brushing his hand off my shoulder. “You can see I’ve got company so—”

“So I’ll call you later.” He smiled and turned to go.

“Don’t do that,” I called after him.

He turned to look at me. “What?”

“Don’t call me. We’re not gonna be friends and we’re not gonna date so there’s no point.”

He stood there staring at me. “Wow. I had no idea I only had one shot at impressing you.”

“Bra—”

“God Jory you should put that on cards and pass them out when you meet people.”

“Whatever,” I said, closing the door.

But he hit the door before it clicked shut and it was just dumb luck that it caught my lip and split it.

“Crap,” I groaned, pressing the back of my hand to my mouth.

“Jory,” he said, reaching for my face. “I just wanted to say some—”

“What the fuck is going on?” Sam roared from the kitchen.

It was completely accidental but Brandon wouldn’t even live long enough to explain. I looked at him with wide eyes. “Run.”

“Jory I—”

“Run,” I panicked as I heard Sam moving behind me in the apartment.

“Baby are you...what the fuck,” his voice dropped low, turning to ice as he charged toward me.

Brandon hit the doorframe, bounced off of it and ran. I heard his feet pounding on the wooden floors outside in the hall and then there was silence.

“Sam,” I called him before he could get out the door. “I need you.”

He was back in front of me in seconds, his hands on my face, frowning.

I grabbed hold of the lapels of his topcoat and looked up into his eyes.

“I will beat that fuck ‘til there’s nothing left.”

I chuckled. “It was an accident.”

“What the fuck was he doin’ over here anyway? And how’n the hell does he know where you fuckin’ live?” He growled at me; hand on my throat, so gentle as he looked me over. “We gotta ice that.”

“Stop swearing,” I told him. “And I’d like to point out that you know where I live too.”

“So what? You belong to me. Of course I know where you live.”

I nodded, smiling up at him.

“Shit,” he glowered at me, grabbing and dragging me into the kitchen. Sam’s ministrations were almost more painful than the bump that had caused the split lip.

When he was done I stood and stared at him.

“What?”

“I was going back to your place.”

“Yeah the note covered that,” he grumbled.

I smiled at him before I left for my bedroom to pull on a sweater. While I was fastening my belt buckle he leaned in the room, holding on to the doorjamb.

“You should have woken me up. I would’ve driven you over here.”

“It’s fine.”

“I woke up and you were gone...I didn’t like it.”

“So that’s why you came? Just couldn’t wait for me to come back?” I teased him. “Or maybe you thought I wasn’t coming?”

“No, I just wanted to talk to you and I couldn’t wait.”

“Wait for what?”

He walked slowly into my bedroom. “I like your place.”

“Thanks.” I smiled at him. “It’s bigger than the old one.”

He nodded. “So what now J?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I mean...was I gonna sleep over here with you? Were you planning to spend the night at my place? Were we getting dinner and then doing our own thing? I dunno what’s going on ‘cause you’re not talking. I’ve told you how I want things to be but you haven’t said anything.”

I stared into those dark smoky blue eyes of his.

“J?”

I took a deep breath. “I was planning to pack a bag and sleep at your place tonight if I wouldn’t upset your morning routine too much.”

The light that came into his eyes was very satisfying. “No you wouldn’t upset anything. That’d be great.”

“Okay.” I smiled at him. “Sit down and talk to me while I pack.”

He watched intently as I put things into my duffle and afterwards carried it out for me as I followed him down to his car. When we were inside but he didn’t start the engine, I turned to look at him.

“What?”

“Last night you said it was just for the night...did you mean it?”

I looked at him, studying his face. “Obviously not.”

“Don’t be funny okay? I know this is really fast for you so I’m trying to not push but it’s killin’ me ‘cause there’s stuff I want you to say and...I’m not sure what to do. Should I leave you alone for a little while or what should I do J? Tell me what you want me to do?”

“This is fast Sam you know it is. I mean I just saw you Sunday now its Thursday night and—”

His phone rang, cutting me off. He ignored it, intent on me. I couldn’t. “You better get that.”

He answered while I looked out the window trying to figure out what I was going to do. I was split right down the middle. Half of me wanted to throw caution to the wind and beg him to move in with me, the other wanted to run away as fast as I could. I was terrified to lose him and terrified of getting hurt again. When he cleared his throat I looked back at him. The crooked grin made me smile.

“What?”

“Well this oughta be the clincher,” he sighed.

“What? Tell me.”

“That was my Mom calling to remind me that I’m already late for dinner.”

“Dinner? Don’t you guys usually do the Sunday thing?”

“Yeah but Mike’s girlfriend is a stewardess—”

“Flight attendant,” I corrected him.

“Whatever Mr. Politically Correct,” he grumbled. “I’m just telling you that his girl flies like every Sunday, so the only time to catch her is in the middle of the week. My Mom wants everybody to meet her so...we got Thursday night dinner at the Kage’s.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t sound so excited.”

“No I didn’t mean anything.” I moved to get out of the SUV. “I’ll let you go and maybe after if you want you can pick—”

“Hey,” he said softly, taking hold of my arm, leaning me close enough so he could put his hand on my face. “I’m not going without you.”

“Oh no Sam you—”

“Listen, I know you’re scared to go over there ‘cause what does that mean right? It’s too fast and you’re starting to panic.”

“No,” I lied even though he had hit the nail on the head. “I just think—”

He tilted my chin up and looked down into my eyes. “It’s fast ‘cause it’s right and make no mistake I need you to go with me.”

I stared at him and he leaned close and kissed me. It was so soft and so tender and I tried to deepen it, to draw him down but he resisted.

“You can hurt me a little Sam,” I breathed against his mouth. My split lip didn’t even hurt.

“I already did,” he said softly. “Never again.”

And I knew he meant when he left. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” he said, his eyes absorbing my face. “But I have the rest of my life to make it up to you.”

“Sam—”

He cleared his throat. “C’mon baby get your belt on we gotta hurry.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause my Mom’s making her world famous casserole for Mike’s new girl and we don’t wanna miss the carnage,” he almost cackled.

“That’s not funny,” I assured him, scowling. “Your family is big and loud and scary. Poor girl.”

“It’s a little funny,” he argued, evil smile for me. “And don’t kid yourself, you love my family.”

“I love you,” I said, turning the heater up.

“What?”

Too late I realized what I’d said. And I had voiced it before but not without him asking me, pressuring me. The words had simply tumbled out and I could tell he was very pleased.

“J...what?”

“What?” I looked at him. I was hoping to play it off like nothing.

“Say it again.”

“Say what?” I asked innocently. Maybe he’d let it go.

He smiled evilly. “You know what ya said.”

No chance he was letting it go.

“C’mon,” he prodded me. “Say it again.”

I stared at him and he leaned over the emergency brake to give me a quick kiss.

“I love you.” He breathed down the side of my neck.

I nodded. “I love you too.”

And the smile on his face when he leaned back, so wide, so arrogant, so relieved, so smug, was not to be missed. I had created a monster with four little words.

* * * *

EVEN THOUGH IT WAS Thursday night instead of Sunday, there were enough people there that we needed to park the usual half a block away. With an arm draped over my shoulder, Sam led me through the front yard and around the side of the house to the steps that led to the back door of the large two-story A-frame, redbrick home. I followed him into the kitchen and as soon as I was inside I smelled the food.

“Jesus what is that?” I said, breathing it in. I was almost salivating right there.

“It’s the Mousalia.” He smiled at me. “I told you its world famous.”

“It smells like heaven.”

He winked at me before he yelled. “Mom! I’m home.”

“What did you bring me?” she asked from the other room and I could hear her laughing at her own joke.

I heard so many other voices laughing along with her that all at once I was scared. What if she was mad at me? What if everybody hated me now, what if they had all thought that time away from me had turned him back into a straight man. Maybe their son’s gay lover wasn’t the guest they were looking forward to seeing at their table, for a special middle of the weeknight edition of dinner.

“Sammy get in here,” Thomas Kage called out. “The game started on ESPN already.”

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked me quickly.

“You first.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.” He grinned slowly, devilishly. “You’re the one who’s freaked out.”

“And if I am,” I asked, my voice rising just a little.

He reached out and put an arm around my neck, easing me up against him. He kissed my temple. “Aww baby everybody already loves you. You’re golden.”

I smiled up at him and he bent and kissed me.

“C’m on baby.”

I followed him into the living room.

“Look what I brought you Mom.”

Regina Kage was a stunning woman just sitting doing nothing. When she smiled you saw the movie star magic. When she smiled you got that she was luminous. She was smiling now. Her eyes darted back and forth between us and settled on me.

“Jory,” she breathed out my name. “Oh my goodness finally.” Her breath caught as she rushed across the room to me. She threw her arms out wide and I stepped into her, hugging her tight. “Finally.”

She chanted the word with so much feeling and relief that I felt stupid for even doubting my reception. The woman loved me it was obvious.

“Oh my sweet boy,” she cooed into my hair, rubbing circles on my back. “My sweet-sweet boy.” And then she said something into my shoulder that I couldn’t hear before she pulled back to look at me. “Everyone come see,” she called to the women sitting in the living room. “My boy is home!”

And I looked over at Sam as he shrugged and people surged around me.

Jen came and threw herself into my arms, kissing and hugging me tight before stepping back to introduce me to her new boyfriend Doug Yates. He was nice, had three kids of his own and was a construction foreman. I liked him right away and the fact that he didn’t care one bit that I was gay was a big fat point in his favour. He cared more about Sam than me. He was just as intimidated by Detective Kage as everyone else that ever met him, careful of his size, the muscles and the quick temper. Me he cared nothing about at all.

Rachel mauled me and her husband Dean was very pleased to see me. There were other cousins to see, and the men greeted me with outstretched hands, the cool guy head tip or a yell. The women quickly invaded my personal space. I kissed and hugged them all and they pointed out the main attraction to me, Beverly Stiles, Michael's new girlfriend. She was meeting the extended family for the first time. My heart went out to her. She looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"J," Michael said, smiling crazily at me as he breezed into the room. "Hey buddy I missed ya."

When he was close enough, he surprised me by reaching out and grabbing me into a tight guy clench. "Sammy missed ya too," he said softly, his voice catching. "More than a little. Maybe now my brother can stop being such a prick."

"Michael!" Regina had overheard him and she was clearly mortified.

"Aww Mom you know it's the God's honest truth!" he grumbled at her, letting me go. "He's been a total asshole the whole time Jory's been gone."

"Yes I know but your words Michael, Mother of God!"

"But Mom we both know he should do a helluva lotta ass kissin' or," he stopped and looked at me. "And no offence there J since maybe that's something you're into or—you know—I dunno...but the point is whatever it takes Sammy should just do already 'cause I can't deal with him when you're not around. He's a total dick." He was adamant.

"Michael!"

"Amen," Levi Kage chimed in, walking up to stand behind me. "How ya doin' Jory?" He held out his hand for me when I turned around. "I hope you're planning to stick around this time."

I took the offered hand and was pulled into the same guy clench that I had gotten from Michael. It was the hard handclasp; the shoulder-to-shoulder jerk followed by the sharp back slap. It was slightly painful so I knew it was sincere. I got many more handshakes as many of Sam's cousins flowed through the room.

Minutes later, I leaned over the back of the couch and reached out a hand to Joseph, Levi's brother. Funny to think that I had met all the guys years ago but it seemed like only yesterday. He stepped close so I could reach him and we shook hands.

"It's great to see ya."

"You too."

He nodded, staring at me hard. "Do me a favour and just hang out okay?"

“Yeah I’m going to.”

“No I mean like stick around for a while. Not just for tonight.”

I nodded. It was very nice.

“Seriously,” he said, suddenly so quiet and still. “Sammy looks like himself again ya know?”

I shrugged. “He looks the same to me.”

Michael squeezed my arm as he walked by. “That’s what he means.”

I smiled gazing after both of them as they left the room.

“Jory,” Thomas Kage, Sam’s father, called out to me from over near the TV. “C’mere!”

I moved quickly because you just did as he ordered.

He glanced up at me but only for a second. Some game was on. “Jory.”

“Sir.”

“You stick around this time Jory, all right?”

It wasn’t my fault. “Sir I—”

“Ah!” he cut me off sharply, loudly, leaving no room for protest. “Just do as I say.”

“But it wasn’t my—”

“Ah!” He did it again, and I realized what an annoying sound it was “Just promise me. That’s all I want to hear. I’m not interested in excuses.”

I sighed deeply. “Yessir.”

“Good,” he said quickly and gestured to Michael’s new girlfriend, who I hadn’t noticed until then sitting beside him. “Did you meet Beverly?”

“No sir.”

“Beverly, this is my son’s partner, Jory.”

She rose off the couch and gave me her hand.

“More friend,” I corrected him, smiling at her.

“Partner!” Sam’s Dad yelled at me.

I shot him a look. Now I knew where Sam got his temper.

“You have something to say?” he dared me, finally looking from the television screen to my face. “Go ahead, speak.”

“No sir,” I breathed out, drawing Beverly away from him, turning to look at her face.

“Good,” he grunted like everything was settled.

“I’m so happy to meet you,” she said sincerely, clinging to my hand.

I saw the wide-eyed fright in her eyes and smiled tenderly. Poor thing, they were scaring the crap out of her. I knew that for people who weren’t used to big families, the volume in the house, the yelling, and the way people just came and went, could be a little daunting.

“Same here,” I told her. “So how long have you and Michael been going out?”

“About five months,” she said quickly, turning and smiling after him as he walked through the living room. “And I have to say that this is like the first time I have seen his brother not look mean.”

“Mean?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes,” she assured me firmly.

“How so?”

She thought a moment. “I think the scowling is my favourite. And the way he never speaks to me and how gruff his tone is when he does.”

“Really?” I just couldn’t get over it. “Well you have to cut him some slack. He’s a police detective and—”

“Oh I know all about his job.” She dismissed my argument.

“So you understand why sometimes he can come off—”

“It must be very stressful to be a detective,” she agreed, “I’m not debating that with you. But it doesn’t really explain his mood since I’ve met him.”

“Oh. What does?”

“Well, I thought maybe it was because he was lonely.”

I shrugged. “That would seem reasonable.”

“So I asked Mikey and he agreed with me that we would set him up with some of my friends.”

Mikey? “That’s really nice of you guys.” I nodded thinking how I could get Michael alone so I could strangle him. Set Sam up? Was he high?

“It was,” she smiled sheepishly. “But the second you walked through the door he leaned over and told me to not worry about it anymore.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I think I know what Mikey wants now.”

“And what is that?” *Not to be called Mikey?*

“Oh please!” She giggled. “He was worried about his brother and thought maybe I could help him do something about it. But now that you’re here...he wants you and Sam to be together.”

“You think?”

She laughed because she knew I was teasing her. “Jory, ohmygod, could Mikey like you anymore? Could any of them? My goodness it’s like Christmas around here right now.”

“It’s ‘cause—”

“I had no idea Sam was gay,” she said in a low voice. “Nobody tells me anything.”

“Well he—”

“Holy crap,” she said softly before I saw her glance warily around the room. I put an arm around her shoulders. “There are a lot of people here.”

And I realized that to her we were just talking. She didn’t care for a second that I was gay or Sam was. It was a tiny detail to her, a momentary “huh”, merely something she hadn’t known or considered. In her universe where Michael was the centre, Sam and my situation were meaningless. I loved the fact that no one cared at all.

“Beverly.”

She turned to look at my face.

“Everything’s gonna be all right. It must be a good sign that the extended family was summoned over here to meet you.”

“I guess.” She was unsure and it was clear from her voice.

“No, I’m sure it was.”

“Oh God.” She flinched.

I smiled tenderly. “It’s okay; you must always tell yourself the more the merrier.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So are you guys getting engaged?”

“Oh don’t I wish,” she replied honestly, and I doubt she even realized what she said to me. “No, it’s just he wanted me to meet his whole family and so did his Mom which is nice I guess but...I mean I’ve been here a few times before, met his folks of course and Sam and his sisters but not...everyone.”

“It’ll be okay,” I told her, patting her arm.

She whimpered.

“Why don’t you come in the kitchen and help Regina and I.”

“Are you sure that’s the right thing to do? I mean I want her to like me but I don’t want to push.”

“Believe me, that’s the way to do it. I’ll help you clean the kitchen after the meal is set out. That’s a step in the right direction big time.”

She grabbed my arm. “Thank you—thank you—thank you. You have no idea how crazy I am about this man. I have to make his family love me.”

“It’s easy.” I smiled warmly, speaking from experience. “Just be yourself.”

“Were you yourself?”

I thought about it a minute. “Yeah I was.”

“Did you know you wanted to be with Sam from the moment you laid eyes on him?”

“I don’t know if—”

“Me too,” she jumped to the conclusion even after cutting me off. “I want to marry Mikey,” she confessed. “I’m in way over my head Jory.”

I put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed gently. “Well I think he’d be lucky to have you.” I said supportively, realizing that I meant it. This was a really nice girl. I hoped that Michael was healthy enough to realize what he had.

Beverly Stiles was just a little shorter than me, so just under five-nine with shoulder length brown hair and big cornflower blue eyes. She did her make-up with the heavy black eyeliner on top that made your eye look like a cat’s. The lipstick was pale and lined dark and she had an amazing tan for the middle of winter. I was thinking at least two trips a week to the tanning salon.

“And how long are you going to be around?”

“What?” My mind had been drifting.

“I asked you how long you were planning on staying around.”

This was a very good question.

“I hope for a long time ‘cause I need you.”

“Me too,” Sam said quickly, his voice deep as he walked up beside me.

“Hey.” I smiled up at him. “Say hello to Beverly.”

“Hi there.” He smiled at her, his hand slipping around the back of my neck. “Hope you’re not put off by the volume in here today.”

She was stunned, you could tell. Like a lot of people she had thought she had seen Sam and knew what he looked like. “No,” she gulped, and I saw her pale looking at him.

“It’s good to see you again,” he said honestly, moving his hand to massage the back of my head, his fingers buried in my hair. “My brother looks really happy.”

She nodded and I watched her melt under his warm eyes, his gentle voice, and trace of a smile. She wondered like everyone else, how in the hell he hadn’t commanded more of her attention before. Had he always looked like that? Was she so blinded by Michael that she had missed his gorgeous brother?

“I’ve never seen you look better,” she told him sincerely.

Automatic smile in response instead of the cold disapproving look I knew she was used to. “Thanks. You want something to drink? I’ll grab it for you.”

“No.” I put up my hand. “Let Beverly get it Your Mom will like that.”

“What?” Beverly asked anxiously, turning from Sam to me.

“I’ve watched Regina—she likes her boys to be served, not to do the serving.” I told her. “Really, go in the kitchen and tell her you’re there to get Michael a drink and one for Sam as well.”

“Oh, okay.” She nodded, moving around me fast. “Thanks Jory.”

I watched her go as Sam stepped behind me and wrapped his arms loosely around my neck. He leaned down and kissed my ear as his father yelled for the prodigal son to come into the living room and watch football with him. Like I even did that.

I sighed heavily. “What’s with him pushing my buttons tonight? He’s never been like that before?”

“Ask me what he said every time I came over here?” he whispered in my ear giving me goose bumps.

“What?” I smiled as the heat raced along my skin.

“He said, so dipshit when you gonna go get your boy?”

“Are you kidding?” I was stunned. He called me Sam’s boy?

“Yeah. He’s embraced my alternative lifestyle very quickly.”

“Is three years quickly?”

“More like two,” he said, pressing a kiss into the crook of my neck. “You smell so good.”

“Quit.”

“You wanna see my old room?”

“No.”

“I think ya do.”

“No.” I smiled but I didn’t laugh. It was a victory for me.

“How ‘bout my old bed? It doesn’t creak much.”

“Sam—”

“My Dad is crazy about you. Everyone is.”

I let out a deep breath.

“You’re the only one everybody likes in fact.”

He sounded odd so I turned my head to look at him.

“Huh,” he was really thinking about what he’d just said. “That’s really interesting. Everybody else has a problem with at least one other person in the family.”

I smiled at him as he looked down into my eyes.

“Except you.”

I arched a brow for him.

“Funny.”

But I was likable. Dane always said so.

* * * *

I HAD NEVER BEEN in Sam’s room before and I had no idea why. Maybe because I’d never been invited and to go without being asked seemed like an intrusion. But he had offered so I was there, alone, looking at his bookshelves, at the pictures tacked to the corkboard, at trophies and a letterman jacket hanging by itself on a hook behind the door.

“In case you missed it,” he said from behind me. “I wanted to come up here with you.”

I hadn’t even heard him open the door. “I know I just wanted to see what you were like when you were younger. Where’d ya keep the porn?”

He chuckled and walked up behind me. I felt him there like a wall of heat and when he kissed the crook of my neck, I tilted my head so he could reach more. Instantly, his arms wrapped me up, holding me tight against his chest.

“We should’ve stayed home.”

“Why?”

“Cause all I can think about is last night.”

“And?”

“I wanna go back to bed.”

I felt my heart flutter and I trembled hard. I couldn’t help it; my body just reacted to the sound of his voice, the low, throaty quality of it that just dripped sex.

“Your body was always beautiful but now...” He put a hand in my hair. “Damn baby.”

I couldn’t take it. “Sam,” I barely got out.

He turned me in his arms, bent and kissed me in one fluid motion. His mouth was sealed over mine, his tongue sliding over my lips as I opened them for him. One of his hands was on the small of my back, the other one lower on my ass, kneading, caressing me through my jeans. My hands were in his hair, holding him close to me, kissing back with every drop of need in me. I was hungry for him and he wanted me just as bad.

“Wow that’s hot.”

We broke the kiss, flying apart, both of us facing the sound of the voice at the door.

“Oh don’t stop on my account,” Rachel smiled at first her brother and then me. The twinkle in her eyes was absolutely evil. “You two go right ahead.”

“Aww,” Jen said from beside her. “You guys are adorable together.”

“Uh,” Sam groaned. “Talk about a buzz kill.”

Rachel’s arched eyebrow, Jen’s clasped hands held to her heart and Sam’s scowl—it was all too much. I dissolved into laughter. I loved Sam’s family.

Another groan from him and I could barely breathe.

“He’s so cute,” Rachel said, smiling at me.

“Oh yeah,” Sam exhaled. “He’s a goddamn riot.”

Later on after everyone ate and I helped clean for almost two hours, Beverly at my side making points the entire time. I went and found Sam. He was watching more football with his Dad, stretched out on the recliner and I sat down on the arm of the chair. I felt his hand on my back and when I looked down at him, he patted his chest. I sank down on top of him, my head under his chin, one arm under him, the other draped across his chest. I was so comfortable and he was so warm. I fell asleep with him stroking my back.

I woke up because Sam’s Dad yelled.

“Shhh, you’ll wake him up,” he whispered harshly.

“And so what if I do? Maybe he’ll give me better answers than you.”

“Mom,” he called for her.

“Thomas,” I heard Regina soothe him. “Leave your son alone. He’s done well today. He brought his boy back home and I’m sure he’s not stupid enough to let him go again.”

“Mom,” he groaned, and I felt the sigh come up out of him.

“What do you want me to say darling?” she asked him patiently. “That whatever this boy wants you to do you should do so he never leaves you? Why you left him go in the first place is completely beyond me. Didn’t you know you loved him?”

“Course.”

“But not how much. You had no clue how it would feel to lose him.”

No answer, he simply took a deep breath.

“I knew. He’s the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“Mom,” he began, groaning. “I didn’t leave him. I had a job to do and I needed to keep him safe and—”

“You deny it?”

“Deny what?”

“That he’s the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“No, but I’m trying to tell you why I—”

“There’s no but my love. Before him you were a wild thing with no one to care for you. All those women and not one that could keep a home for you.”

“Mom,” he complained. “There weren’t that many—”

“I prayed for a wife for you every night,” she interrupted him. “And now I know the Lord he heard my prayers, he just knew better than me what was best for you. I understand now because when I see the way Jory looks at you my heart hurts with joy.”

“Okay Mom.”

“He’s an angel straight from heaven.”

“Yes he is,” he agreed, and I felt his fingers trailing through my hair.

“You are so happy when he’s with you. Everyone said to me tonight, Regina your son is radiant.”

“I’m sure they did Mom.”

“Sarcasm is not lost on me Samuel.”

“Christ.”

“Sam!”

“Sorry—sorry, I just—”

“Be quiet. Just sit there and hush.”

“How come no one’s on my side?” he grumbled, shifting so he could kiss my forehead.

“What’s your side?” Michael asked.

“That I had to go and—”

“But you’re the man,” Thomas argued in his medieval mindset. “As soon as you got back you should have gone to him, told him how things would be. This is your place Sam.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause I don’t own him Pop.”

“No?”

“You know I don’t. Jory does what he wants to do.”

“And so now he wants to be with you?”

“Yes. I think so. I hope so.”

“You don’t know?”

“I told him how I wanted it to be but...he’s gotta say.”

“He doesn’t say, you say, and he’s here now so whatever you do you keep him.”

“Aww man, it’s not my fault I had to go. I—”

“But it is your fault that it took so long to come back. You should thank God Jory did not find someone new. Where would you be then?”

“Who cares whose fault it was,” I heard Michael throw in. “It only matters that it’s fixed now.”

“Christ I wasn’t in that bad of shape.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain!” Regina scolded him.

“Mom that wasn’t taking—”

“You sure as shit were,” Michael interrupted him. “I mean you know it’s gotta be bad when even Beverly who barely knows you can see the difference.”

“Oh yeah? What can you see?” I heard Sam bait her.

“No, Sam, I only meant that—”

“Oh no little girl, you’re in it,” Thomas explained to her. “Say what you think.”

“Okay,” I heard her voice shake. “I just mentioned to Mikey that you look really good today. It’s like I said earlier, I’ve never seen you look better.”

“I see.”

“Are you upset with me?” she asked slowly, her voice very small.

I pressed against him, squeezing him tight, before slipping a leg between his. I wanted to listen but I was just too sleepy. I kissed his throat and then snuggled back down, my head over his heart, letting out a contented sigh.

“No,” I heard him answer before I dropped off again. “I’ve got my boy back, there’s no way I could be pissed at anyone right now.”

“So what are you going to do now Sammy?” I heard Jen ask.

She must have walked into the room.

“Whatever he wants me to.”

“Oooh that’s a nice answer.” She laughed and everyone joined her.

I woke up much later and looked around the room. Thomas was yelling at the TV and Regina was smiling at me. I turned and saw Michael with his attention on the screen and Beverly sitting quietly beside him.

“Oh I’m so sorry.” I yawned, smiling at Regina. “I missed everybody.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said cheerfully. “There will be other times for you to see them.”

My face must have given her pause.

“Jory?”

“Regina,” I hedged, “I don’t know if—”

“What?”

“I don’t know if Sam and I are gonna—”

“What?” Thomas snapped, turning to look at me and I had Michael’s attention as well.

“I have a job I love and a life and I think that Sam—”

“Since when do I care what you think?” Thomas asked dryly. “I don’t care. It’s Sam’s fault you went away in the first place but if you leave again it’s all on you Jory.”

“Thomas!”

“Regina do you hear what he’s saying? He’s going to leave your son.”

“No that’s not what I’m saying. I just,” I shook my head, rising up off of Sam, awkwardly getting to my feet. I was all tangled up in him and almost took a header into the coffee table before I found my legs. I moved to stand over Thomas. “I’m not saying I’m leaving him it’s just moving too fast and—”

“Wait,” Thomas put up a hand in front of me. “Do you love my son?”

This was a thousand times worse than how I had imagined it. I looked over at Regina and she looked as though someone had slapped her.

“I don’t know if I—”

“You don’t love him?” Michael asked pointedly.

“No, I love him, I—”

“It’s one or the other,” Thomas said solemnly. “Which is it Jory?”

“Jory?” Regina prodded me.

"I just, it's like a minute old ya know? He just comes storming back into my life and...I need a second to breathe. I can't promise you anything right this second."

They were all staring up at me and I felt terrible. Here they were ready to welcome me with open arms and I was on the fence.

"What the hell's going on?" I heard Sam growl behind me.

"Listen," Thomas said quickly, rising up in front of me and grabbing me into his arms in one fluid motion. I was crushed against him as he whispered into my hair. "He needs you and you need him. Don't let something as insignificant as time change your heart. When its right you know and I think you do."

I trembled in his arms and he rubbed the back of my head like I'd seen him do with his grandchildren.

"Seriously, what the hell is going on? Why're you cryin' Mom?"

"I'm so happy. Jory's home."

"Mike?"

"What?" he snapped at Sam.

"Are you crying?"

"In your dreams asswipe."

"Mikey don't curse in your parents home."

"Sorry Bev," he apologized. "I meant to say asshole."

"Mikey!" Beverly yelled.

"Michael!" Regina yelled.

"Sorry Mom. Sorry Bev," he apologized to both of them.

"Oh," Regina clapped her hands. "I'm so happy."

"Christ."

"Samuel Thomas Kage!"

He groaned.

“Don’t take the lord’s name in vain!” Thomas bellowed at his son, finally letting me go. “You stay with us Jory. This family needs you,” he said sincerely, his eyes all soft and liquid.

“That’s such a nice thing to say.”

“I know,” he said arrogantly. “Now this Sunday we’re having deer for dinner. My brother Joe will be back from his hunting trip.”

Eating Bambi. I felt my stomach roll. “Great.”

He patted my face.

“Jory dear come help me in the kitchen.” Regina smiled, getting up off the couch. “Who wants cake?”

I turned and looked down at Sam. I couldn’t stop smiling. What a weird twenty-four hours this had been.

“Baby I’m sorry,” he said worriedly, standing up in front of me. “We can go slow and—”

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Yeah. What’s the point?”

He was searching my face. “But you’ve been such a basket case about me coming back into—”

“And I’m still worried Sam, but what am I gonna do just live in fear that something’s gonna go wrong? I mean c’mon something will always go wrong; we just gotta roll with it this time. I mean I don’t know if you feel it but—and maybe it’s as simple as we’re both older I dunno I just,” I took a steadying breath. “I’m at the job I’m gonna keep ya know and I have Dylan and Chris and friends that have stuck around, and of course Dane and now his wife Aja and...I just didn’t have you and now you’re here so... and I’ve got your family’s blessing...I figure,” I shrugged. “I’m good to go.”

He gave me a crooked grin. “So you’re saying what? You’ll move in with me?”

“No.” I shook my head. “That part we do need to take slow.”

“Then what?”

“We can date.”

He scowled at me. “I don’t wanna date you I wanna live with you.”

“Well you get to date me.” I smiled at him. “You gotta start somewhere.”

"I want you to move in with me."

"Let me explain something to you," I began, "you can keep saying that but it's not gonna change anything."

Just the very corner of his lip curved. "Oh no?"

"Let's see how it goes Sam."

He nodded. "It's gonna go so great, you're gonna be begging me to move in."

"We'll see."

"But you won't see anyone else," he was clarifying, making sure. "I'm the only one you're sleeping with from now on right?"

"Right."

"Okay," he breathed out. "I'll take it, it's a start."

I just looked at him. He'd take it; like he had a choice...the man was hilarious. Of course he'd take it; it was all he was going to get right now.

He put his hands on my face. "You mean it right? There's only gonna be me."

Did I mean it? I searched my heart just to make sure nothing felt weird. I purposefully tried to think of our worst times, but all that came to mind was us having breakfast in the middle of the afternoon. Just the two of us together in his apartment sitting and eating, being together and talking about the events of the night, it felt comfortable and right. There was only good stuff, nothing bad.

"Yeah I mean it," I told him. "And God help you when Dane gets back from his honeymoon."

"I don't give a shit about Dane Harcourt," he grabbed me roughly, and his arms were around me as he lifted me off my feet. "I just care about you J. I'm gonna make you so happy this time. I swear to God."

I smiled, wrapping my arms around him, holding him tight. "What? You love me?"

"I do," he breathed out and I felt the shiver run through his huge frame. "You know I do."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck, yeah."

I really needed to work on the swearing. "Yeah, well. I love you too." I sighed in his arms. "It's exhausting but I do."

“I know baby. I know.”

CHAPTER NINE

I HAD BEEN FRANTIC all Friday trying to catch up and do my job, as well as Dylan's, so that when Sam called and said he was coming to pick me up for lunch I had to turn him down. I was buried and it was a nice change that he understood. He had things to catch up on himself. I told him I would see him at dinner. I was surprised when he showed up at noon with Chinese food. It was really nice and the make-out session on the couch was even better. When I was shoving him out the door two hours later he looked sad until I passed him the extra set of keys I had for my apartment. His smile lit his eyes.

"What?" I smiled back.

"These are keys to your place right?" he asked, rolling them in his hand.

"Yeah. You should have a set."

The muscles in his jaw clenched tight. "Thank you."

"Are you okay?"

He nodded.

"Good," I said, leaning up to touch his face. "Me too."

He grabbed me tight and kissed me hard. Who knew a set of keys could make the man so happy?

* * * *

THAT NIGHT SAM HAD arranged for me to meet his partner and her boyfriend for the first time. I wanted to make a really good impression, but I was so nervous that I did what I always did when I was either worried or bored, I drank. By the time Sam got to the restaurant with his guests and collected me at the bar, the hour head start that I had on them made it impossible for me to be anything but funny and charming as all hell. I was good tipsy and a fun drunk and so people were always torn between worrying about me getting wasted and the fun they had when I was. When I was drinking I was the life of the party and I realized that was how I wanted to be when I met Sam's partner. I wanted her to love me.

Chloe Stazzi was warm and kind and her boyfriend Jason Cozza was one of those strong silent types. That I got him laughing surprised both she and Sam. After that I could do no wrong. We went to sing karaoke after dinner and I got Jason up on stage with me. Chloe fell out of her chair watching us sing *Love Will Keep Us Together* and then dance around on the stage. Sam was

very pleased with me but when he bought the next few rounds, I noticed I had a Long Island Ice Tea without the Long Island.

“What’s going on?” I asked him, trying to focus my eyes.

“You’re done,” he assured me. “You drink too much babe and if I’m gonna stop swearing you’re gonna sober up.”

“Me? I drink too much?”

“Yeah.” He smiled evilly. “Ya do and even though you’re cute as hell we’re gonna cut this off.”

And as I waited for the lecture and the scowl, and waited, I realized that it wasn’t coming. He wasn’t passing judgment on me he was just stating the facts.

“You’re not mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad?” He asked, reaching for my hand and tugging me forward to stand between his legs. “You ready to let me take you home with me hotshot?”

I stared down into his eyes.

“Your face is all flushed and your pupils are huge.”

I was stunned. There was no yelling, no growling, and no threats...just Sam talking to me.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “I’m ready to go.”

“Good, ‘cause just watching you is killin’ me,” he breathed out, standing up, his hand going to the back of my neck, massaging as I let my head fall forward.

I leaned into him and I heard the deep chuckle.

“I love the purring.”

“I think maybe I’m hungry again,” I said, suddenly ready to just sit and talk to him.

“Me too,” he agreed, his arm wrapping around my neck. “Come with me. Let’s find Chloe and Jace and see if they wanna grab a late dinner.”

At the car Jason told me he loved me and I quickly returned the sentiment. Chloe groaned loudly and laughed before giving me a big kiss and telling Sam I was a keeper. Something about me being as big a pain in the ass as her man. I liked her so much. I was glad that Sam had me

meet this partner and it was a nice way to spend a Friday night. I wanted everyone in his life to adore me. I was surprised when they didn't wait for us but instead drove away.

"Wait," I said, pointing after them. "Did you ask them if they wanted to eat?"

"No dear, you did."

"I did?"

There was a snort of laughter from him. "Yeah."

I looked up at his face. "What'd they say?"

He shook his head "They told you no like five times. You never listen when you're fucked up."

"Don't swear." I yawned. "Say wasted instead."

"Fine. You never listen when you're wasted."

I grinned wide. "Chloe liked me."

"Yeah she did."

"Her boyfriend's nice."

"Her boyfriend barely looked at her. He paid more attention to you."

"You think so?"

"Yeah I think so."

"Sam he just—"

"You move nice by the way," he said with his smoky voice and I felt the shudder pass through me just from the sound. "Cold?"

"No, I'm fine."

"I wouldn't get too attached to Jason if I were you."

"Whaddya mean?"

"I'm thinkin' he's done."

"Like how? You think he's cheating on Chloe?"

“Maybe not cheating but you can tell just from watching them that he’s not that into her. I mean I’m not saying he has to throw her down and screw on the floor of the bar but I don’t think he touched her once all night.”

As we walked to the car I thought about what he had said. Could I roll back the night in my head and see disinterest from Jason? I made the argument that some people just weren’t that demonstrative.

He grunted.

“Okay,” I chuckled, “but for example...obviously because we were in a straight club you—”

“Even if we were in a gay club J, which for the record I might never go in...I’m not usually into the whole public display thing.”

“This is what I’m saying.” I yawned quickly. “Maybe Jason isn’t either.”

“Yeah but I never take my eyes off you when we’re out.”

I snorted out my laughter. “We’ve been out all of once at this point.”

He shook his head. “No, even from before...I never take my eyes off you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well for one,” he said as we reached the car. “I like looking at you and for two; if someone other than me tries to get close to you without my permission then we’ve got a problem.”

“Whatever,” I chuckled.

“We both know it’s true.”

I let him open the door for me and as I climbed in he went around. I leaned across his seat to unlock the driver’s side door and then put on my seatbelt.

“That’s nice you know?”

I turned to look at him. “What?”

“That you always unlock the door.”

I smiled at him. “It’s common courtesy.”

“To some people it is.”

I nodded. I needed to accept compliments better.

“Okay,” he said as he pulled the car away from the curb. “About Jason, I know it’s different when it’s new and you’re hot for each other twenty-four seven, but I can’t imagine that there will ever come a time when I’m sitting with you and don’t feel the need to touch you. I think when you’re in love, even over time that you still like that physical contact with the other person.”

I nodded my agreement because he had just told me he loved me again.

“So ya know he doesn’t need to maul Chloe in public but you’d think he’d at least wanna stand close to her or make sure no other guy was hittin’ on her.”

“Maybe he figures since she’s a cop she can take care of herself.”

“He’s still a guy he should at least get jealous.”

I shook my head.

“Okay so you disagree but I know people. He’s not into her.”

“Maybe not.”

He let out a long breath. “It’s probably been hard on the guy ya know?”

“Hard how?”

“Hard to be alone so much.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“All the long hours J. Being the spouse or partner of a cop is a rough gig. You hardly ever see them and you worry all the time if this is gonna be the day that they don’t come home. I mean most people don’t have the potential to die every day when they go to work unless they’re in the military or something.”

I turned to look at him. “This is all very comforting.”

He chuckled and his hand went to my leg. “C’mon J you knew it was like this. I mean as much as I can I’ll be around but the whole home every night deal ain’t gonna be me. You’re gonna have a lot of time alone and during that time I don’t want you out drinkin’.”

“What?” Talk about a weird transition.

“You heard me.”

“I don’t drink every night Sam.”

“Yeah but when you do drink you drink too much.”

I scoffed at him. "I'm a social drinker."

"Not anymore. We're gonna skip this scene for a while."

I grunted. "Like you get to say what I do."

"Oh I get to say," he said smugly, reaching out to slip his hand under my chin, draw me close to him. "Remember who you let back in your life J."

I lifted my chin out of his hand and sat there scowling at him.

"You are fuckin' adorable."

"Stop swearing," I grumbled at him as he laughed at me.

* * * *

AS I SAT ACROSS from him at the diner, slouched down in the booth, I was struck by how easily we had both fallen into our old patterns. Back together for not even two full days and acting like we had never been apart. It was a little overwhelming but I was trying not to dwell on it and freak out.

"What are you thinking about?"

I needed something that would give me a second to breathe. "Oh I know," I said more to myself than Sam. "Tell me how many women you slept with while you were gone."

"Why would you wanna know that?"

"Because I do."

"Fine," he shrugged. "None."

"Any guys?"

"Yeah."

"How many?"

"I dunno, a few."

It was irrational but I was very happy.

"Why are you smiling that makes no sense at all?"

“I just didn’t wanna be the only guy you ever slept with Sam.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Cause if I was you’d always be curious about what it would be like with other men. This way you know.”

“Yep I know.”

“And what do you know?”

“That it’s not the same as sleeping with you.”

I stared at him, my gaze unwavering. “It’s not?”

“No J.”

“How come?”

“It was just sex J. I fucked those guys and left. They were all one night stands.”

“You ever let any of them top Sam?”

“What? Oh fuck no.”

“Don’t—”

“Swear I know. Whatever.”

“I was just wondering.”

“It’s not me J; it’s not how I’m built. That will never happen.”

“Okay.”

“Why? Do you have the urge to fu— do me?”

“Nice save,” I teased him.

“Answer the question.”

“No Sam,” I told him sincerely. “I don’t have the urge to do you. That’s not how I’m built.”

“Have you ever?”

“What? Topped anyone?”

“Yeah.”

“Lots of times.”

“And you didn’t like it?”

“No I didn’t.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I let out a breath. “So these other five guys...did you—”

“I fucked them and forgot them J. End of story.”

“Really. Simple as that?”

“Simple as that.”

“Did you use protection?”

“No J, I just fuck around without a condom,” he snapped irritably, shooting me a look like I was an idiot.

“Sorry it was just a question.”

“A stupid one,” he qualified, still scowling.

“Okay, now I know.”

“Like I would ever do that with some stranger.”

I smiled down at the table because he was so indignant.

“I didn’t spend the night with any of them.”

I couldn’t have said anything if I tried.

“And you?”

I took a breath. “What?”

“Don’t be an idiot answer the goddamn question.”

I took a deep breath. “After you left I was a little messed up. I slept with a lot of guys.”

He nodded. “And then what?”

“Then for a while there was Aaron.”

“Uh-huh. Who else?”

“No one worth mentioning.”

His eyes were dark. Clearly he didn’t like my number of conquests. “Where did you meet Aaron Sutter?”

“Why do you care?”

“Just answer the question.”

“When I was working at Barrington. Dylan and I did some work for his company.”

“What does he do?”

“He builds and manages hotels all over the world.”

“Rich.”

“Very.”

“Huh. And so what?”

“You know the story. He wanted me to move in, wanted me to travel with him, just go places with him and be around.”

“He wanted to be your Sugar Daddy.”

“No.” I shook my head. “He wanted me to be his partner.”

“But?”

“But it was too soon. I wasn’t ready.”

“It was a year later J, when were you gonna be ready?”

“His question exactly.” I smiled lazily, pushing my half-eaten piece of apple pie away from me.

“And?”

“And I dunno. I liked him, I enjoyed being with him—we had a lot of fun...I dunno.”

“You know.”

I did and Sam knew me too well to not get it out of me. “He wants me to be what he wants me to be and I don’t feel like changing just to please him.”

“Nobody can change anybody else, it’s not possible.”

We were in complete agreement on this one point.

“Was he good in bed?”

I groaned. “How is that your business?”

“Was he?”

“Yeah,” I answered too quickly.

His grin was instant and evil, staring at me with heavy-lidded eyes. “You lie. He didn’t do for you at all.”

“You have no idea what you’re even—”

“The hell I don’t,” he almost cackled, leaning forward, pointing at me. “I bet he was one of those gentle, considerate guys huh J, the kind who asks what he can do first. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Aaron was—”

“Lousy in bed,” he chuckled, getting up only to take a seat beside me in the booth.

“Go back over there,” I grumbled, pushing on his chest, trying to get him to move.

His thigh was pressed to mine and he leaned against me, his warm breath on the side of my neck, his lips hovering over my skin.

“He was the sensitive type huh J?”

“Yes,” I snapped at him, trying to scoot over. “And a lot of guys get off on that.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” he said letting his voice drop to almost a whisper as he slid his hand down over my groin. He cupped me through my dress pants, and I sucked in my breath hard. “But you don’t baby. You like it when I hold you down and do whatever the hell I want.”

“I like it when you’re gentle,” I corrected him, even as I pushed up into his hand and tipped my head so he could reach my neck.

“You like it gentle after but first you like to be manhandled and wrestled down on the bed. Being thrown up against walls, pinned there, done hard—you crave that and I know ‘cause I’m

the one who gets off on doing that to you. Any guy who ain't strong enough to physically force you to do what he wants doesn't stand a chance of being in your bed for long."

"No I—"

"You need a guy that can overpower you J plain and simple."

"You think you know me so well."

He kissed up the side of my neck to behind my ear. When I shivered he laughed at me. "I do know you and Aaron Sutter can kiss my ass. I'm the only one that can give you what you need. Tell me I'm wrong."

I kept quiet.

"See," he said, biting the side of my neck before he kissed it hard. "There's only me for you."

I wanted to climb in his lap but we were in the middle of a restaurant. "Take me home."

"Okay," he said, his voice husky and deep. "Tell me first, can I keep you?"

"I already said yes." I smiled at him as he pulled his wallet from the breast pocket of his leather jacket and took four twenties from it. I watched him get up and stand beside the table. He looked really good and I had told him so when he met me at the bar in the restaurant hours ago. In his black jeans and boots, dark brown cashmere sweater and leather jacket, he was stunning. You saw how big he was; tall with his broad shoulders, lean hips and long legs. The sweater was tight, clinging to all the defined muscles in his arms and chest.

"Hey."

My eyes moved from the bulging biceps back to his face. "What?"

"Focus willya?"

"Sorry."

"I need you to say stuff."

"Like what?"

"I need ya to say that even though it's fast its okay. Say you're gonna stick around," he said, his gaze locked on mine. "Say you'll wear a ring if I get you one."

I licked my lips and noticed how his attention was drawn there to my mouth. The man definitely had it bad for me. "Sam you—"

“Please J,” he cleared his throat, his voice dropping lower. “It’s making me sick thinkin’ about you having doubts about us.”

I sighed deeply, standing up beside him. “I don’t have any doubts.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ll expect you to be around until you aren’t anymore.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, draping his arm over my shoulder, pulling me close to him.

“Okay.” I grinned, patting the rock hard abdomen as I lifted my head to look at him.

“So move in.”

I groaned, trying to pull away.

His arm was suddenly an anchor holding me beside him. I couldn’t move. “You say we’re in this together, I’ve got keys for you at home...just move in.”

“Sam—”

“Move in,” he was insistent. “I want you to live with me.”

I shook my head. “If anybody’s moving anywhere you’re moving in with me. Your place is cursed Detective.”

A surge of heat fired his eyes. “You’re on. I’ll be happy to move in with you.”

“Wait, that’s not what I said.”

“When can I move in?”

I had a feeling that this was going to be a daily conversation until I relented.

“J?”

I stared up into his eyes.

“I could move in this weekend.”

“No,” I chuckled. “It’s too soon.”

“How ‘bout Monday?”

I groaned.

“I wanna kiss you.”

I smiled at him. He was adorable.

“But I’m just not comfortable doing that in the middle of this diner.”

I made a noise. “Please, like I’m into the whole public display thing either. You can kiss me in the car,” I teased him, grinning lazily. “The windows are tinted after all.”

I watched the muscle in this jaw clench. “Okay. I’ll kiss you in the car.”

And he was as good as his word even though I was much more than just kissed. I was mauled in the SUV, driven to a secluded spot, stripped naked and pulled into his lap. It was where I had wanted to be all night.

* * * *

THE THUMP HAD WOKEN me. I reached for the light beside his bed and the room came into dim focus.

“Where are you going?” I croaked out, finding Sam putting on his hiking boots in the empire chair across from the bed by the window.

“I gotta go to work. Go back to sleep baby.”

I checked the clock on the nightstand and saw the time. “It’s three in the morning. Come back to bed.”

He smiled suddenly and his eyes sparkled in the low light. “I would like nothing better believe me but duty calls.”

“Just go later,” I pleaded, yawning, barely awake and groggy.

“I can’t baby.”

“But Sam—”

“I left you a set of keys on the kitchen table.”

“Okay.”

“You know you could just move in and then you wouldn’t have to carry two sets.”

“That’s very logical of you.”

“That’s me, logical.”

I stared at him and when both boots were laced, he got up and crossed the room to me.

“You know I was thinking,” he said, sitting down beside me, rubbing my arm. “I really rushed you into all this and I didn’t even think about what was going on with you.”

I squinted up at him. “And?”

“And I’m sorry,” he said softly, leaning down, kissing my throat. “But I can’t have it any other way.”

“That actually makes me really happy.”

“Good ‘cause like I said, I hafta have you with me.”

I stared up at him.

“So you really should move in ‘cause you’re gonna hafta start cooking.”

It took me a second to process what he was saying. “I’m sorry what?”

He chuckled then leaned in and kissed me so hard and so deep I got light-headed.

“You cook on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. I cook on Monday and Wednesday and Friday.”

“What?” The kiss had muddled my brain.

“And Sunday my Mom cooks.” He went on like I was following him.

“Sam...what?”

“Yep. It’s perfect. We can’t afford to eat out every night so...I’ll be home between six and seven. I’ll call if I’ll be any later.”

“Okay.”

“So your ass needs to be here.”

“What?”

“Since you need to cook.” He grinned at me.

“I’ll be here.”

He was silent a minute.

“What?”

“Just happy,” he said, his hand trailing down my chest then lower under the blanket, gently rubbing circles on my stomach.

“Me too.”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

The growl that came out of him, pure contentment, made me smile. I understood at that moment how much he loved me, needed me, and truly wanted me around.

“So feed me,” he said, kissing me again, his tongue instantly deep inside my mouth, tasting me, moving lazily because he knew I belonged to him.

I whimpered at the loss when he pulled back. I wanted him to stay.

He rose over me, his hand in my hair before he leaned back down and kissed my forehead. “Stay outta trouble J. I’ll see you tonight.”

I could only nod, I had no voice.

“You know moving in would be so much more convenient.”

My smile came on its own. The man was determined to drive his point home.

“Or I can move in with you.”

“Give it a rest.”

“What? I’m just thinking of you.”

“Like hell you are.”

The bed lifted as he stood up and I watched him go. I stayed awake even after I heard the front door close. Why, I asked myself, was I so damned uneasy?

END OF BOOK THREE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MARY CALMES

Mary Calmes lives in sunny Hawaii with her two lovely children and her long-suffering husband who supports her absolute need to write or die. And while the Yaoi Manga books confuse him, he just goes with it. Working as an assistant manager at a copy shop pays the bills and her Co-workers are always fun and interesting. Someday, maybe, she can stay home and do that which she has always loved since she wrote her first short-story in the seventh grade. Oddly enough, it too was about two men. Some things never change.