



Opportunity knocks once in a lifetime...

Harley Hayes is always looking for a new challenge to stretch his artistic vision. The subject of his first foray into nudes is a vision, indeed: Ryan Morgan. With each sitting, Harley finds it harder to ignore the fact he's falling head over heels for the straight-arrow model.

Their first kiss confirms that Ryan feels the heat, too—for about five seconds. Then he pushes Harley away and bolts.

Ryan is less than proud of some of the things he's done to survive his hand-to-mouth existence. Including model for a gay magazine—and accept money from his female clients in exchange for “extra favors”. The memory of Harley's kiss still rattles the foundation of his sexuality even now, six months later.

When they run into each other at a gallery opening, nothing has changed. The sparks flare brighter than ever, driving Harley to make an offer he desperately hopes Ryan won't refuse. And Ryan is just desperate enough to say yes...

Warning: Contains scenes of m/m intimacy; hot sex on a kitchen table and a man with a body to die for.

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Life Class
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Life Class

Scarlet Blackwell

Dedication

To J.R., my slash partner in crime, for unflinching encouragement from the start.

Chapter One

Men in suits and women in ostentatious jewelry choked the gallery. Knots of people stood under artfully lit paintings, debating their merits furiously. Waiters carried trays of pink champagne and caviar entrees. Thousands of dollars worth of art were bargained on while soft music rose over the chatter, and Ryan Morgan drifted already, his attention not so much on the canvases displayed on the walls, but on the lavish buffet table at the back of the room.

The pockets of his jacket were deep, and he aimed to get two meals out of this, one eaten here and the other smuggled out to be eaten tomorrow. It wasn't as if he wasn't getting paid for being on the arm of a flighty, blonde socialite, but the money he earned tonight would have to pay his electricity bill tomorrow before he got cut off. And summer in Orange County without air-con wasn't funny.

He'd survived on a candy bar and two large oranges all day so far, and his stomach growled. The first swallows of champagne went straight to his head. His current dire financial circumstances weren't going toward keeping the sculpted body on which he prided himself. Not when he couldn't afford to eat.

He lingered behind Anna Smith, the lady who'd offered to pay for his company that night, his bored gaze flitting over the paintings and back to the buffet table. Something caught his attention, and he turned to look. Two women, their heads together and whispering; one of them pointed not-so-discreetly at him. He frowned, not recognizing them. Maybe his fame as a life model and sometime-whore was spreading and they wanted to hire him.

He dutifully followed Anna along the row of paintings, seeing a man nudge his female companion and gesture at Ryan. He frowned again before Anna stopped so suddenly in front of him that he almost ran into her. She muttered under her breath, "Oh, my God."

Ryan's gaze flickered to the wall above her head. Frankly, he could take or leave art, especially the pretentious crap being peddled tonight, even though he'd enjoyed drawing and painting at school, but...

He froze on the spot as he stared up at the canvas.

In large landscape, a man reclined naked on a bed of red satin, face down with eyes lowered. Long lashes shadowed his cheeks, and dark hair was cropped close to his head. The hills and valleys of his muscular body were drawn with lavish attention to detail, the pert swell of his buttocks a thing of startling beauty after the perfect dip of his spine.

His pale skin was painted in the creamiest tones with a stark, black tattoo marked there between his broad, powerful shoulders.

It was this tattoo which identified the subject to Ryan, for he was looking at himself. But the lifelike resemblance had clearly struck many people in the room, because there was a hullabaloo of excitement now, women pressing his arm, asking his name.

Ryan stepped back, horrified, gaze not needing to stray to the bottom right of the canvas for the artist's signature. He remembered only too well sitting for this picture some six months ago, a picture he hadn't expected to be made public in such a fashion.

He turned around, cheeks burning with humiliation, intent on fleeing, and there, standing at the back of the room with eyes fixed on him, was the artist himself, Harley Hayes.

There was a heartbeat of shocked recognition between them and then anger became the dominant emotion in Ryan's confused and indignant brain. He put his empty glass down with a clatter on a nearby table before he stalked across the room.

Harley had finished the painting long ago, and it had remained covered and untouched in his studio for months as he drowned in pain over Ryan Morgan. He'd never expected to see his model again this way, not after so long, and he stood his ground with his fists clenched as Ryan approached. He couldn't help but be intimidated by the other man.

Harley was a few inches shorter than Ryan's six-feet-three, his body lean and subtly toned as opposed to Ryan's all-out muscle, but it was Harley's face people didn't forget.

Harley knew it had been said that more than one straight man had turned gay on first sight of him. He couldn't walk into a room without every person there staring at him. His face was exquisite, like an angel in human form. His lips were full and pink, his nose small and button-like. A pair of startling, amber-colored eyes fringed with lush lashes peered out from behind an untidy fringe of glossy, dark brown hair. This hair was cut close to his neck and fell over his eyes in a manner which might seem carefully calculated to others, but was not. Harley didn't tend to think too closely about the effect he had on other people. He had, however, had six months to think about the effect he'd had on Ryan Morgan, and his heart hammered against his ribcage as the other approached with menace on his face.

"I want to speak to you right now." Ryan moved past him and glared back, making it clear that if Harley didn't follow him, he would be dragging Harley after him by the scruff of his neck. Harley glanced around the room, seeing just how many friends and acquaintances had witnessed this, before he followed Ryan quickly through a door marked *Staff Only*.

In the narrow, dimly lit corridor, Ryan looked almost incandescent with rage. "What the hell are you playing at?" he yelled as the door swung closed. "When I sat for that picture, you never said you'd be putting my bare ass up in a fucking gallery for the whole world to stare at!"

Harley regarded him coolly. He made his tone deliberately supercilious, trying to mask his unease. “I sell my paintings, Ryan, it’s how I make a living, I didn’t pay for your services for nothing and, exhibitionist that you are, I thought you’d jump at the chance of people drooling over your body.”

Ryan grabbed Harley by the shoulder and slammed him into the wall, holding him there, their faces close. “You paid me to take my clothes off for *you* and you alone,” he hissed. “I didn’t give you permission to show my ass to frustrated housewives.”

Harley’s lip curled in barely concealed scorn. “You really don’t have a shred of humility, do you? What did I ever see in you?”

Ryan looked embarrassed. Maybe he’d been hoping this entire unfortunate encounter would pass without mention of *that*. Of the fact that the sittings for the portrait had come to an abrupt end after Harley had made a pass at Ryan.

The original point of the fight had clearly been lost, because Harley could see those memories warring within Ryan before he turned on his heel and fled through the fire exit.

Harley went back out to his exhibition with his shoulder burning from the grasp of Ryan’s fingers and his stomach leaden with misery. A gaggle of people gathered under his canvas of Ryan, surrounding his manager, Nathan, seeming to be in a bidding war no doubt brought on by seeing the exquisite model in the flesh. Harley couldn’t have wished for better publicity than Ryan turning up that night, but he could have wished for a better ending to him and Ryan.

Not that there’d ever been a him and Ryan, at least not beyond the kiss he would never forget as long as he lived.

Ryan made it back to his tiny apartment and found the electric off. The man below him played his TV too loud as Ryan sat there in the dark and brooded. All because of Harley, he’d left without Anna paying him and without any food. All because of Harley, he was remembering being kissed by a man six months ago and allowing it to happen. But this memory had never left his mind; not really. He just pretended to himself that it had.

He groaned, lying down on his bed and closing his eyes, the taste of champagne bitter in his mouth, the artist’s beautiful face behind his eyelids. Damn him to hell.

Chapter Two

“How do you want me?” Ryan had asked him that first day in Harley’s studio at the top of his house, and Harley wanted to groan and utter the truth right then—*on top of me, my legs around you*—having spent the last twenty-four hours possessed by the image of this man since they had met.

Word had got around in his circles about the new model on the scene and his perfect body. Harley usually painted landscapes and wanted to branch out into nudes, not least because he’d caught sight of Ryan at a gallery a few weeks previously, their eyes meeting across the room, Harley bewitched by what he saw.

Ryan came with a ready-made reputation, too, as someone who was willing to stay after the sitting was done for the right price and the right woman. Such rumors didn’t concern Harley, even if he wondered if Ryan extended his hospitality to men.

The first meeting suggested otherwise. Harley’s gaydar wasn’t alarming as he tracked Ryan down to the beach and observed the model covertly for a good few minutes before he moved in. Ryan lay on a towel under the shade of an umbrella, reading a book, a black tribal tattoo stark against his powerful shoulders, his back rippling with muscle. Harley went over, ducked under the umbrella on one knee, introduced himself and said he’d seen him previously at a gallery and one of his friends had told him Ryan was a model and directed him this way.

Ryan had been friendly, shaking his hand, asking him to sit, turning over to sit up so Harley saw the hard curve of his pecs, his flat, ridged stomach and the unmistakable heavy swing of cock and balls in his flimsy swimming shorts as he shifted on the towel.

Harley had swallowed nervously, glad he wore sunglasses as his treacherous eyes roamed the other man’s majestic body and his jeans became tight. Ryan was perhaps thirty, with cropped black hair and eyes the color of sapphires or a stormy ocean. Harley didn’t know what was more attractive, his face or his body, but he did know he’d never seen anyone like Ryan in his life. Anyone he’d wanted to instantly possess. The other’s sheer physical beauty hit him in the stomach like a fist, and there on that beach, as he gave Ryan his address and he agreed to come the next day, Harley was smitten.

Now, with Ryan in his studio, standing before him, asking him what he wanted, Harley started to stammer, realizing he hadn’t actually agreed with the model for him to pose naked and suddenly afraid he would refuse. He knew Ryan *did* pose naked, but as far as he knew, it was only for women. He might feel threatened or even angry at being asked to do so by a man.

“Well...” he said as Ryan regarded him coolly, looking amused at his discomfiture. “I have the...” He gestured vaguely at the bed with its red satin covers, finding he couldn’t even say the word in front of him.

“You want me to lie on the bed?”

Harley nodded in relief and then his throat went dry as Ryan peeled off his T-shirt and kicked his battered shoes away. Oh, my God, he was stripping without being asked. The man was as proud of his body as Harley had heard, evidently not afraid to show it off to a man. Harley wondered if, when Ryan found out Harley had slept with men in the past, he would feel quite so inclined to strip for him in the future. For now, though, he retreated behind his easel and tried to pretend he wasn’t watching the most erotic striptease of his life.

The jeans came off the pert ass and down the long, slim legs, and Harley caught a glimpse of balls as Ryan lifted each foot to take off his boxers. He strode to the bed and climbed on, and Harley saw a tantalizing snatch of dark hair and long prick before Ryan settled on his stomach.

“Face up or face down?” Ryan asked. Harley all but gulped because he’d intended to paint his first nude man face down, but here was Ryan offering to lie on his back, displaying his goods shamelessly.

Harley was torn between the needs of his work and the needs of his perverted mind. Maybe he could paint Ryan full-frontal afterwards, he told himself as he said, “Stay where you are,” to his own disappointment. He watched Ryan settle, legs spread a little, buttocks deliberately thrust up from the bed, dripping sexuality from every pore and sending Harley out of his mind.

“This okay?” Ryan shifted sensually on the satin, and if the voice wasn’t coy, Harley would eat his paintbrushes right then and there. He was sure Ryan wasn’t gay. Was he just a hopeless flirt who liked his body admired by either sex? Did he know what he was doing to Harley?

Harley nodded and took up a pencil quickly, feeling as he drew the curves of Ryan’s body that it was his hand stroking over the hills and valleys of his model.

Harley stretched out that first sitting as long as he could. He took a couple of hours just to do a vague outline and he saw, as the sun started to dip lower in the pink-streaked sky, that Ryan was having trouble keeping his eyes open on the bed, his head lolling forward.

Harley smiled to himself at the image. “Want to stay to dinner?” he asked, more out of a need for the man’s company than innate good manners.

Ryan’s eyes snapped open, his head turning in surprise. He looked wary. Did he think Harley was coming onto him? Ryan’s dark blue eyes softened soon enough, though, to Harley’s relief, and he clambered unselfconsciously off the bed, muttering, “Sure,” as he reached for his boxers.

Harley swallowed as he saw the man in full-on nudity for the first time, his flaccid cock swinging heavily against his leg, bigger in an unaroused state than some men were while hard. He tried not to look,

concentrating on putting aside his pencil and covering the easel so his model didn't see the work in progress.

Maria, his housekeeper, served dinner on the terrace table overlooking the ocean. Harley owned an expensive beachfront property and was almost embarrassed by the way Ryan's jaw hung open as he'd surveyed the grand entrance hall and spiral staircase, the huge airy studio, and now the garden and its perfect view across the tranquil sea.

Usually Harley wasn't embarrassed by his money because he'd worked hard for it since school, but then he didn't usually have someone as evidently poor as Ryan for a guest.

Ryan might have been clean, well-shaved and good-smelling, but his shoes were almost falling apart and his jeans weren't fashionably ripped at the knees, but worn through with age, his T-shirt faded and almost transparent in areas. Harley tried not to see this evidence of poverty because it made him uncomfortable.

The dinner was pasta with garlic bread and salad, washed down with a chilled chardonnay. Ryan ate like he was starving, before he glanced toward Harley and seemed to catch himself, slowing down with a blush staining his cheeks.

Harley smiled to himself and kept Ryan's glass filled. Not trying to get him drunk, he told himself. *I don't have to get any man drunk.*

"So, Ryan," he said conversationally, "tell me about yourself."

They had talked casually during the sitting, the conversation easy enough, but Harley found the model rather reticent, his face always seeming to wear a rather closed expression even though he was friendly enough.

Ryan's gaze darted to Harley's and he paused mid-chew as though Harley had asked him if he wanted maggot surprise for dessert. In the silence which followed, he swallowed quickly and muttered, "Nothing to tell," then picked up his wine and took a gulp.

Harley didn't believe that. "Do you do this full time?" he asked politely.

Ryan's ocean blue eyes narrowed. "What?"

Harley was taken aback. "This. Being an artist's model."

For a moment, Ryan stared at him before he looked away. "I try to do other jobs on the side," he muttered. "It doesn't exactly pay the bills."

The atmosphere seemed suddenly tense. Now Harley could surmise that Ryan took extra money off female artists to pay the bills, not because he enjoyed it. He couldn't help but pity the poor man. Imagine having to go to bed with someone you didn't even desire. "Have I offended you?"

Ryan didn't look at him. He stared straight ahead out to sea, his jaw clenched. He shook his head. "I just thought you were..."

“What?”

“Making fun of me,” Ryan finished. “At my choice of...career.”

Harley frowned in confusion. “I don’t understand. Why would I... You seem like a decent guy to me. I don’t know why you think...”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said abruptly. He tossed his serviette onto the table, his plate empty, and stood. “I should go.”

“You don’t have to leave yet,” Harley said. “Stay for dessert.”

Ryan shook his head. “Sorry, dude, I have some place to be. Thanks for dinner.” He vanished off the terrace before Harley could even offer to show him out.

They hadn’t yet arranged the second sitting, so Harley had to call up his contact and pry Ryan’s cell number from her before calling the model himself.

“Hello?” Ryan answered on the fifth ring, his voice gruff.

“Hi, it’s Harley.”

“Oh...hi.” Ryan sounded awkward.

“I wondered if you were free again this week to come back and sit for me.”

There was a pause. “Yeah. Is tomorrow good for you?”

“Sure. Say three-ish. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. See you then.” Ryan hung up.

Harley closed his phone in relief, having been convinced Ryan would not be coming back. He wasn’t ready to admit to himself that the model had got under his skin shockingly fast since their first meeting. A primal lust for Ryan filled him, the likes of which he’d never known. He might be wasting his time, but that didn’t stop him wanting Ryan.

Chapter Three

Ryan had been trouble at school. He wasn't interested in much beyond chasing girls and hanging out with the coolest kids. Consequently, he left without his diploma and things had gone downhill from there. After he'd had several successive brushes with the law, his parents had thrown him out at the age of twenty-one, and suddenly he'd found himself jobless and penniless on the streets and had to grow up real fast.

He stayed in a hostel in his hometown of Newport Beach while he took on odd jobs. Ryan's problem with customer service jobs, such as waiting tables, was that his temper was so easily triggered. One wrong word from the customer had him telling the diner to stick their meal up their fat ass. He had never heard of—nor did he give a rat's ass about—the motto “the customer is always right”, he informed his first manager.

Despite being sacked from nearly every establishment in the city, he finally managed to save up enough to pay a deposit on a tiny apartment. If you squinted hard enough through the trees, you could even make out the sea. It was a shit hole, but it was Ryan's shit hole.

He tried hard after that, managing to keep the roof over his head, but not the food in his mouth, struggling fruitlessly below the poverty line for years, too proud to ask his parents for help.

One day he saw an ad on the notice board in the local coffee shop for models for the life class at the college. Ryan knew what a life class was, but he wasn't afraid of taking off his clothes. His face and body were all he had in this world. He knew that, and he traded on them frequently.

He went along to the class, and there he dropped his robe and stood naked on a podium while a group of spotty youths painted him, pretending they weren't interested in his obvious charms.

From past experience, *everyone* was interested in Ryan's charms, male or female, and he soon began to realize it was time to use these charms appropriately.

A blonde girl approached him at the end of the sitting as he tied his robe. He groaned inwardly because he wasn't into underage girls and was disappointed this was the best the class had to offer him. She introduced herself politely as Leanna Smith and told him her mother was a well-known local artist, Anna Smith, and asked if he knew about her.

Ryan looked at her blankly because he didn't know the first thing about art, even though it had been his favorite subject at school. Leanna went on undeterred. It was her mother's birthday next week, and she would love Ryan to come and sit for her as a present.

Ryan regarded her suspiciously for a moment. This girl wanted to buy him as a present for her mother. Maybe he should have felt more offended than he did, but beggars couldn't be choosers. The sum she mentioned was considerable, and he duly presented himself at the beachfront house three days later.

Anna Smith was an attractive blonde in her forties, her admiration for Ryan obvious as soon as she set eyes on him. She took him up to the studio, and there he stripped, a little more nervous at this one-on-one sitting than he'd been in the group scenario, bizarrely enough.

She wanted to paint the lot. He sat there in a chair with one leg draped shamelessly over the side and studied the paintings on the walls as she drew him.

Afterwards, she came out from behind the easel and stood before him, and he knew something was going on. "The fee my daughter gave you," she told him. "I can triple it if you'd like to stay a little longer."

Ryan regarded her a moment. *I'm a whore*, he thought. *I'm actually a whore*. And then he thought of possibly being able to buy a new couch as Anna reached behind her and undid her halter neck dress, letting it slide slowly down her legs and pool around her ankles. Underneath she wore a tiny, lace thong, and her body had no tan lines. She was in remarkable shape for her age, although her breasts didn't look real.

She climbed onto Ryan's lap and tried to kiss him. Without thought, he turned his head away. She pulled back and regarded him coolly. "Don't you kiss?"

Ryan didn't know why he'd done it. He was no great romantic. He hadn't had a girlfriend since high school. He had no particular thoughts about kissing either way. Maybe he watched too much TV and just knew whores didn't kiss their clients and, seeing as he was now a whore, it applied to him too. He was supposed to save his mouth for the one he loved. He wanted to laugh at his own ridiculousness, but he was too busy gasping as Anna slid down onto her knees and put her mouth around his burgeoning wood.

Ryan suddenly found his cell buzzing with unknown numbers after that first time. Anna had told all her artist friends about him, and they all wanted him to sit for them. These women all seemed like bored housewives to him, rich and glamorous, and the art decorating their studio walls was no great shakes.

They weren't subtle in what they wanted from him after the sitting, either, and for a time, he went along with it and enjoyed the money. Soon enough, he became dissatisfied when a couple of women called him up and asked him to sleep with them up front, no mention of posing for a painting first.

Ryan was angry. He might have been a whore, but he tried to maintain a façade of dignity and respectability, no matter how farcical it was. He turned these women down.

Shortly after, an incident occurred where the artist painting him came from behind her easel, stepped over to him and blatantly groped his wares. Ryan slapped her hand away. She was scornful and scathing as he dressed and walked out with dignity. Behind him, she shouted that he was cheap trash and he could go back to the gutter for all she cared.

His phone stopped ringing. Poverty beckoned again, and things became dire. His best friend, Jamie, this time came up trumps, providing Ryan with the name of a man looking for photographic models.

Only when he went along to the studio did he find the photos were for a gay magazine, but then he didn't much care who jerked off over him, only that they wanted to. He took off his clothes, pulled a little at himself to get semi-hard and posed for the photographer before collecting his paycheck and going home to spend it on rent and bills.

The photographer passed his name and number on to a porno film director after that, and Ryan was invited to a rundown warehouse where he was asked to strip before several men examined his body from all angles.

"Do you top or bottom? I'm guessing top," one asked him. Ryan looked at him in confusion, freezing his ass off and feeling his balls shrinking with cold.

"What do you mean?" he asked, and the men laughed.

"We got ourselves a virgin here," a second man remarked. "That's hot as fuck. Ryan, do you want to fuck some hot guys for the pleasure of gay men worldwide?"

Ryan stared in horror, going crimson. Slowly he shook his head. "No, I don't..."

The first man clucked his tongue disapprovingly. "Ryan, you're hot, you've got a big dick. You could earn a fortune. And frankly, you look like you need the cash."

With dignity, Ryan started to put his clothes back on. He walked out of the warehouse without another word. As the California sunshine hit his face, a lump came to his throat, and he laughed at himself. How many men would come out here feeling sorry for themselves after having been asked to star in a porn movie? Gay porn, but porn nonetheless. A chance for the camera to worship his face and body the way it should be.

And that was just it. That was all Ryan was. There was nothing else to make money with. What happened when the face went and the muscle started to drop? Already he was losing muscle mass because he couldn't afford to feed himself properly. Soon he was going to turn to skin and bone and drooping flesh, and who would be interested then? He would swap his face and body any day for a marvelous brain, he thought suddenly; the brain of a Harvard professor. To be sitting in a peaceful study, surrounded by books, not worrying where the next meal was coming from.

He'd just turned down the opportunity to make, if not a fortune, then certainly a tidy sum, and he was an idiot.

He bit his lip hard and lifted his head, staring defiantly ahead of him as he set off down the street. He was alive and he had what life had thrown at him. He either got on with it or he didn't. His choice.

A couple of weeks later, working a few hours at a restaurant, he had the misfortune to be waiting a table at which presided Anna Smith, the artist who'd first offered him sex for money. He froze as he got there, notepad in hand, and she looked at him, her heavily made-up face breaking into a broad grin.

“Ryan, darling!” she cried so six other pairs of eyes at the table landed on him, some of them more familiar than he would have liked. “Where have you been, my dear boy?” He wondered why when she knew exactly where he’d been—cast into the ether by her witches’ coven for daring to rebel against being turned into an object and passed around like a glorified dildo.

He didn’t answer, only set his jaw firmly and regarded her with steely eyes.

“Come now,” she scolded. “You have lines around your mouth when you pout like that. It’s not pretty. I’ve missed you. I’m invited to a charity art auction on Friday. Why don’t you accompany me? I’ll introduce you to lots of new artists who, I’m sure, will all be dying to paint you.”

Dying to fuck me, more like. “What can I get you to eat?” he asked stonily.

Anna sighed and rolled her eyes. “Don’t bear a grudge, my love. It doesn’t suit you. Come by mine at eight on Friday, and wear something nice. I’ll make it worth your while.”

Ryan looked away, addressing the rest of the table. “Everyone ready to order?”

He was there on Friday, ten minutes late deliberately, as his one act of rebellion, and Anna answered the door herself in a slinky black evening dress, her lips painted scarlet, dripping in jewels.

“You’re late,” she said with a pout, and he said nothing, only glared. He wore his only decent shirt and pants, both black, with a black tie, which set off his pale face and large blue eyes, his hair freshly cropped so it graced the elegant curve of his skull in fine, dark stubble.

Anna looked him up and down and smiled slowly. “I think you’ll make quite an impression tonight, Ryan.”

And he did. The gathering was a good mix of men and women, all the women and a few of the men riveted by Ryan as soon as he stepped in the door. He stayed obediently by Anna’s side as she introduced him to one person after another, most of the women pressing him with their cards and asking him to call them up if he wished to model for them. It was with relief that he didn’t see any of the artists he’d already bestowed his favors on in the past.

After a few glasses of wine, he managed to corner Anna alone. “Look,” he said, his voice low, “these people, are they going to be wanting...? Because I don’t...”

As he spoke, his gaze strayed to the corner of the room. There, a man of medium height and build stood watching him with a glass in his hand, his glossy, dark hair falling across his eyes untidily. In the room full of people, he stuck out like a sore thumb. Their eyes met intensely for the briefest moment before Anna put her hand on Ryan’s arm, and he turned back to her, blinking, having missed what she’d said.

“I just want to model,” he told her. “I don’t want to be bought anymore.”

His gaze strayed back to the man in the corner, but the stranger was gone. So came about his first glimpse of Harley Hayes.

Chapter Four

Ryan arrived promptly at three for the second sitting. Harley was in his studio doing some work on another canvas when Maria showed the model up. When Ryan came through the door, Harley smiled and put his paintbrush down to wipe his hands on a rag.

Ryan looked stunning again. He wore those battered shoes and worn jeans, with a red, equally faded T-shirt. He was shaved glass-smooth, a small nick evident on his throat so Harley's eyes were drawn to it magnetically. Ryan's hair looked shorter than it had been yesterday, closely cropped so his ocean blue eyes, fringed by lush black lashes, appeared enormous. He smiled hesitantly, and Harley caught himself as he realized he was staring.

He didn't offer his hand because it was suddenly damp. He moved to a bottle of mineral water on the desk. "Drink?"

"Yes, please," Ryan replied politely. Harley poured it with an unsteady hand and held it out.

"Thanks." Ryan took the glass, their fingers touching briefly before he turned away from Harley and walked over to the canvas Harley had been working on. It was a landscape, sunset over Huntington Beach pier, which Harley had started some weeks previously and was now completing from memory.

"That's beautiful, dude," Ryan offered.

Harley smiled in pleasure. "Thank you."

Ryan looked at it for another moment, then he walked over to the bed. He bent and put his glass down on the floor so Harley admired the tight stretch of denim across his ass before he straightened up and, with back turned, pulled off his shirt.

Harley thought he would groan. He moved to his easel and took down the landscape, moving to prop it up against the wall. He lifted the covered portrait of Ryan and carried it back with him. Ryan was barefoot by now and sliding the denim down his legs. *Fuck*, Harley thought. *This is wrong. I have to stop perving this way, or it's going to frighten him off. Why didn't he give me some sort of fucking warning before he started to strip?*

Harley threw the cover off his canvas with a shaking hand, pulling his bottom lip into his mouth and sinking his teeth into it. Ryan's boxers were black and tight fitting and they came down off his pale buttocks and his long legs like a perfect glove. Ryan kicked them onto the top of his pile of clothes and climbed onto the bed, settling face down.

Harley sported wood now as his gaze travelled the luscious curve of the model's spine and onto the twin round globes of his peach-like ass. For a moment, he imagined his face between them, his tongue, his fingers and his cock, Ryan writhing beneath him as he was filled.

That was it. His cock was rock hard and about to split his pants. Ryan turned his head to look at him, and Harley made sure his entire body was behind his easel.

"This okay?" Ryan's tone was so innocent that Harley couldn't quite believe it. Did he really not know what he was doing?

Harley nodded mutely and hid his face as Ryan shifted his pelvis slightly, seeming to slide and thrust a little against the satin cover, his legs spreading farther so the artist could see his balls.

Harley closed his eyes and bit his lip until he tasted blood, his heart hammering, his stomach sending flames of desire to his groin. *Oh, he knows what he's doing, how can he not? Maybe he does this to every artist in the hope they'll offer him money to sleep with them. It would serve him right if I went over there right now and put my tongue in that ass. I bet he'd stop teasing me then.*

His breathing came fast as he held his pencil up to the canvas and tried to focus on it, his gaze straying back unbidden to Ryan once more. The model turned his head away, looking absently out of the window, perfectly still. *He doesn't know*, Harley thought with a start. *He's not teasing me after all. He's just naturally sexual like this.* And strangely, his heart sank in disappointment. As much as it titillated Harley to imagine Ryan was putting on some sort of performance for him, the truth was, the straight model was oblivious to Harley's desire for him.

He took some deep breaths and steadied his hand, then he focused his attention on Ryan's profile instead of his ass and tried to be the professional he knew at times he could be. Without doubt, Harley's nude was going to make him a fortune if he didn't get distracted in falling for his model.

But Ryan seemed to be the distracted one. He still gazed out the window, and his mouth moved like he would speak before he closed it again firmly as though to keep the words inside.

Harley shaded a cheekbone, defined the sensuous lips a bit more, waiting for the other man to break the silence, which, after a few minutes, he did.

"Look, about yesterday..." Ryan finally glanced over at him, and their eyes met. His long fingers plucked a little at the satin cover. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"You weren't." Harley's voice was soft.

Ryan swallowed and licked his lips. "I was. I don't want you to think I wasn't grateful for your hospitality."

Surprised, Harley contradicted him. "I didn't think that." What surprised him more was how tender and damn near affectionate his voice sounded to his own ears.

Ryan sighed. "Well, I did, and I was wrong. I'm not all that keen on talking about myself, and I'm not used to people asking. I'm sorry."

Taken aback, Harley said quietly, "It's okay." Their eyes met for another second before Ryan looked away.

Harley regarded him silently. The cool, aloof man had shown a chink of vulnerability in his armor. Now Harley liked him even more. He smiled.

It was another hour before Ryan said, "Can I use the bathroom?"

Harley nodded, and Ryan hoisted himself up off the bed. Shamelessly, he walked right past him naked, cock and balls swinging gently, disappearing into the ensuite at the back of the room.

Harley put a hand to his forehead. *Control yourself*, he told himself fiercely. He would have to hurry the painting rather than stretch it out further, or he was going to end up obsessed beyond all reason with a man who would never reciprocate his feelings. But he didn't think he could bear to hurry Ryan's exit from his life.

His eyes focused on the battered Converse shoes lying by the couch, and his thoughts drifted a moment. Casting a glance toward the bathroom door, he moved over to them, bent and picked one up, reading the size from the sole of the shoe.

Chapter Five

The third sitting was a week later. Ryan wondered why Harley was taking so long when his previous artists had always got him done in one sitting. But then maybe that was because they screwed him first sitting and were tired of him by the second. At least he knew that wasn't going to happen with Harley. The artist was a good guy. He was friendly and generous, no airs and graces about him as often came with money, paying Ryan a decent amount and inviting him to stay again that second time for dinner. Ryan felt more at ease with him than he had with anyone for a long while. It was just a shame that the gulf in class between them meant they would never be friends. He liked the man's company. Harley didn't make him feel like a second-class citizen the way some of his other clients had. And when he went to Harley's house, it was a relief not to have to wonder if he could get it up, let alone sexually satisfy the person who was paying him.

Harley was down on the terrace when Maria showed Ryan through. He sat facing the ocean, with a tall glass of amber liquid in his hand, a jug of the same in front of him on the table.

His face lit up when he saw Ryan, a smile crossing it, showing perfect teeth. "Hey. Sit down."

Ryan did so, smiling back, pushing his sunglasses into place.

"Iced tea?" Harley asked.

Ryan nodded and thanked him when he poured it. The tea tasted of peaches and was ice cold on his parched throat. It'd been a difficult morning. The money from the few shifts he'd managed at the restaurant wouldn't be due until next week. He was a month behind on his rent again and almost out of food.

He should be grateful he was a man of simple tastes and didn't smoke, drink to excess or shoot up drugs, he thought as he stared out across the ocean, like most other people living in his building. He couldn't afford to have an addiction. He could go to Jamie, who always subbed him, but Jamie was normally in difficult financial straits himself, and these days Ryan hesitated to do it, even though his friend would probably give him his last penny.

He glanced at Harley, taking in the graceful lines of his profile before he looked away and wondered if he would get fed before he went home.

"Are you okay?" Harley's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Yeah," Ryan replied. "Why?"

"You're quiet today."

Ryan was always quiet. He didn't believe in filling silences unnecessarily when he had nothing to say. He didn't see what was so different about today for Harley to have noticed, but the artist was kind of intuitive.

"I've got a few things going on," he mumbled, taking another drink.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

Ryan turned his head to look at him. Harley's amber eyes were hidden by sunglasses too. "No."

"Okay," Harley countered softly. "Well maybe I can cheer you up with the present I've got for you, then." He stood and went back into the house, leaving Ryan watching him in bemusement.

Harley's study was through there, a bright room lined with bookcases, a desk with a computer in one corner. The artist came back with a brightly colored paper bag and handed it to Ryan.

Ryan frowned as he took it. "What's this?" he asked, seeing an oblong box inside.

"Open it and see," Harley replied. He sat again, smiling.

Ryan stared into the bag a moment in confusion. Was this a present? People didn't buy him presents. At least not without wanting something in return. Was this some kind of bribe?

He pulled out the box and set it on his knee, noting the Converse logo upon it. He slowly lifted the lid to see the blue and white shoes within. His mouth opened silently, and he looked across at Harley with the frown still on his face.

Harley stumbled over his words. "I...saw them when I was at the mall and...realized you had a pair the same so...I bought them for you." He bit his lip, studying Ryan's face earnestly. His sunglasses were off, his eyes like honey in the bright sunlight.

Ryan looked at the shoes again and then at Harley once more. He couldn't stop a feeling of suspicion creeping over him, and it must have shown all over his face because Harley all but withdrew into himself, looking very unhappy.

"It's not..." Harley began and stopped.

"It's not what?" Ryan demanded, his voice unintentionally hard. "What I think? If it isn't what I think, then tell me what it is."

"I just..." Harley seemed cowed and chastened before him, this normally laid-back, cheerful man. "Wanted you to have some new shoes," he offered helplessly.

Ryan lifted his own sunglasses slowly so he could look into the other man's eyes. "So you didn't do it so I would be..." He hesitated, choosing the right word, "Beholden to you?"

Harley's face suddenly lost the meek look and turned ice cold. He stood abruptly, looking down at Ryan. "*Beholden?*" he repeated. "That's what you think? That I would try to *buy* you into my bed?" He laughed mirthlessly. "If you allowed yourself to be bought with a pair of shoes, Ryan, that makes you pretty damn cheap."

Ryan surged to his feet, hurling the box onto the ground, all the anger and injustice and shame at his whoring career rising to give vent for the first time at the wrong person. He squared up to Harley, taller than the other man, staring him down, fist clenched. At that moment, it would have felt way too good to punch him, and it didn't help that Harley didn't back down, his eyes blazing almost yellow, pupils constricted to a pinprick in the bright sunshine, the sea breeze blowing his dark hair over them.

Ryan abruptly regained control of himself. He stormed off the terrace before he could hit Harley.

He made his way through the study to the entrance hall with the red mist over him, putting his hand up to wrench open the front door before he heard running footsteps behind him.

A hand slid under his arm then slammed against the door to prevent him opening it, while another wrapped around his bare biceps, clenching it hard. Ryan came to a halt and looked over his shoulder.

"Please, Ryan." Harley was breathless, his face full of anxiety. "I just wanted you to have some new shoes, that's all. I swear I had no ulterior motive. I'm not some pervert trying to seduce you. Believe me."

There was a moment's silence during which Ryan became uncomfortably aware of the heat of the fingers curled around his arm. "Let go of me," he warned.

Harley did so, moving back so Ryan could pull open the door. He slid through it without a backward glance and set off down the drive.

Ryan lay sleepless in bed that night, replaying the scene over and over in his mind, appalled at his behavior. Jesus, he'd almost hit Harley. What was wrong with him? Had he got it all out of perspective? Were the shoes an innocent gift, while his suspicious mind told him everyone was trying to use him for their own ends?

Now he'd calmed down, he began to see how he'd ruined his chances for any more work, and hence money, from Harley. Then he began to think about the worst case scenario if the shoes were not an innocent gift. That Harley wanted to fuck him. Was he even gay? He didn't seem that gay to Ryan. That aside, what if Harley *did* want to fuck him? He had to remind himself that, so far, the dude had paid him as much per sitting as some of his female clients had paid to *screw* him, so imagine how much he would offer Ryan to fuck him?

He squeezed his eyes shut at this thought and sighed into the darkness. That it had come to this. After he'd turned down an offer to star in a gay porno movie, he was now wondering how much Harley would offer him to sleep with him. What was the matter with him? Had he no dignity at all left?

In the morning, things were a little clearer. What was clear was that Ryan was an asshole and you didn't bite the hand that feeds you. Yesterday he could have earned another tidy sum for taking his clothes off for Harley and come back with some new shoes in the bargain. Instead, he'd walked out with nothing.

He was the biggest fool who ever lived, and pride did not pay the bills. Doing whatever you had to do to earn money paid the bills.

He searched for Harley's name in his cell address book and called him.

"Hi," Harley said quietly after a few rings.

"Hi. Listen..." Ryan's throat dried up before he could even apologize. He felt like he was always apologizing for being an asshole to Harley. He wondered why the other man even wanted him around. "If you still wanted me to...I could...sit for you today."

Harley took a moment to reply, and for a minute Ryan expected him to tell him to go to hell.

"Sure," he said finally. "Come by whenever you're ready." He hung up.

Ryan closed his cell and gave a sigh of relief.

Chapter Six

Harley paced the floor after Ryan's call, replaying it in his head. When he thought of the words he'd spoken to Ryan the previous day, he blushed with shame. He'd given away with ease that he knew the rumors of Ryan's whoring on the side, and Ryan must now know the truth: that Harley was preoccupied with these rumors and that he was hot for him. But clearly Ryan had known anyway, before this. That word he'd used. *Beholden*. He was under no illusions about their working relationship, try as Harley might to hide his attraction, and Ryan didn't return it, judging by the fact he'd almost hit Harley. Jesus. How could he ever face Ryan again?

He couldn't concentrate on any work. Instead he took a novel down to the living room and laid full length on the couch, enjoying the stillness the peaceful location of his house gave him. All he could hear were seagulls and the gentle swell of the ocean, and he'd barely read a page before his eyes became heavy. He let the book drop face down onto his chest and allowed his lids to close.

Something woke him up: a feather-light touch on his face beneath his eye, and he stirred, a hand coming up instinctively in his sleep, thinking a spider had crawled onto him. He came back to consciousness quickly and he opened his eyes to see Ryan kneeling by the couch, looking down at him. He blinked in confusion.

"Sorry," Ryan said. "You had an eyelash."

Harley regarded him in surprise. Ryan reddened and looked away, his gaze straying to the box under the coffee table.

"You've still got them." Ryan gestured to the shoes.

"Yeah." Harley stretched a little, feeling groggy. "They're too big for me. I could give them to my manager. He's big like you. Or I'll take them to the thrift store."

Ryan glanced at him before his gaze swept back to the box. "I could...have them if..." he mumbled. He sat back on his heels as though he was aware he was too close to Harley.

Harley lifted himself on one elbow, regarding him. "Do you want them?"

Ryan bit his lip, as though the decision tortured him, before he nodded.

"Then take them, idiot." Harley gave an affectionate smile. Ryan's gaze moved back to his, and he smiled hesitantly in return, a smile which contained the apology Harley doubted Ryan could bring himself to make. Which was fine by him because, as far as he could see, Ryan was a troubled, lonely man, and

Harley didn't want to make his life any harder than it was. He wasn't one to bear a grudge, and besides, with those ocean blue eyes looking at him with such warmth in them, how could he bear a grudge anyway?

Ryan reached for the box and took off the lid. He brought out one shoe, holding it up, admiring it with almost child-like excitement. Then he smiled to himself and sat, stretching out his long legs and reaching down to unfasten and pull off his battered shoes.

Harley tried not to look too closely at the faded black socks he wore, a hole in the toe of one and the heel of the other. *Should have got him socks too*, he thought with an inward, rueful smile. Ryan slid his feet into the shoes and laced them up and then he stood and walked around the living room, admiring his feet, preening and smiling to himself.

Harley watched him with fascination. Without doubt he could buy Ryan a present every day of the year if it meant seeing a smile like this. Ryan glanced over at him and looked bashful. "I'll go upstairs and get stripped off," he said apologetically, as though he were wasting Harley's precious time.

Harley's blood ran hot in his veins. He'd much prefer it if Ryan got naked right then and there and crawled onto the couch with him. That would suit him just fine.

"Shall we eat first?" he asked, lazy, aroused and disinclined to go up to the studio at that moment and battle his desire to make a pass at Ryan. He could control himself so much better if Ryan had his clothes on.

"Sure," Ryan said easily. "I *am* kind of hungry."

Harley nodded and swung his legs off the couch. "I'll just go see Maria. Make yourself at home."

Maria was bustling about the kitchen busily. "My...model...Ryan," Harley stumbled over how to refer to the other man, "is staying to dinner, if that's okay."

Maria smiled back, eyes bright. "Already accounted for him." She winked audaciously as she stirred a sauce in a pan. "He's so beautiful, Harley," she sighed. "Is he married?"

Harley frowned because that was something he'd never thought to ask. But Ryan didn't wear a ring. "I don't think so," he mumbled.

Maria continued to smile. "You like him, don't you?"

Harley felt blood rise to his face in a rush. His gaze moved to the door. It was pointless trying to deny it. She wasn't stupid. "He's my model," he told her sternly.

Maria snorted in derision. "He's up there taking his clothes off every day and you're telling me you *wouldn't*?"

If anything, Harley's face grew hotter. "Shush, Maria."

Maria grinned. "You're a lucky, lucky man, Harley. I hope he likes you too."

Harley didn't reply to that, because it really was wishful thinking.

They took their meal in the living room, in front of the TV, plates on their laps, Harley thinking Ryan would enjoy the informality of it rather than the best china in the dining room with the ostentatious chandelier. Ryan *did* seem to enjoy it, clearing his plate then polishing off a large slice of chocolate cake, earning a look of approval and a fond pat on the head from Maria as she served the coffee.

Harley yawned. He was starting to feel tired and in no mood to start work so late in the evening. And besides, twilight gathered rapidly outside. He couldn't paint a person's skin—Ryan's creamy, perfect skin—by artificial light.

"Ryan," he murmured, and the other man turned his head from the opposite couch. "I don't think I'm going to paint you today. I'm kind of tired. I'm really sorry for wasting your time. I'll still pay you."

If he'd expected Ryan to be angry, he'd underestimated the man. Ryan shrugged and yawned. "I'm tired too. I didn't sleep so good last night, and I've got to say, I'm not much in the mood for getting naked for you." Now that was a crying shame, Harley thought wistfully. "But seriously, you've just fed me. I don't expect you to pay me when I haven't done any work."

Harley smiled in relief. "Want to watch a movie?"

Ryan's face broke into a grin which made his eyes glitter, and his gaze strayed to the vast towers loaded with discs to his left. "Definitely."

Harley channel flicked while Ryan chose. At first they argued over who was choosing, Ryan refusing, saying it was Harley's house and he should choose, but finally giving in. He stood at the shelves perusing the movies in silence for a few minutes, breaking it occasionally with various exclamations of, "No way have you got..." and "Oh, my God, I love this..." to Harley's amusement. He'd found one thing they had in common. Who said there was a gulf between them, that Ryan wouldn't look twice at him? But then it wasn't so much the gulf as which team Ryan batted for, and he could bet his bottom dollar it wasn't Harley's.

Ryan turned from the shelf with an almost embarrassed smile, holding up a DVD, and Harley was further surprised. He would have expected a man like Ryan to choose *Rambo* or *Die Hard* or *Scarface* but no, in his hand he held a copy of *Edward Scissorhands*.

Harley gave Ryan a point for the gay camp.

"What?" Ryan asked. "Do you think I'm a fag?"

Harley's smile dropped. He didn't like that word. Not at all.

Harley saw instant apology on Ryan's face as he got up and took the film silently, then bent down to the DVD player. "Hey look, I didn't..." Ryan fumbled for words behind him as Harley slotted in the disc and stood. "Don't think I'm... I mean, if you're... It's none of my business..."

Harley turned to face him with a steely expression, almost enjoying his discomfort. "If I'm what?" Like Ryan didn't already know, after yesterday.

Ryan bit his lip and looked like he wished the ground would swallow him up.

"A fag?" Harley suggested sweetly.

Ryan reddened. He gave a sigh and lowered his gaze. "I don't care, man," he muttered.

"Don't you?" Harley enquired sarcastically. "So if I told you now I batted for the other team, you wouldn't start to feel uncomfortable about taking your clothes off in front of me?"

Ryan lifted his head. In a quiet, serious voice, he said, "No. Because I already figured it out."

Harley stared at him a moment. His heart was beating very hard and he felt reckless, needy, like he was on the verge of doing something *really* stupid. With an effort, he got himself under control.

"Well, you're wrong. I bat for both teams." And he gave a smug smile and sat on the couch, taking hold of the remote control.

Ryan looked at him in astonishment before he sat back in his own seat. "That must be..." The man was lost for words again. "You must have...the best of both worlds."

Harley glanced over at him and burst out laughing. "You're really funny sometimes, dude and you don't realize it. The best of both worlds? You don't have to make a comment on it, you know, just because you're uncomfortable. You don't have to feel obliged to let total bullshit come from your mouth. I mean, what the fuck?"

Ryan's expression darkened. Harley tried to tone down his laughter, wiping at his eyes. "Come on. I'm teasing you. I thought you had a sense of humor."

"I do." Ryan's voice was stiff.

"Then lighten up."

Ryan turned his head away, focusing on the TV. "Are you putting the movie on or not?"

"Depends," Harley replied. "Are you pissed at me?"

"No."

"Are you lying?"

"No."

"Does what I've told you change the way you think about me?"

Ryan's eyes slid to his. "No," he said quietly.

And Harley's heart stilled a little in relief because just maybe Ryan considered him a worthwhile person and they could build a real friendship, even if he now knew with a sinking sense of futility that Ryan was definitely straight.

The film started. Fifteen minutes into it, Ryan glanced over. "So how does it work, anyway? Do you have phases where you're gay and phases where you're straight?"

Harley was taken aback momentarily. "Yes, actually." He chuckled.

"And which phase are you in now?" Ryan's gaze held Harley's steadily.

"Oh, I'm definitely queer at the moment."

Ryan turned his attention back to the movie without another word.

They started on a bottle of wine. Ryan didn't make it to the end of the film, Harley having told him to take off his shoes and get comfortable. He was soon lying full length on the couch, legs curled up, face turned toward the TV with his eyes closed. Soft breathing came from his parted lips.

Harley's gaze lingered on his perfect face. Oh, just to snatch one kiss from those lips while he was asleep. Did he dare? Would Ryan wake up?

He climbed stealthily from his own couch and crossed to Ryan's, kneeling before him to look into his face. His fingertips hovered over the curve of his cheek, desperate to touch it. God, if he woke up and saw Harley staring down at him like this... If Harley touched him and Ryan woke up, they would be done for good. He would never see Ryan again. He couldn't bear that thought. But it wasn't enough to stop him from touching. Nothing could stop him.

His fingertips traced the curve of Ryan's cheek, finding his skin like silk, moved down to his jaw and over slight stubble, going to his mouth and tracing the full bottom lip with his index finger, then sliding over the top lip, his caress lighter than a butterfly's wing. Ryan's mouth quivered under his touch, and Harley drew back his hand. But the other man didn't stir, and Harley went in for the kill. He bent down and pressed his lips to Ryan's. His mouth was achingly soft and warm, and Harley wanted more. He wanted those lips to part beneath his so he felt the moist heat of Ryan's mouth on his and his tongue curling against his own.

Harley drew back, looking down at the erection tenting his pants, and hurried out of the room before Ryan could wake and see the truth of his desire for him.

He went upstairs and retrieved a pillow and blanket from the bedding cupboard, took it downstairs and covered Ryan up as he slept, leaving the pillow on the floor by him for fear of disturbing him by lifting his head. The other man still didn't stir, and Harley pulled the door closed and went up to bed.

In the moonlit room, he stripped off his clothes, brushed his teeth in the ensuite then crawled naked between silk sheets.

He lay in the silence staring at the ceiling, with his hands twitching by his sides and his cock growing harder and harder with every passing second. His desire for Ryan was out of control. It was only a matter of time before he did something stupid and ruined their burgeoning friendship for good. He would have to finish the painting in the next sitting and break off all contact with Ryan, for the sake of his sanity.

He'd so far refused to jerk off over his model, knowing he would feel too guilty afterwards, and he was damned if he would do it now, with the man himself downstairs, but his inhibitions were lubricated by half a bottle of wine. His limbs were loose and sensual and God, he wanted it.

He imagined Ryan creeping into his room, crawling naked into his bed and pinning him to it with that body of his. That body which was surely made for sin. Harley had to stifle a groan when he thought of the sins that body could have committed. His hand moved to his cock against his will, his fingers wrapping around his straining shaft.

Oh, God, he wanted Ryan. It was pointless trying to pretend his interest in him was platonic anymore. He wanted him in the most primal, sexual way it was possible to want another human being and, God help him, he was going to go insane with that need.

He bit his lip as he thrust into his own hand, fingers sliding up and down expertly, imagining Ryan lying between his legs, hot mouth around him, coaxing him to climax. A whimper spilled from his throat. He tossed back the covers, sweating in the close bedroom, his body writhing on the silk sheets. With eyes squeezed shut, he imagined Ryan on top of him, penetrating him, gliding into his depths, that satin mouth on his, and he came, biting on his other hand to stifle his cry.

He fell back panting on the bed, lethargy consuming his entire body, limbs spread-eagled as he drifted toward sleep.

“Harley?”

Harley’s eyes flew open. He scrambled beneath the covers, grabbing a handful of tissues to wipe the semen from his stomach as he did. This wasn’t even funny. This was like his worst nightmare. The subject of his jerk-off standing outside his bedroom door? Not funny at all.

“Yeah?” he called nervously. He didn’t put on the light because he didn’t want Ryan to see how flushed with orgasm he must be. The door slowly opened. Ryan stood silhouetted there.

Ryan chuckled awkwardly. “Now you know what a lightweight I am where movies are concerned. You shouldn’t have encouraged me by covering me up. I’ll go home now.”

Harley sat up a little on his elbows, making sure the covers didn’t fall too low. “Don’t be silly, you don’t have to go home at this time of night. Get in the spare bed across the hall.”

Ryan hesitated. “I put upon you too much. You’re so kind to me, and I haven’t done anything to earn it.”

Harley clicked his tongue to dismiss him. “I like having you here. Is that so bad?”

“No.” Ryan sounded taken aback. It was impossible to see the expression on his face in the dark. “Will you put the light on?”

Harley hesitated before he leaned over to the bedside table and flicked the switch. He felt exposed as the soft lamp glow bathed his skin, and he pulled the covers over his naked torso, acutely aware of what had been splashed there a few moments ago.

“I just...” Ryan fumbled for words. His gaze travelled over Harley’s body, and Harley’s dick twitched again, to his utter shock. How was this even possible? He could be damn sure if he was in bed with the guy and he needed to get it up again within five minutes it wouldn’t happen. How was it that it could happen now with no hope of satisfaction, with the only chance of him getting off again by his own hand? He could have yelled in frustration.

And then he looked again at that rippling body straining Ryan’s T-shirt, at the tight jeans and the unmistakable burden they were packing, and scratched that thought. *I probably would be able to go all*

night with him in my bed. I would probably turn into some kind of super-human fucking machine, insatiable and unstoppable.

He turned a little on his side so he could bring his legs up to hide his growing hard-on.

“What I mean is...” Ryan still waffled helplessly, poor guy. Harley decided to put him out of his misery.

“It’s late. Why don’t you go to bed?” And he held Ryan’s eyes steadily and willed him into his own.

Ryan didn’t move. As they looked at each other, Harley’s heart started to race, and he grew harder and harder. Oh, God, he’d never been hotter for anybody in his life, he was sure of it. If begging would have brought Ryan to his bed, he would have done it. He would have given anything to have Ryan’s skin against his that night.

Surely Ryan saw his need in his eyes? Harley was surprised he didn’t run a mile. Ryan finally broke the tense silence. “Thank you, Harley,” he said quietly, and he backed out of the room, closing the door.

Harley took some deep breaths and slid down in the bed. He turned off the light and lay with face flaming and ears straining as Ryan went into the bathroom down the hall and closed the door.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “I’m such a prick.” But he put his hand down again and stroked himself as he imagined Ryan doing the same in his bathroom, overcome with need for him.

But Ryan wasn’t in there long enough. The toilet flushed and water ran, then footsteps went into the spare room before a light clicked on and the door closed softly, plunging Harley’s room back into darkness. Harley pictured Ryan stripping and sliding naked into his spare bed. He visualized himself going across the hall and climbing in beside Ryan, and he turned on his side, taking his hand away and blocking out his thoughts, because he couldn’t go on this way.

Chapter Seven

It was eleven when Harley awoke, to his shock. He never slept so late, and he yawned, rubbing his face as he went into the ensuite to shower. He remembered every detail of the night before as he stood under the spray with his morning wood refusing to go down. He half wished Ryan had slunk home at dawn and half wished to find him still curled up in his spare bed.

He climbed from the shower and shaved and dressed, sighing with frustration all the while. He needed to get laid as soon as possible and take his mind off a man he would never have.

To his shock, laughter came from the kitchen as he descended the stairs and there, at his kitchen table drinking coffee, sat Ryan. Harley's heart lurched and he managed a smile, stepping into the kitchen and taking a glass from the cupboard and some juice from the fridge.

"You shouldn't have let me sleep so late," he scolded Maria, who hovered by the counter. He tried not to glance over at Ryan again and failed. Unshaven and fresh from bed, the man still looked one hundred per cent edible with those ocean blue eyes and that easy smile. Harley almost shuddered with desire.

"That's my fault," Ryan spoke up. "You were so tired last night when I came to your room that I persuaded Maria to let you sleep late."

Their eyes met, and Harley felt himself flush as Maria, standing behind Ryan, lifted one eyebrow and grinned widely.

"I'll take toast, coffee and one of your smoothies, please, Maria," Harley said stiffly. "Ryan, want to come outside onto the terrace?"

Ryan nodded and rose gracefully to follow him. They sat together on the terrace, looking out to sea. Harley's hair was still wet, and it cooled his scalp as the sun started to rise to its zenith.

"Thanks for letting me stay last night," Ryan said quietly over the call of sea birds.

"You're welcome." Harley wasn't one for conversations in the mornings, and this morning was doubly awkward. Surely Ryan knew exactly what Harley had been doing last night when he'd walked in and seen him all flushed and his bed rumped? He was so ashamed he couldn't bear to look Ryan in the eye.

"Do you want me to sit for you today?" Ryan asked. Harley nodded. "Okay I'll just go home, grab a shower and change, and I'll be right back."

"You can shower here," Harley offered.

Ryan shook his head. "I need clean clothes."

“Fair enough. Stay for breakfast, then I’ll drive you home.”

Ryan hesitated and shifted a moment in his seat in clear discomfort, and Harley realized perhaps he wanted some time away from him, didn’t want him sitting in his apartment waiting for him to shower, or maybe he didn’t want Harley to see where he lived at all.

“I’ll walk, if it’s all the same to you,” Ryan murmured just as Maria came through with the food, so Harley could only nod. Perhaps Ryan was ashamed of where he lived.

Harley tried his best to make polite conversation during their breakfast, even though he didn’t feel much like talking. He would have been happy to sit in silence, just enjoying Ryan by his side. “So, have you ever done any modeling, Ryan? Apart from sitting for artists, I mean.”

Ryan gaze jerked sharply to his, much to Harley’s surprise, then he looked away. “No.”

“Oh.” Harley wondered if he’d touched a sore point. “Because I know quite a few photographers. I could arrange for you to meet with one to shoot a portfolio, if you wanted. With your face and body, you’d be guaranteed some work if you submitted it to the right agents.”

Ryan stared at him, his blue eyes hard and unfriendly. “Why would you do that for me?”

Harley had made the offer out of mere generosity, simply because a man with Ryan’s attributes should use them for the best. There was no need to be struggling to make ends meet when you had a face like Ryan’s, but Ryan’s angry glare made him feel guilty, like his motives were less than pure, when this time, they really weren’t. “Because...I’d like to help you, that’s all. You could make a fortune.”

Ryan gave a loud sigh and ran a hand through his cropped hair. “Okay, look, I lied. I’ve done that shit already, and it wasn’t exactly...” He trailed off, looking away.

“You’ve done some modeling?” Harley asked in surprise, wondering why Ryan had lied.

“I wouldn’t call it modeling.” Ryan’s tone was disdainful. “I had some photos taken, that’s all.”

“For what?” This was like pulling teeth.

“A magazine.”

“That’s great.” Ryan was looking shifty, and Harley was beginning to suspect what the problem was. “Did it pay well?”

“It was okay,” Ryan mumbled.

“So what magazine was it?”

Ryan was silent for a long time. Finally he replied. “A...men’s magazine.”

Harley almost smiled at this euphemism. “You mean a gay magazine?”

Ryan nodded, tight-lipped.

“Nothing wrong with that. You must have made a lot of men very, very happy.”

Ryan reddened, but for a moment there seemed to be a small, grateful smile on his face before it disappeared.

Maybe he just needed someone to tell him it was okay to earn money that way. “Did you get any other offers after that?”

Ryan’s blush deepened. “Not for photo shoots. There was a...film...but I didn’t do it.”

Harley had to be careful here with Ryan’s sensibilities. “A...porno?” he asked gently.

Ryan nodded without looking at him. Harley tried to beat down the lecherous voice inside him which told him Ryan in a porno, bending another guy over a table and servicing him thoroughly, would be the hottest thing in the history of the world. Hotter still if Harley was his partner. His face burned at his thoughts.

“Why didn’t you do it?” he asked, which was stupid because Ryan flew off the handle.

“Come on!” he exploded, scraping his chair back, rising and starting to pace the terrace angrily. “What sort of question is that? It was *gay porn*. I had to fuck *another man*. Contrary to what you might think, I *do* have some self-respect left.”

Harley bit back a remark about those rumors he’d heard about Ryan taking extra money to stay after his sittings with female artists. Instead, he said unwisely, “Self-respect doesn’t pay the bills, though, does it?”

Ryan’s eyes were like blue flame. “So I should have done it? I should have slept with men for money? Would *you* have done it?”

“Probably,” Harley replied. “But I like to sleep with men.”

“Yeah, well,” Ryan said in a disgusted tone, “*I* don’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Excuse me?”

“How do you know that you don’t like to sleep with men?” Harley repeated flippantly. “Try everything once and don’t knock it until you’ve tried it, that’s my motto.”

Ryan stared at him in astonishment. “So you think I should have done the movie because I might have *enjoyed* it? Because it’s your own personal wet dream?”

Harley glared in outrage. “Not exactly,” he backtracked. “It’s probably deeply unerotic, actually, what with a bunch of people standing around watching your naked ass going up and down...” He trailed off because he was getting hard just thinking about it.

Ryan’s face was beyond stony. Riling him this way was hardly conducive to bringing him to Harley’s bed. Not that that was ever going to happen, not with yet another affirmation of Ryan’s heterosexuality.

Ryan moved across the terrace, jaw clenched. “I’m going home. I’ll be back later.”

“Ryan.” Harley’s voice stopped him at the french windows. “Would you...bring your photo shoot back with you? I’d like to see it.”

Ryan sighed, his anger seeming to drain away. “Harley, they’re not...suitable...”

“Why? Are they with another man?”

“No, no,” Ryan said hurriedly. “They’re just...”

“Naked? In case you haven’t realized yet, I’ve seen you in the buff a few times.”

Ryan’s face finally relaxed into a reluctant smile, and his beauty made Harley’s heart clench. “Okay, but I warned you. We’re talking stupid poses and ridiculous props.”

Harley grinned. “My favorite kind of photo.”

Ryan continued to smile. “Yeah.” He raised a hand in farewell as he left the terrace.

There was no hot water when Ryan got home, but he didn’t mind a cold shower. He was sweaty and dirty and, more than that, uncomfortable with the breakfast conversation. He liked Harley; there was nothing about the guy *not* to like. He was generous, thoughtful and fun to be with. He was also bisexual and had confessed to being in a queer phase at that very moment. That made Ryan nervous. How could it not? It was surely patently obvious that Harley had designs on him. What with all the taking so long to finish the painting, the invites to eat, the staying over, the new shoes and the not-knocking-gay-sex-until-you’ve-tried-it. How could he *not* have designs on Ryan? Not that he’d made it obvious. He hadn’t done anything at all out of line yet, as far as Ryan could see, but maybe the other man was biding his time.

He scolded himself as he got out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist and stood dripping at the sink to lather up for a shave.

He was thinking of Harley as some sort of sexual predator about to jump his bones when he doubted anything could be further from the truth. After all, Harley had had ample time last night when Ryan had been asleep and defenseless in bed, hadn’t he? And the fact was Ryan had gone to Harley’s room and not the other way around. Which led him to another subject.

As he’d climbed the stairs last night, he’d got the impression Harley was jerking off. He’d heard a few stifled gasps and the rustling of bed covers before it’d all gone quiet. He’d been afraid to go in after that, and when he did summon the courage, the man looked sweaty and disheveled. So what caused Harley to go straight upstairs from *Edward Scissorhands* to jerking off? Johnny Depp was hot as fuck to most people, gay or straight, but Ryan doubted many people got off to him as the pasty-faced guy with built-in hedge trimmers. What was the last thing Harley had done before going upstairs? He’d covered up Ryan with the blanket. He’d woken up with it snug around his neck. He paused with the razor against his jaw. Christ. Christ.

Chapter Eight

Ryan had been lying, or at least exaggerating, about the “stupid poses and ridiculous props”, because what the photos were was deeply erotic. Ryan had been two hours at home getting showered and changed and when he came back and nervously handed Harley a glossy magazine in the studio, he turned away quickly and went to the red satin bed.

Harley turned the page and perused the table of contents. There he was, pages twenty to twenty-four, *Ryan Morgan*. Harley’s fingertips were a little damp as he flicked through the magazine and, while Ryan stripped across the room, looked at the sexiest pictures he’d ever seen in his life.

Page twenty had Ryan stretched out naked full length on a bed, face down. Looking into the camera and leaning on his arms, his face dominated it, his eyes huge and violet-blue. While looking down the length of his body, the camera picked out the breadth of his shoulders, the black tattoo and the twin swells of those peach-like buttocks. The entire effect was stunning. Harley couldn’t take his eyes from those of Ryan in the picture for long seconds, but he forced himself to glance to the opposite page, realizing Ryan must be watching his reaction.

Page twenty-one had Ryan in a pair of boxers, leaning against a wall with one arm stretched over his head. His lips were slightly parted, his eyes slitted and heavy, as if he’d just crawled out of bed, and the tight white material held the thick outline of a half-erect cock.

Harley felt his own twitch. His hand trembled as he turned over to page twenty-two. Ryan sat in a chair, naked apart from a cowboy hat. Maybe that was what Ryan had meant about the stupid props, but Harley had seen *Brokeback Mountain* and there sure as hell was nothing ludicrous about Jake and Heath.

Between his spread legs, Ryan cupped himself with large hands, hiding his modesty, but not the neatly cropped thatch of dark hair. Harley thought he would groan. This magazine knew a thing or two about teasing its readers. Ryan had been revealing more and more with every photo. He could only hope the last one was the big one.

There was an ad for a gay dating service on the opposite page. Slowly, Harley turned over to page twenty-four and hit the jackpot.

Ryan was stretched out naked in the sand on a glorious summer’s day. His naked body was tanned and gleaming with oil, his biceps and pecs huge, his stomach rippling with muscle. His head was turned to one side, looking coyly down his body at the camera, while his legs were spread, one of his hands resting on his inner thigh, almost touching his cock which lay there half hard, his balls heavy and hairless below.

Harley bit his lip hard. He moved his body behind his easel. He was going to have to think of some excuse for Ryan to leave the magazine here and then he was going to jerk off over it until either he suffered from the worst case of repetitive strain injury ever or his dick fell off. Either one would suit him fine.

He couldn't even think straight. He knew Ryan was lying silent and naked across the room awaiting his verdict, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the false image before him to the real one a few feet away.

"You're shocked, right?" Ryan broke the silence nervously. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't..."

Harley cleared his throat. "Ryan, I'll be honest with you. These photos are sexy. You know that, don't you?"

"I...don't know," Ryan muttered.

Harley finally dragged his gaze away from the god in the sand to the god on the bed. "The man who took these photos knew what he was doing to appeal to readers." He tried to sound professional; tried not to act like a man whose hard-on was being asphyxiated by his jeans.

"You think?" For a man who was so supremely confident of his body, Ryan certainly seemed unsure right now, and Harley found it endearing.

"I do. And I want to show these to one of my friends, and I want him to photograph you. With more clothes, of course."

Ryan shifted on the bed, and Harley couldn't help but be aware of every slide of his skin against the satin, of the thickly muscled arms, the broad shoulders, the rise and fall of the spine and the crest of the buttocks.

I am in lust, he thought. I have to touch him, just once, no matter what.

"That's very kind of you," Ryan said, and Harley took one last lingering look at the final photo before he closed the magazine and laid it down on the floor by his easel. He took the cover off his canvas.

"Right, then," he said, trying desperately to focus above his pounding heart and his aching dick. Instead, he asked himself if he had the balls to make a pass at Ryan that afternoon or if he would just make do with the magazine after he'd gone.

He knew it was going to be the latter. Harley had never needed to do things like this, because the people he liked always came to him. To have to chase someone who wasn't interested in him was a novel experience, and an awkward one. He felt out of his mind with desire. His brush on the canvas Ryan's skin seemed to touch his own burning flesh, searing it, turning it into an inferno, and meanwhile his heart continued to beat harder and harder, and Ryan watched him with cool blue eyes from the bed, his face implacable as though oblivious to Harley's torment and suffering.

Harley frowned. Just what kind of game was Ryan playing? Because he didn't buy all this. Ryan was a tease who was more than aware of his body. Harley had known that on his first sitting. Was all this an act

and was he getting off on what he was doing, watching Harley squirming and panting with desperation? A slow, indignant anger built inside him, bringing with it shame and humiliation.

Ryan glanced away, staring out of the window with what appeared to be clear disinterest, and Harley suddenly flipped.

“Look at me,” he growled. “I’m supposed to be painting your face.”

Ryan did as he was told, an expression of surprise on his features.

This didn’t do it at all. Ryan had his head all wrong. In fact, Harley noticed now his model’s pose was completely different from the one on the canvas. The lines of his body were different, his face not angled the way it had been in previous sittings. This trivial fact riled him beyond belief.

He stalked out from behind the easel, complaining, “What’s wrong with you today, Ryan?” He got down on one knee at the head of the mattress and reached out, taking Ryan’s face in both hands. “It’s all wrong,” he told him, turning his head none too gently. “Like *this*. This is...” And he stopped as his gaze met Ryan’s and the breath caught in his throat.

Those ocean blue eyes fixed unblinkingly on his, looking up at Harley from the mattress, cool and almost defiant at the brusque treatment. Harley’s stomach clenched. The hands which had a hard grip on Ryan’s face loosened, and his fingertips slid deliberately across Ryan’s cheeks in a caress. He tilted Ryan’s face up to his as he leaned down to him.

Ryan made no protest. He only continued to look at him as though he didn’t realize what Harley was going to do. Which was okay, because Harley was sure he didn’t know what he was going to do, either. All he knew was that he was leaning right over Ryan, holding his face, and his lips were moving closer of their own accord. He saw Ryan’s eyes close at the last moment as their lips met.

Stars exploded behind Harley’s eyes. Ryan’s mouth was so soft and warm and sweet, it completely undid him.

Their lips joined for only a second before they came apart again, and Harley felt Ryan’s shocked expulsion of breath against his mouth.

Instead of moving away, Harley took Ryan by the back of the neck with one hand and kissed him again. Ryan’s mouth opened to his, their breath mingling, and Harley’s fingers stroked the soft, stubbly hair at the back of his head as he explored those velvet soft lips.

Ryan kissed him back gently, hesitantly, the kiss almost chaste, no tongues involved, and Harley sank into the sweetest ecstasy he’d ever known. He’d never experienced a kiss like this in his life. Ryan’s mouth seemed to meld perfectly to his own as though it had been made for him. His other hand crept hesitantly onto one naked, powerful shoulder, and Ryan’s hands came up against his chest, palms open.

For the briefest moment they curled into fists, gripping the material of his shirt and making Harley’s heart pound with excitement as he imagined Ryan was about to drag him onto the bed. Just as suddenly,

they uncurled again and, palms outstretched against his chest, Ryan shoved him away. Harley fell backward onto his ass, stunned.

“What are you *doing*?” Ryan cried, his eyes wide with horror and disgust. Harley sat on the floor and stared in confusion. He could have sworn Ryan was reciprocating the kiss in style a moment ago. Ryan climbed off the bed and stalked furiously to his pile of clothes. Unmistakably he was half-hard.

Harley swallowed at this evidence, his own pants tented and uncomfortable. Ryan climbed into his boxers and pulled on his jeans before hopping on each foot to put on his socks, finally cramming his feet into his new shoes.

He left the laces undone and grabbed his T-shirt, and Harley finally moved, clambering to his feet. “Ryan,” he beseeched, trying to catch his arm.

“*Don’t!*” Ryan shoved him backward hard, his eyes flashing wildly. “That’s what all this has been about! The dinners and the fucking shoes. Get this into your fucking head, Harley: I’m not queer!” He stormed from the studio.

Harley ran after him with his heart in his shoes and regret clawing his throat. “Ryan!” he called, following him desperately down the stairs. Ryan wrenched the front door open and slammed it shut behind him.

Skidding to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, Harley stood staring at it. He couldn’t help but feel that the greatest thing he’d ever known had just walked out of his life for good.

At home, Ryan’s mouth burned. He brushed his teeth and used mouthwash, but still it burned and still he could feel the soft pressure of Harley’s mouth and its taste of honey. Jesus Christ, a *man* had kissed him. A man! But, he had to remind himself, it wasn’t just any man, it was *Harley*, a man he was inordinately fond of, a man who might have even been his friend.

He paced backward and forward, alternately groaning and squeezing his eyes shut. He’d *let* Harley do that to him, and he’d kissed him back, hadn’t he? What was wrong with him?

The next day, when he woke up, an envelope had been pushed under his door containing a thousand dollars in cash and a handwritten note which read: *Forgive me*.

He didn’t know who Harley had got his address from, but that was kind of irrelevant. Harley didn’t owe him that much, and it made Ryan feel like the whore he was. He wished he could take the money back to the rich man and tell him to shove it, but this was the real world and he couldn’t afford the luxury of pride. Not anymore.

He sat with the note in his hand for a while, then he hovered with it over the trash can for long moments. Finally, he tucked it into a drawer.

Chapter Nine

Six months later

A knocking at the door disturbed Ryan from sleep. He blinked, feeling the pounding in his head immediately from the champagne, his mouth dry. He sat up, a wave of nausea overwhelming him, and swung his legs off the edge of the bed. He pulled on a T-shirt and boxers as he made his way to the door, looking at his watch, prepared to berate the caller if it was too early. But it was nearly midday, to his surprise.

When he pulled open the door, his heart surged as he saw his visitor. He remembered every detail of their encounter last night at the gallery. “Dude, I’m hung over and not in the mood for any more bullshit from you.”

Harley was pale, dark circles under those startling amber eyes, his hair disheveled and hanging over his forehead in glossy strands. “I didn’t give you any bullshit, Ryan,” he said quietly. “I told you how it was.”

“Go to hell.” Ryan went back into his apartment, leaving the door open, making for the kitchen where he ran a glass of water and drank it down in one. Harley, meanwhile, followed him in and closed the door.

“Listen,” he began, walking into the kitchen.

“Harley.” Ryan slammed down the glass. “Go find some other straight guy to seduce, because I’m not interested.”

Harley’s eyes were large with sorrow, his mouth tight and unhappy. “I didn’t try to seduce you. I only kissed you. And you can say you didn’t want it, but you kissed me back.”

“Go fuck yourself.” Ryan pushed past Harley and went into the bedroom with his face burning. Harley merely followed him.

“You’ve got a selective memory as to how it went,” he said defiantly as Ryan dragged on some jeans. “We kissed. And then you tried to say you didn’t want it.”

Ryan turned on him viciously. He grabbed Harley by the front of his shirt and pushed him against the wardrobe. “Get out of my house and out of my life right now, fag,” he said between his teeth.

“You know what? I came here to offer you half the money from the sale of your painting,” Harley cried, twisting in his grip. “You make me out to be so fucking bad, to have these wicked designs on you, but I bet I was the only one who *didn’t* offer you money to fuck me.”

Ryan went still. His hand fell from Harley's shirt, and he took a step back. He couldn't believe his ears. He'd waited all this time for Harley to make mention of what he must have known all along, and here it finally was, Ryan's shame laid out before him. He wished to sink through the floor. "What did you say?" he asked in a deadly tone.

"You heard me," Harley shouted. "I fucking tiptoed around you and tried to control myself when nobody else gave you that courtesy. Well, now I'm done playing nice. If *they* had it, *I* want it too."

Ryan stared at him wide-eyed, his mouth open while Harley dug into the back pocket of his jeans to bring out a folded and battered checkbook and a pen. He opened it and stood on one foot, resting it on his thigh and beginning to scrawl.

"I was going to give you two thousand, five hundred for the painting," he told Ryan with his attention on the book. "So I'll double it." He ripped the check from the book and held it out. "Five thousand."

Ryan couldn't begin to understand what Harley was offering. Actually, he could, but he would rather not think about it. His mouth worked silently a moment before he spoke. "For...what?"

Harley grunted in annoyance. "You can drop the innocent act now. It really doesn't suit you. Five thousand to come home with me. Yes or no?" He waved the check impatiently.

Rage consumed Ryan whole. He shoved Harley back against the wardrobe. "I'm not a fucking whore!"

"Really?" Harley's voice was scathing. "Funny, I thought that's exactly what you were."

Without thought, Ryan pulled back his fist and hit him, and Harley's head thudded into the wood with a hollow clunk before he slithered to the floor semi-conscious, still holding the check.

Ryan stood over him, not knowing what to do, only knowing he was filled with regret as blood dripped from Harley's lip onto the front of his shirt. He couldn't believe what he'd done. No matter what Harley had just said to him, he didn't deserve *this*.

Harley shook himself and climbed laboriously to his feet, ignoring the repentant hand Ryan held out to him. He leaned against the wardrobe, breathing heavily, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He lifted his head to look at Ryan, his amber eyes flat and cold.

To Ryan's disbelief, Harley held out the check once more. Harley still wanted him? After what he had just done, he was still willing to pay him five thousand dollars for the privilege of his body? Harley must still have it bad for him, even six months down the line. That idea didn't sit comfortably with Ryan. He stared at the three zeroes on the check. All his problems would be over if he took it, at least in the short term, because the situation was as dire as could be at the moment. He was four months behind on his rent, and his landlord had given him one month's notice to leave. Either pay in full during that time, or get out at the end of it. The chances of him being able to find the money were zero. This offer was like Ryan's fairy godmother appearing, but with a nasty sexual bartering system in tow.

What if Harley took what he wanted, then cancelled the check? He doubted the artist had such malice in him, but then he'd been plotting to seduce Ryan all this time, so who knew how his mind worked?

What Ryan *did* know was that, apart from being desperate for the cash, he kind of owed it to Harley for hitting him. Which was ridiculous, because since when was giving another person your body equal remuneration for punching them? If that were the case, Ryan owed a lot of men his body.

Long seconds ticked by as they stood regarding each other, Harley's mouth still bleeding and him still holding the check out to Ryan.

Ryan went out into the kitchen. He plucked some tissues from a box on the counter and handed them to Harley, who followed him and took them without thanks. He dabbed gingerly at his lip, then reached out and laid the check on the counter. "You can cash it first, if you want. Come to me when you're ready." And he left the apartment without another word, closing the door quietly behind him.

Ryan slumped down on the couch in shock.

Harley stood looking at his bruised lip in the mirror, relieved no teeth were loose. He'd deserved it, he guessed, for calling Ryan a whore, because that was out of line. At the end of the day, the man only did what he could to survive, and the aura of sadness around him didn't come from enjoying prostituting himself, that was for sure. Harley was still angry with Ryan for hitting him, but not angry enough to retract his offer. The anger merely made him more determined to have Ryan in his bed. There would be no feelings and no love involved, and Harley would have bought every last kiss and caress Ryan gave him, he told himself fiercely. But that was okay, because Harley had a vivid imagination. He could pretend Ryan had come voluntarily to his bed. He doubted Ryan would come at all, though, but nonetheless, he would shower and shave and change into some nice clothes and then he would sit like an idiot and wait for the man who held his delicate heart balanced in the palm of his hand.

It would only be once. Ryan screwed his eyes up in disgust as he imagined himself entwined with another man. But this wasn't any other man. This was *Harley*, a man Ryan liked and respected. A man who had burned his mouth with his kiss six months ago and who Ryan had not stopped thinking about since. What would he be expecting of him? A blowjob? A rim job? To be flat out fucked six ways to Sunday? He imagined Harley on all fours, himself behind him. *Surely if Harley is so desperate for me, he'll come as soon as I touch him and then I can go home. He can't force me to stay any longer if I walk out. He can cancel the check if I don't satisfy him, though. What if he expects me to be some sort of sexual stallion and go all night? What if I can't get it up?*

He didn't imagine Harley to be sexually insatiable, but then he couldn't imagine Harley sexually at all. He couldn't see the other man naked and writhing on a bed in ecstasy, try as he might. But what Ryan also couldn't imagine was that he would have any trouble getting it up with Harley. He doubted Harley was

the type to lie back and let Ryan satisfy him, giving nothing in return. Harley wasn't a selfish person, and Ryan could bet he wasn't selfish sexually, either. There was also the fact it had been a while for Ryan, and so a touch by any person at all was likely to inflame him. He could use that as an excuse when he got an instant boner with Harley.

He leaned back on the couch with his eyes shut. *Can I do this? Can I actually do it?*

Chapter Ten

In the six months since he'd seen Ryan, Harley had moved on from pining over a man he would never have. His manager, Nathan, had been making overtures toward him for a long time, and the day after he'd kissed Ryan, Harley had fallen into bed with him, deliberately and calculatedly. Afterward, he blamed Ryan for driving him into Nathan's arms when he wasn't sure he wanted to be there, and he withdrew, telling Nathan it had been a mistake.

Nathan, a cocky, confident, worldly man and almost the antithesis of Harley's quiet, mellow persona, was persistent, though. He chased Harley relentlessly until, lonely and heartbroken over Ryan, Harley was back in his bed once more.

Their relationship hadn't progressed very far in six months. Nathan pushed to make it serious, pushed to be allowed to stay over at Harley's or for Harley to come to his, but Harley always refused to spend the night with him. He kept Nathan at arm's length, to the other's frustration, and he denied the charge when he was accused of having someone else.

Because of course, there was no one else. Nathan had seen Harley disappear into the corridor with Ryan at the gallery last night, though, and there followed a fierce question and answer session in the bathroom later, while outside, people fought over his painting of Ryan. Nathan knew of Ryan and knew Harley had been painting him six months ago, but had never got the full story of the fight which had led to Ryan finishing sitting for Harley before the painting was completed. He asked Harley bluntly if he and Ryan had been sleeping together.

Harley told him no, but Nathan was suspicious anyway, wanting to know what had transpired between them. He badgered Harley so forcefully that Harley eventually snapped.

"I kissed him, okay?" he shouted. "And the guy's straight. He didn't want me. That's why he stopped sitting for me. Happy?"

Nathan had regarded him a moment. "Do you still want him?"

"Does it matter?" Harley responded in exasperation. "I'm never going to get him, whether I want him or not. He's fucking straight!"

Nathan looked like he was sucking lemons. He stormed from the bathroom and disappeared from the gallery.

Sitting at home now, Harley knew he should call him, but he was too consumed by Ryan's impending arrival. He'd only ever used Nathan as a substitute for what he couldn't have, he realized in a moment of clarity, and he felt ashamed of that fact.

Ryan lifted his hand and knocked on the door. His heart was in his throat. He asked himself over and over again what he was doing and how he was going to go about it. He smiled awkwardly at Maria when she swung open the door.

"Ryan!" she exclaimed, as though he were a long lost friend, and his smile deepened in gratitude at this welcome. "Come in, come in." She ushered him inside. "Harley's upstairs in his room."

Of course he was. Ryan glanced up the stairs with trepidation. Where else would he be? "Is it all right if I go up?"

"Of course. Can I bring you up a drink?"

Ryan very much wanted a drink, preferably something to steady his nerves, but he could hardly have Maria knocking on the door just as he and Harley were getting down to business—and he didn't intend to beat around the bush. He intended to be in and out, literally—so he would have to refuse.

"No, thank you," he said politely, and Maria nodded and waved him toward the stairs before she took her leave.

Ryan climbed them slowly, going around the curve of the landing to stand before the closed door he remembered as Harley's. He stood there a moment, running a hand over his cropped hair as though it were out of place and clearing his throat before he knocked.

"Come in," Harley called from within.

Ryan turned the handle and pushed open the door. Harley stood inside the large, bright room, just turning away from the full-length mirror to face him. He'd shaved, and his dark hair hung damply over his eyes. He'd changed into a black shirt and pants. Ryan couldn't help but think he looked good and was relieved he himself had showered and put on some decent clothes. Harley was evidently taking this seriously.

They stood and stared at each other for the longest time, neither moving until Ryan spoke.

"What do you want?" He made his tone unfriendly and his gaze cold.

Harley hesitated only a split second before he replied in an equally hostile tone, "I want you to fuck me."

There. It was out in the open now. There was no pretense between them. Harley had always wanted this from Ryan and, to his shock, the words made a fire ignite in the pit of Ryan's stomach. He bit his lip, afraid and striving to retain control of the situation.

"Take off your clothes," he growled.

He saw Harley's expression change, then; an unmistakable softening of the eyes, a look of hurt and disappointment. The man who'd stood with the cold look on his face telling Ryan so clinically what he wanted had gone, replaced by *Harley*, the man Ryan knew was decent through and through.

"What?" Ryan demanded, his tone lower.

Harley shook his head, averting his gaze. "Nothing."

"It's not nothing. What's wrong with you?"

Harley sighed loudly. "I know you're pissed at me, and I think you've got every right to be, but do you have to be so...aggressive?"

Ryan arched a brow. "Aggressive?"

"Yeah," Harley snapped back. "Do all your bedroom encounters start with you demanding your partner takes their clothes off?"

Ryan regarded him coolly. "I'm sorry, is romance supposed to be included in the price? Give me another thousand, and I'll light some fucking candles and sing to you."

"Asshole," Harley spat. He turned away, unfastening his shirt and wrenching it off, tossing it on a nearby chair. The curve of his spine was elegant, his shoulders broad, a tribal tattoo at the base of his back, a little smaller than Ryan's. Ryan stood watching as Harley moved to close the curtains, blocking out the sunlight, but still leaving adequate light in the room.

Harley started to unfasten his belt. He looked over his shoulder at Ryan as he unbuttoned his jeans. "Unfortunately, you'll have to at least partially undress in order to penetrate me," he sniped.

Ryan glared. He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his shirt. Then he stalked forward, gripped Harley by one biceps and tossed him onto the bed.

Harley gave a gasp of protest at the rough treatment, but Ryan only covered his body with his own, naked torsos pressed together, gripping his wrists and holding Harley's arms above his head.

Harley struggled, his amber eyes flashing fire. "Is this the only way you can get off, dickwad?"

Ryan pressed him down harder, one thigh between his, more than aware of the erection nudging his hip and how Harley was not so subtly trying to rub it against him. Their faces were so close that their noses almost touched. Harley's breath came in ragged, angry pants.

Ryan looked down and studied the plump, parted lips, the perfect white teeth revealed behind them, the mouth moist and pink and almost...swollen with need. His gaze darted back to Harley's, and his jeans started to tighten steadily. Harley's eyes were bright beneath the dark hair falling into them, the pupils huge with desire, and suddenly Ryan broke.

He leaned down and captured Harley's mouth in a fierce kiss. He felt the effect of it sweep through his would-be lover's entire body. Harley groaned deep in his throat, his mouth opening under Ryan's, his body bucking up and undulating beneath his as though to try and press every part of himself against Ryan, his hands thrashing in Ryan's grip to get free.

Ryan let go, and one of Harley's arms immediately wrapped around his back while his other hand held him strongly by the back of his neck. The kiss deepened and their tongues met. Ryan tasted the moist, sweet heat of Harley's mouth, and bliss danced through his veins, his cock rigid against Harley's leg, the other man gyrating his pelvis sensually and deliberately against him.

He heard himself panting for breath. Harley's hands moved down his back, short nails scratching lightly, to grope at his ass, pulling Ryan hard against him.

Ryan thought he would lose his mind. What was happening? They were both still semi-clothed and already Harley was doing enough to bring him toward climax. He pulled out of his embrace and sat back on his heels, reaching out to drag down the already unfastened jeans, revealing the bulge in Harley's boxers.

Harley lay passively beneath him, letting Ryan move on to his boxers and strip him so he lay there naked. Ryan's gaze moved slowly over him. Harley's body was infinitely pleasing, lean and subtly muscled, lightly tanned apart from around the upper thighs and groin where he'd worn shorts. His cock, a little over average length and circumcised, rested rigidly against his belly.

Ryan got up off the bed to undress, with the blood pounding in his veins. He was going to do it. He was going to fuck Harley. For money.

He tossed his jeans and boxers aside and climbed onto the bed, pushing Harley's thighs apart with his hands so he could kneel between them.

Harley's gaze traveled over his body, and Ryan waited for the comment most of his partners gave when they saw the size of him fully erect, but Harley said nothing, nor did he look worried at being able to accommodate him.

Neither did he point out how surprisingly hard Ryan was for a straight guy doing this for money, and for this, Ryan was grateful. Maybe Harley was grateful, too, that Ryan was going to be able to perform without coaxing. Their gazes met intensely.

All the aggression Harley had accused Ryan of having had leached from him. Now he was just nervous and anxious as to how to progress. Did Harley expect foreplay? He hardly looked like he *needed* foreplay, shifting as he was sensually on the bed in frustration, his hands gripping the covers, a pale drop of fluid glistening at the end of his cock.

Ryan guessed he could stick it in and go, but maybe Harley wanted more. Maybe if Ryan tried to cheat him out of the full experience, he would cancel the check. Hesitantly he reached out his right hand and laid it on Harley's thigh. The other man shuddered as it travelled up the silky inside of his muscular limb, fingertips moving over his balls before they curled around the base of his shaft and he started to lightly slide Harley through his palm.

Harley caught his breath, his neck arching back, his eyes closed, his hips bucking up.

Jesus, he was a sensual creature. Harley's body rocked to the tune of his hand, his thick lashes trembling on his cheeks, his tongue running over his lips, leaving them glistening.

Jerking off another man didn't feel as wrong or sordid as Ryan had thought it might. In fact, it was kind of hot. He couldn't imagine doing this to anyone other than Harley, though. He couldn't imagine actually being...fascinated by his ability to arouse another man. But here he was, and his heart was beating so hard now, his cock crying out for attention, and he was ready, God he was ready.

As though reading his mind, Harley sat up abruptly. He leaned over to the bedside table. Ryan's gaze travelled down his back and onto his pert ass. He put out a hand, keeping Harley in place when he tried to turn back.

"Stay like that," Ryan told him in a low, excited voice.

Harley did as he was told, curling onto his side, deliberately bringing one knee up so his buttocks were spread. Ryan swallowed, kneeling behind him, taking the tube Harley held out to him.

He opened the cap, squeezed cool liquid onto his fingers, then used his left hand to spread Harley open to him so he could see where he was going.

He located the puckered entrance, rubbing it slowly with his fingers, massaging the lubricant in until Harley opened up and accepted one of his digits. The other man groaned, his face buried in the pillow, his arms around it. Ryan moved to lie down against him. He pressed his lips to Harley's shoulder and moved his finger in all the way.

Ryan wasn't an expert at this. He'd dabbled this way with women in the past and always hurt them. He didn't want to do the same to Harley. He might feel inclined to cancel Ryan's check if he couldn't walk the next day. He eased another finger into Harley and used them both now rhythmically, backward and forward, listening to Harley's little pants for breath and longing to cut to the chase.

Something sharp scraped against his thigh. Ryan looked down to see Harley pushing a foil square at him. Eagerly he withdrew his fingers, ripped open the condom and rolled it on one-handed. Then he coated it thickly with lubricant.

As Ryan curled himself against Harley, the other man trembled with need. He took hold of himself and rubbed the head of his cock slowly between Harley's cheeks, leaving lube glistening on the pale, smooth skin. Harley quivered as Ryan's other hand came up to hold his forearm hard above the pillow while he pushed into him.

Oh, Jesus, it felt like heaven. Harley enclosed him like satin and moaned loudly as Ryan glided into his depths, his hand groping behind him to grab at Ryan's thigh fiercely.

Ryan sank in as far as he could go, then he stopped a moment with every inch of his body pressed against Harley's and sweat beginning to seal their skin together. His lips touched the closely cut hair at the back of Harley's neck while his hand moved around to his partner's groin to jerk him off.

Harley cursed under his breath. He gasped with every thrust as Ryan started to move gently into him, building his rhythm. With eyes closed, Ryan tasted the sweat-dewed skin of his lover's neck and let the sensations overwhelm him. This was something else.

This lean body pressed against his, the tight muscle surrounding him, the noises of appreciation spilling from Harley's lips. This was better than anything Ryan had ever had in his life.

He moved faster, and Harley became noisier. His head fell back against Ryan's shoulder, and Ryan devoured his throat. His hand worked Harley's cock steadily. Harley shuddered all over, trembling and writhing in ecstasy.

He craned his head around to kiss Ryan, who possessed his mouth greedily, panting hard for breath.

Harley's head fell back again. "Ryan," he groaned. Ryan felt him clench around him hard.

He spurted jerkily into Ryan's hand with a cry as Ryan buried his face against Harley's neck, his own orgasm rising to sweep away all rational thought on a tidal wave of blistering ecstasy.

He continued to thrust into Harley until he'd ridden out every last wave and he slumped exhausted against his partner, his heart thundering against Harley's back.

They remained motionless together for the longest time. Ryan moved his sticky hand and rested it lightly on the curve of Harley's hip. He kept his eyes closed as he softened within Harley, unwilling to draw himself free.

It was Harley who moved first, sliding away from Ryan and walking naked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Ryan sighed and rolled onto his back. He removed his condom with lethargic fingers and tied a knot in it, reaching to drop it onto the bedside table.

Then he sank back and let his thoughts overwhelm him. Jesus, that had been good. He could hardly pretend otherwise, much as he'd like to. Harley was such a sensual, erotic creature, and his body aroused Ryan so much it shocked him. He was supposed to be doing this for the money. Enjoyment wasn't in the plan. But out of all the artists who'd paid him for sex, he'd enjoyed this interlude the most. *I'm queer*, he thought in horror. *Look what Harley has done to me. He's seduced me and corrupted me.*

He worked himself up into a lather of distaste until, at that moment, Harley came out of the bathroom and lay face down by Ryan's side.

One arm wrapped itself around Ryan's torso, and Harley laid his head against his chest with a faint, infinitely satisfied sigh.

All Ryan's anger blew away instantly. He looked down into Harley's face, at the dark crescents of his lashes against his cheeks, and one hand came up against his will to stroke the dark, unruly hair, the strands like silk under his fingers.

Harley evidently liked this. He stretched sensually against Ryan and pressed a series of small kisses to his chest. Ryan shivered a little. His cock twitched treacherously. Harley lifted his head and zeroed in on one nipple, sucking it into his mouth and putting his tongue out to lick at its stiffening peak.

Ryan had to stifle a groan as flames of lust throbbed their way down to his groin. Harley's hand smoothed over his torso, tracing the arch of his ribs and the curve of his hip, before moving up one inner thigh.

His hand closed around Ryan's balls while he worked on his other nipple with lips and tongue, lightly scraping with teeth. He took hold of Ryan's cock and drew him firmly back to full erection.

Ryan's hand tightened in his hair. He ached to be sucked off and wondered if it would be bad form to push Harley's head down there when *he* was the one getting paid. But Harley started to work his way down Ryan's torso regardless, and Ryan shuddered as those lips pressed burning kisses in a trail to his groin.

Harley nuzzled the hair between his legs. His tongue crept around the base of Ryan's shaft and licked firmly all the way from root to tip. Ryan drew in his breath and clutched at Harley's hair as the artist's tongue flicked teasingly over his slit.

"Why did you never tell me that you like to paint?" Harley asked abruptly, and Ryan's eyes snapped open, blinking, staring down at him in confusion, the tide of lust retreating.

"What?" he asked stupidly.

"That you like to paint," Harley repeated. "All the times you sat for me, and you never told me."

His face was open, his eyes warm and so innocent that they melted Ryan to the core. He realized what Harley was talking about. The magazine of erotic photos he'd left in the studio six months ago in his rush to leave after Harley had kissed him.

In small print beneath the photo of him stretched out naked on the sand was a very brief biography. *Ryan Morgan is a thirty-two year old native of Newport Beach. When he is not working out his magnificent body, he likes to paint.*

Ryan's face grew warm under Harley's scrutiny as though a shameful secret had been revealed. "It was...something to tell them," he said awkwardly. "I'm not exactly a man with many hobbies. I haven't done it since high school." But he'd loved it; he remembered that much. He ached with jealousy over Harley's God-given talent and the fact he made money from it.

Harley's eyes were tender. One hand stroked the bony prominence of Ryan's hip. "You could paint in my studio any time you wanted. I'd love to see your work."

For a moment Ryan's throat felt tight. "That's not exactly what I'm here for. After we're done, I won't be back."

Harley looked like Ryan had slapped him. If Ryan had been under any illusions about Harley's feelings for him before, now he wasn't. This wasn't any sort of cheap fuck for Harley. Not that five thousand dollars was cheap. Ryan doubted Harley had paid for sex before, and yet now he was desperate enough to? The reasons for that seemed to be obvious, but Ryan would rather not face them. He would rather not think that walking out of Harley's bedroom today would leave this man brokenhearted.

Harley lowered his head a moment and went still. Then his hand moved to circle Ryan's erection, and he said quietly, "In that case, I'd better get my money's worth. Can we go again?"

Ryan couldn't have refused him even if he wanted to. He told himself this was all to do with guilt and earning his ridiculous fee rather than the fact he was hard as a rock and needed to get off again.

He gripped Harley under the arms and dragged him up his body so they were torso to torso, Harley straddling his hips. Harley gave a soft moan of lascivious pleasure as their mouths met passionately, and the fire ignited in Ryan's stomach once again. His hands tightened on Harley's back, moving to his buttocks, massaging them, spreading them, maneuvering his partner so his cock was between them, and rubbed against his still-wet entrance.

Harley drew in his breath and sucked on Ryan's bottom lip, writhing, pressing down hard so Ryan felt himself engulfed.

In panic, he gripped Harley's hips to stay him. "Condom..." he protested with a gasp at the tightness squeezing the head of his cock.

Harley drew back, to his relief, even though Ryan had almost been lost. He reached over for a condom, rolled it on Ryan and covered it with lube. Then he straddled Ryan's waist again and lowered himself, forcing himself down inch by inch, sitting up, his head thrown back, gasping as he was impaled.

"Fuck..." Ryan groaned out, his clenching fingers leaving red marks on Harley's hips.

"Ryan..." Harley panted in reply, his hand gripping his cock. "Ryan..."

He jerked off, his body undulating sensually as he rode Ryan with an effortless rhythm, and something rose in Ryan's breast. Ryan was a man like any other, perfectly capable of having cheap sex with no emotions involved, perfectly happy with never seeing his lover again after a one-night stand. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt something during sex.

But now, staring up at Harley, at the flush on his face and across the top of his chest, at the lashes trembling on his cheeks and the way his back arched, he felt something more than an explosive rush to orgasm.

He felt the effects of six months without this man and this astonishing desperation for him. He felt need and desire and *relief*, and he was afraid.

He slid his palms slowly up over Harley's chest, his lover shuddering a little as Ryan squeezed his nipples, then he ran his hands down Harley's back, taking a firm hold of his ass and thrusting up hard into him.

Harley cried out, one hand pressed against Ryan's chest, the nails clawing, while the other one continued to work his cock swiftly. Ryan pushed his hand away impatiently and replaced it with his own, and Harley groaned and bucked into it. He fell forward to kiss Ryan, hands clutching his face, tongue lashing his, breath hot and heavy.

Ryan moved his hips faster, returned that kiss with equal passion and started to come. Harley was there just before him, though, stiffening and trembling on him, wrenching his mouth away to bury his face in Ryan's neck. Semen spurted onto his chest, accompanied by a few stifled gasps. Ryan came seconds later, his eyes squeezed shut, grunts of appreciation spilling from his mouth, thrusting up over and over into that warm, tight body before he collapsed, spent, beneath his lover.

Harley eased himself free within a few moments and fell gracefully onto his back. Ryan turned his head to glance at him. His torso gleamed with sweat and rose and fell rapidly. He had his eyes closed, his lips slightly parted.

He was beautiful, Ryan thought. He was wrong to feel that way about another man. He lay still and silent, gathering the strength to leave, the coward in him hoping Harley would fall asleep.

He got his wish. Harley's breaths became slow and even, and his body relaxed beside Ryan's. Ryan slid slowly to the edge of the bed. He reached over to the box of tissues on the bedside table and wiped Harley's fluids from his chest before he wrapped the condom in the handful of tissues. Then he found his boxers and pulled them up to his knees, followed by his jeans, before standing.

"Are you sneaking out without saying goodbye?"

Ryan froze in the act of pulling his jeans over his ass. Frostily he replied, "Do I need your permission to leave your bed now you own me?"

Harley was silent a moment before he spoke quietly. "I don't think for a moment that I own you. I paid you for a service, which you gave me—"

Ryan turned around, eyes flashing, interrupting. "Exactly, which means I'm now entitled to leave, or do I need to make you scream some more?"

Harley's mouth tightened as though he were sucking lemons. "You make it out to be such a hardship, Ryan, but I've never seen a straight man quite so...willing to perform."

There it was. Ryan almost flinched at the words. The barb he'd been expecting about his sexual prowess that day. He curled his lip scornfully. "Well, I don't know, Harley. I'd pretty much do man or beast for five grand. That amount of money tends to give me a hard-on."

He regretted his words instantly. The anger drained from Harley's face, and his eyes became luminous with hurt. He visibly swallowed as though he had something stuck in his throat.

"And that's all it was?" His voice was almost a whisper. "The money? You had no desire for me at all?"

Ryan stared down at Harley naked on the bed, his skin honey against the pale bedclothes, his hair endearingly tousled, and he almost shuddered at the memory of being buried within him, those velvet lips on his and his hot breath flowing into his own mouth.

"No," he responded.

He bent and picked up his shoes, socks and shirt and then he left the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He made his way down the spiral staircase and there put on his socks and slid his feet into his shoes, bending to lace them up.

As he straightened and pulled on his shirt, Maria came out of the living room. He blushed furiously before he reminded himself she would think he'd merely been modeling for Harley, even if it was strange that he was still getting dressed as he walked out the front door.

He smiled at her as best he could through the lump in his throat, and she offered him a goodbye, her eyes darting indiscreetly down his chiseled torso before he buttoned up his shirt. He waited until she'd disappeared down the hallway, then he took the folded check from his back pocket and laid it on the telephone table.

He opened the door and closed it behind him.

He wouldn't mind if the water was cold when he got home, because cold water was exactly what he needed to put out the fire which still raged within him. He hurried down the street. It was late. He'd spent longer pleasing Harley than he'd thought.

Two men carried items of furniture down the path which led to his apartment block, and Ryan stepped around them, vaguely thinking the couch they held looked like his own. He climbed the steps to the first floor and there he stopped, because his front door was open and there were men inside his apartment.

He charged inside and had floored one of the intruders with a punch before he recognized the man who came out of his bedroom—his landlord.

"Just take it easy, Ryan," the short, stocky man in the Hawaiian shirt said, raising his arms in placation as his colleague sullenly picked himself up from the floor.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ryan demanded, but his heart was already sinking because he knew.

"I gave you one month's notice," his landlord told him. "That expired today."

"But... I thought..." He stared at his landlord in confusion. "I thought it was next week."

"It's today. I'm sorry. I think I've been more than patient with you in the time you've been here. I've given you chance after chance and I'm going to lose four months' rent now."

Ryan's mouth opened and closed again. What could he say? He wasn't a man to beg for anything. Right about then, he kind of wished he'd taken the check from Harley.

"We're taking your furniture to storage. You can pick it up when you find another place," his landlord said, his tone softening. "Unless you want to take it now?"

Ryan shook his head. "I'll just get some clothes," he mumbled, and moved past him into the bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, Ryan sat on the wall overlooking the sea with his holdall beside him. He had two options. One, that he go to Jamie's house, or two, he find himself a spot on the beach for the night. Pride would make him choose the latter.

Chapter Eleven

Harley was silent all the way from home after Nathan picked him up for their date the next day and now, as they walked along the pier, still didn't speak, eyes hidden behind sunglasses and fixed straight ahead.

After his tussle with Ryan, he remained fragile, both mentally and physically. Not only did he ache all over and hurt when he moved, but his heart stung with disappointment and loss.

He would never see Ryan again. He wasn't sure he knew how to deal with that knowledge. Thrown into this mix was the confusing fact that Ryan had left the five thousand dollar check on the table in the hall. So Harley hadn't paid him for sex at all; Ryan had given it for free.

Harley didn't know what to make of that, and a part of him harbored some pathetic hope that it meant Ryan would be coming back, after he'd worked out his issues.

The sex had been something else. Harley had never in a million years imagined Ryan would please him so effortlessly, despite the many fantasies he'd had with his own dick in his hand during the preceding six months.

How he'd suffered and bled over Ryan, pining pointlessly for a straight man who would never be his. A straight man who'd kissed him back and fucked him like a trooper, he had to remind himself. Ryan might have been straight, but there must have been a part of him somewhere which found Harley attractive. Yeah, his dick, Harley thought. He'd offered it on a plate, and Ryan had taken it.

Nathan had stopped and walked to the railings to look out over the ocean, and when Harley followed suit, he sighed loudly. "What's wrong?" Even though he was more than used to Harley's silences and brooding in the six months since he'd last seen Ryan. "You've seen him, haven't you?" Nathan answered his own question with another. "Since the gallery."

Harley swallowed and turned away, debating how to answer. Nathan responded by cupping his cheek and turning his face back to him, removing his sunglasses with his other hand so he could look into his eyes. "Answer me," he said, his voice quiet, but his tone firm.

They remained looking at each other a moment before something registered at the periphery of Harley's vision: a figure in black stood staring at them. Nathan's hand fell from his face as Harley's head whipped around in shock.

"Well, isn't this cozy?" Ryan spat, his sapphire eyes flat and cold, his tone laced with venom. "Moving on already, Harley?"

Harley couldn't believe the spite on Ryan's face and how ugly it made him. He also couldn't understand his attitude when Ryan had been the one to walk out on *him*, when Harley was the one with all the unrequited feelings here, not Ryan. Before he could retort, Nathan stepped in.

"He moved on six months ago, *pal*, when he got rid of you. You missed your chance to have him warming your sheets at night. Now he's warming *mine*, so your jealousy's a bit fucking late coming."

Harley stared at Nathan, almost admiring him in that moment, seeing how Ryan's mouth tightened and how pale he turned. If he'd thought Ryan would slink away now, though, he'd underestimated his need to get the last word.

"Guess he didn't tell you I was in his bed last night, then. Or how I made him scream. I promise you, now he's had me, you're going to struggle to..." Ryan paused for emphasis, smirking lecherously. "...fill the void."

Harley's mouth dropped open in outrage, while Nathan approached the slur more actively. He punched Ryan in the face, sending the bigger man reeling back, but not knocking him down.

Touching his bleeding lip in surprise, Ryan stalked forward, gripped Nathan by the throat and threw him into the railings, pressing him against them, bending him backward over the ocean as though he intended to throw him from the pier.

"Let him go, asshole!" Harley cried, trying to drag Ryan away as Nathan gasped for breath under the bruising pressure of Ryan's hands.

People were watching, a couple of courageous men starting forward to break up the fight, but Ryan had already tossed Nathan aside almost disdainfully, so he sprawled onto the wooden planks. He turned to face Harley, breathing heavily, his face flushed and furious.

"You can do so much better," he said scornfully, his voice low.

"Like you, you mean?" Harley cried, before he could stop himself. "Because you're such a prize fucking catch?"

His heart sank at his own cruelty even before he saw the hurt blossom on Ryan's face. Ryan tried to hide it with that cool mask he presented to the world. He looked at Harley for one more moment with his features frozen into blankness and his eyes flashing, then he turned and stalked away.

Nathan had meanwhile picked himself up and was rubbing at his throat, glancing around at the crowd which had gathered with interest over the *ménage à trois*.

"I would have taken the big guy any day," Harley heard a young woman mutter as the people dispersed. "He was hot as fuck."

He watched Ryan's retreating figure crossing the road in the distance. With an apologetic look at Nathan, he darted after him.

He dodged traffic and ran down the street, gaining on Ryan, who walked swiftly. *What am I doing? Why am I chasing this asshole just asking for him to twist the knife one more time?* He had no answers. His anger blinded him to everything else.

“You come back here right now,” he yelled down the street. “You don’t spout that shit then run away like the pussy you are before I’m finished with you!”

Ryan froze in his tracks. He turned around slowly, the expression on his face angrier and colder than Harley had ever seen. “Before *you’re* finished with *me*?” he demanded, and he stalked forward furiously, grabbing Harley by the collar, oblivious to passersby. “Then why don’t we go somewhere more private and you can say your fucking piece?”

He dragged Harley bodily off the street and into an alleyway, hurling him against the wall so violently that Harley was stunned. He surged back at Ryan, smarting at the rough treatment, lifting his hand to smack him across the face as hard as he could.

“Why didn’t you take the check, Ryan?” he shouted as Ryan reeled back in shock. “You fucked me for free because you *wanted* to. You never had a better time in your *life* than you did with me!”

Ryan pushed him back against the wall, gripping him by the hair. A moment later, as their eyes met, flashing with passion, their lips collided fiercely.

Their bodies strained against each other’s, and Ryan pressed Harley harder and harder into the wall so Harley moaned, his arms around Ryan’s neck. Ryan’s hands gripped his ass, scooping him closer, lifting him against the bulge in his jeans to grind against him.

Harley gasped, the kiss breaking, and rough hands on his shoulders shoved him to his knees. Taken aback, he was confronted by Ryan fumbling the buttons of his jeans open, drawing his rigid cock free before he gripped Harley’s head in one large hand, bringing him forward.

Harley had no choice but to open his mouth, and as he sucked Ryan down, his lust turned to anger at the blatant power games the other man employed. He was blind enough with desire to suck Ryan off in this alleyway in public, in daylight, but not this way. Not with Ryan’s face still hard as stone, not with Ryan doing this to subjugate him, not to get off.

He looked up at Ryan with aggrieved eyes as he blew him, the other bucking his hips forward, his hand tight in Harley’s hair. Ryan’s eyes opened. They stared down at Harley intently, and his body went still, his gaze fixed, the expression on his face shifting to something else, something approaching anguish, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown.

He drew Harley abruptly to his feet and pressed him back to the wall, lips on his. He fumbled at Harley’s pants, palming his cock through them, drawing it quickly free and jerking him off roughly, swiftly.

Harley arched against him, reaching for Ryan, their hands and cocks bumping as they masturbated each other, their mouths heavy and wet with passion, tongues tangling.

Harley was close, his body engulfed by flames. His head fell back against the wall, and Ryan's mouth seared his neck, teeth and tongue attacking the sensitive skin, breath scorching him. He moaned loudly, fingers in Ryan's hair, holding his head there as he bucked into his hand, coming helplessly.

Harley shuddered long and hard, coming back to his senses only when Ryan moved away to fasten his jeans. Harley reached to pull him back because Ryan hadn't come and Harley very much wanted him to, but Ryan moved out of his grip, turning away.

"Hey." Harley grabbed his arm, pulling him back because no way was he finished with Ryan yet. No way at all. He only wanted to be close to him for as long as he could.

But Ryan shrugged him off, removing Harley's hand from his arm. For a moment, their eyes met, and once more the shutters were down. Harley read nothing but blankness in those sapphire eyes.

Ryan turned and walked away, leaving Harley in the alleyway, once more bereft.

Oh, Jesus, what have I done? Tell me that just didn't happen. Ryan walked blindly toward the stretch of beach he'd spent last night on and where he'd stashed his bag in some bushes. He'd been out on the pier looking for work, not expecting to bump into Harley, not expecting to end up with the other man pressed against a wall in a dirty alley, for God's sake.

His mouth was swollen where Nathan had punched him, and it burned like Harley's kiss was branded on it for all time. His still-hard dick twitched and leaked in his boxers. He needed to jerk off badly, or he would go insane.

He swerved into the first café he saw and made a beeline for the restroom at the back, not giving a damn what the patrons or the staff thought. He slammed and locked the door of the cubicle, then he freed himself frantically from his jeans. Bracing himself against the wall with one hand, legs spread and head bowed, he spat on his hand and jerked himself off roughly, quickly. As he imagined Harley on his knees with his mouth around his cock, Ryan's breath came in stifled groans, and it only took him a couple of minutes before he spurted over the wall, the name of his tormentor spilling from his lips.

He slumped to his knees, panting, eyes closed, praying for all this to go away.

He eventually made it back to the beach to rescue his bag, and he sat there in the sand with it, deep in thought. Taking an honest look inside himself for the first time, he asked when this was going to stop. When was he going to admit it to himself?

He'd been in purgatory for the last six months. There hadn't been a single day when he hadn't remembered the kiss and how it had made him feel. So many times he'd wanted to go to Harley's house, had even, on two occasions, got as far as the end of the street before turning back.

And he didn't know what he would do when he got there. He only knew he needed to with a compulsion he didn't understand. And yet he had resisted until he'd thought it would kill him. And two

nights ago at the gallery, he'd felt all that pain, all that loss rise up inside him, and he'd thought he would choke on it. Then he'd gone to Harley's house next day and fucked him and, for just the shortest time, those flames of agony had been quelled. Now, with his mouth burning again, an inferno consumed him once more.

That was why he'd left the check. How could he take money for something which had made him feel so good? He would be a fraud and a liar. Not just that, he was done with feeling cheap. He would never take money for sex again.

Nathan remained where Harley had left him, on the pier looking down into the water. As Harley approached his side, Nathan said in a low, trembling voice, "Oh, you must think I'm such a fool. Your ex puts me on my ass in front of all these people and you run after him and I'm still fucking here when you get back."

He turned to Harley with blazing eyes as Harley shook his head sorrowfully, shame-faced. "I'm sorry, Nathan. I'm so sorry."

"I don't want to hear it," Nathan cried.

Harley bit his lip. Lowering his head to stare down at the wooden planks, he said, "I love him. I can't help it. I'm sorry."

Harley paced the terrace back and forth in the dark, staring out to sea, grinding his teeth and pulling at his hair. Oh, God, Ryan was going to drive him out of his mind. He didn't know what he was going to do. He only knew he needed Ryan in his bed or he would lose the plot completely. Ryan had been such a goddamn stallion, bringing him to two explosive climaxes last night which nearly blew off his head and the same again in the alleyway today.

How could he doubt Ryan felt something for him when he'd performed that way then left the check behind? Hadn't that display in the alleyway sealed it completely, because where was Ryan's motive for tangling with him there, other than blind lust?

He had to have him, at the risk of Ryan rejecting him one more time for good. He had to abandon all his pride and beg Ryan to be his. Nothing else mattered.

He strode from the terrace, grasping his car keys from the office desk as he passed through.

Within minutes, Harley stood at Ryan's door with his legs trembling and his heart in his mouth. He knocked repeatedly before he let his head fall against it, bracing his hand there, his eyes closed. Was Ryan inside and ignoring him? Was he really such a coward? The misery rose up to consume him whole. It was done, it was all done. As he turned to walk away, the door opposite opened a crack. A dark Latino face peered out, the smell of cooking wafting behind her.

"You won't find him in, Mister," the woman informed him.

Harley stepped toward her. "Where is he?"

"He was thrown out last night," she told him. "Four months behind on his rent."

Harley's heart clenched in sorrow and pity. "Do you know where he went?"

She shook her head. "Sorry."

Harley sighed. He stood there a moment in thought. "Did you see which direction he went when he left?"

The woman nodded. She pointed over her right shoulder. "Toward the beach."

Chapter Twelve

Harley left his car on the boulevard and hurried down the steps to the beach. He walked along it methodically, scanning every single figure on the sand and in the sea, moving closer to the pier, his stomach clenched into tight knots of trepidation.

It was half an hour before he spotted Ryan at the top of the beach opposite the pier. Curled up against the wall, he used his bag for a pillow and his coat for a blanket. He had his eyes closed, turned on his side facing the sea.

Harley stood staring for long moments with palms damp and heart racing and then he stepped closer.

He knelt in front of Ryan, looking at the pale face washed in moonlight, the dark crescents of the lashes against the cheeks. He lifted his hand, and it trembled as he trailed his fingers down the chiseled curve of Ryan's jaw.

Ryan flinched violently and lurched to a seated position on the sand, fists out in front of him as though ready to defend himself from an attack. He stopped short in astonishment when he saw Harley.

"What are you doing here, Ryan?" Harley asked in a low voice.

Ryan's expression was cold, his lips set together. "What are *you* doing here? Are you fucking stalking me? Didn't you get enough this afternoon?"

Harley flushed because no, he certainly hadn't. How could anyone get enough of Ryan? He'd expected Ryan to still be angry, but his attitude nonetheless hurt. Did all this anger boil down to him seeing Harley with Nathan? What else could it be? He could hardly be angry about the result of their lovemaking. After all, Ryan had been the one to walk out and leave the check. If it had been up to Harley, they would still be in that bed now, fucking like bunnies.

"I went to your apartment and was told you'd been thrown out."

"What of it?" Ryan got up off the sand, so Harley did the same. "Come to gloat?"

"No." Harley frowned, confused. Why would Ryan accuse him of such spiteful things? Did he really not know yet how Harley felt about him, how he would do anything for him? But at the same time, Harley had to remember he'd committed the unpardonable sin of offering Ryan money for sex. The man had every right to think Harley was the lowest person to walk the earth. "Jesus, I don't want to see you out on the streets. Why didn't you come to me?"

"Come to you?" Ryan echoed angrily. "For what?"

Harley swallowed. "For a bed."

Ryan nodded. "Ah, yeah," he sneered, "a bed. And tell me Harley, what would the fee for your bed entail? A blowjob? Fucking 'til dawn?"

Harley closed his eyes and turned his head away. "Oh, Christ, no, Ryan. Look, I didn't..."

"Spare me," Ryan snarled and picked up his bag and coat.

"Wait." Harley grabbed his arm. "Just listen to me. I swear to God, I didn't mean to do any of that."

Ryan looked down at him, his face deeply shadowed, his eyes almost black. "Do what?"

Harley sighed. "Offer you money. That wasn't what..." He stopped because, to his shame, he could feel tears welling up, clogging his throat with six months' worth of misery. "I didn't want to do that. I just...didn't see any other way to...get what I wanted. It was so wrong of me, and I swear I never meant to make you feel cheap or used, and I know I did, but..." He couldn't speak anymore. He bowed his head and started to cry, a hand over his eyes.

There was complete silence from Ryan for a moment, then he moved closer to Harley. "Oh, look..." He sighed, and his hand cupped the back of Harley's head, his touch hesitant.

Harley tried to turn away. No way did he want this touch out of any sort of pity on Ryan's part. He hadn't cried in years, and what a way to end the drought now, in front of the straight boy he'd forced into his bed.

But Ryan stayed him with another hand on his shoulder, and Harley found himself stumbling closer, seeking the other man's comfort against his will. A moment later he was in Ryan's arms, Ryan holding him with that hand on his head, stroking his hair.

Harley pressed his face against his neck, breathing Ryan's familiar scent, and he never wanted to let go. He let out the hurt of the last six months there in Ryan's embrace, and Ryan merely held him and allowed him to vent.

Harley would never have expected this sort of behavior from Ryan in a million years. He doubted Ryan had the capacity himself to cry, and he wondered why he wasn't pouring scorn on him, calling him a pussy and pushing him away. But he didn't. He kept Harley close against his chest as Harley muttered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

When he'd finally composed himself, he drew back and stood there a moment, wiping at his eyes and sniffing. An awkward silence fell between them.

"Just...take the bed for the night, okay?" Harley said quietly with eyes lowered. "No strings, I swear. I won't touch you."

Ryan sighed. "I can't."

"Why not? You don't trust me, do you?"

Ryan took a long time replying. Finally he turned and started to walk away, muttering as he did, "I don't trust *myself*."

The blood surged in Harley's veins, and he trembled all over. He ran after Ryan. "What do you mean?"

"What do you *think* I mean?" Ryan said almost harshly, stopping and glaring at him with steel eyes.

"I...don't know," Harley stammered.

Ryan's mouth twisted into a smirk. "There's that innocent little boy act that I know and..."

"Love?" Harley finished for him with his heart beating so hard it felt like it would break his ribs.

Ryan bit his lip. "Now you're putting words in my mouth. I'll come home with you tonight, but you better behave yourself." He set off walking, leaving Harley staring after him.

Chapter Thirteen

Oh, thank you, God, thank you, Harley chanted silently as Ryan sat beside him in the passenger seat. His hands were damp on the wheel, and the atmosphere in the car was fraught with tension. *I don't trust myself.* The more he thought about those words, the stiffer his prick got. He tried to tell himself they meant nothing, but he didn't quite believe it. He'd been thrown from misery into confusion and some sort of bizarre hope. He dared not even start to think this way.

They exchanged no words on the way home, and Ryan followed him into the house, kicking off his shoes when Harley did and following him up the stairs.

Harley showed him into the spare room, because he wouldn't have dared try to take Ryan into his own, no matter how desperate he was. "Make yourself at home," he said nervously, flicking on the light.

Ryan put his bag and coat down on the bed. "Is it okay if I shower?"

Harley nodded. "Do you want anything to eat?"

Ryan shook his head. "I just want to sleep."

"Drink?" Harley asked.

"I'll have some juice, if you have any," Ryan replied.

"I'll leave you some by the bed while you're in the shower." Harley turned and left the room before his raging hormones got the better of him.

Maria had long ago finished for the night, and the kitchen was silent and dark, lit only by the clock on the oven and the moonlight. Harley switched on the light and poured two glasses of cranberry juice. He heard the shower start upstairs and the creaking of the bathroom floorboards. His imagination took over.

He saw himself climbing the stairs while stripping, opening the glass shower door and pressing against Ryan from behind.

He imagined Ryan starting, giving a groan as Harley rubbed himself against his buttocks before reaching around to palm Ryan's already hard dick.

Maybe he would find Ryan jerking off, and he would stand on the other side of the door watching him for a few seconds before saying, "Do you need some help with that?"

Ryan would jump and then say with a needy growl, "You bet I do."

He would drag Harley into the shower and push him face first against the wall, fingers probing between his buttocks, fingering him, getting him nice and ready. Then he'd fuck him against that wall with Harley's hands scrabbling against the wet tiles and loud moans coming from his mouth.

Harley drew in a shaky breath. He braced himself against the work surface while he stroked himself through his jeans and listened to the water running. Fuck, Ryan was going to kill him. If he didn't fuck him soon, Harley was going to die from excessive masturbation. He was rock hard, and there was a damp spot in his boxers where his cock was leaking.

He bit his lip, debating if he'd enough time, wondering if Ryan would come down and catch him, and then his libido won and he tore his pants open and jammed his hand into his boxers, jerking furiously.

The shower stopped and the floorboards creaked, but Harley didn't stop. He groaned and leaned against the work surface with his head lowered, panting hard for breath. His ass clenched as he imagined Ryan's thick cock driving into him, filling him with come.

Footsteps sounded on the landing now and a door opened. Ryan had gone into his room. The thought made his hand move quicker. Maybe Ryan was dressed in nothing but a towel, going into Harley's room, ready to throw him down on the bed and fuck him senseless. He liked that idea, and he stifled a groan with his hand over his mouth.

He heard his bedroom door close, but still he didn't stop. Ryan was surely going back to his own room, and Harley was nearly there.

Ryan was coming downstairs. Harley's heart lurched with such panic that he thought it would stop.

Oh fuck, *fuck*. He was moments away. He couldn't stop, he *needed* it.

He withdrew his hand as Ryan appeared at the door, but he had no time to fasten himself up, to pretend his pink cheeks and heavy breathing were innocent.

But his mouth fell open because Ryan wore nothing but a towel slung low around his hips, a towel which concealed nothing of the large bulge beneath. His naked, muscular torso gleamed with water. He held something in his hand, and Harley realized with a start why Ryan had gone into his room.

He held a condom and the tube of lubricant from Harley's bedside drawer.

Harley couldn't even manage a gasp of astonishment and arousal before Ryan moved into the room, strode purposefully across it, grasped Harley under the ass, lifted him and all but threw him backward over the table.

Ryan pinned him there, standing between his legs, wet torso soaking Harley's T-shirt, his mouth plundering his.

Harley gave a strangled moan of joy and returned the kiss, finding Ryan's tongue with his own.

He brought his legs up to wrap around Ryan's hips, lifting his pelvis, rubbing himself frantically against the tent which strained the towel Ryan wore. Ryan growled and pressed down harder on him, grinding himself against the bulge in Harley's open jeans, using both hands to shove up his T-shirt.

He stood quickly, then lowered his head, attacking Harley's exposed torso with his mouth.

"Fuck..." Harley ground out, grasping at Ryan's short hair, looking down at the tongue flicking over his nipple and the saliva which made it glisten and stand stiffly.

He reached out and yanked the towel from Ryan's hips, shuddering as it fell away and Ryan stood naked and to attention before him, his cock so long and thick that Harley's ass ached for it.

Ryan stood. Slowly and deliberately, he took hold of his hard cock and started to jerk off as Harley watched.

"Shit, don't tease. Give it to me..." Harley begged shamelessly, writhing on the table.

Ryan smiled while his hand lovingly stroked himself, positioning himself so his cock brushed against the thin material of Harley's boxers through the open fly of his jeans. "What were you doing when I walked in, Harley?" he asked in a low, sensual voice.

"Oh, fuck." Harley reached into his own jeans, down his boxers, and started to fondle himself while watching Ryan. "You know what I was doing."

"And I was doing the same in the shower. And then I asked myself why I was doing that when I was pretty sure I could get *you* to do it for me."

Harley nodded eagerly. "Anything you want," he said. "*Anything.*" He wasn't in the habit of promising sexual partners things like this, and he was almost embarrassed by his total submission to Ryan this way. Chances were he would regret this encounter. After all, Ryan's last statement had sounded much like a man who wanted to use another man for his own sexual pleasure with no feelings attached. He was already sure Ryan wasn't suffering the same emotional attachment as he. He shouldn't be doing this. He shouldn't let his little head rule his big head. He was only going to end up even more hurt. Ryan was clearly horny and lonely and sought the first willing hole he found.

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Anything?"

Harley bit his lip and nodded. He reached out and cupped Ryan's balls, rolling them in his palm, squeezing lightly.

Ryan's eyes went almost black with desire. He reached out and roughly stripped the T-shirt from Harley's body before he started to yank down his jeans. Harley assisted him ably, lifting both feet as Ryan pulled the socks from them.

Ryan stared down at the bulge in Harley's boxers and used one hand to massage him slowly through them, using his thumb on the head of his cock, rubbing the slit so a damp patch stained the thin cotton.

"If you carry on this way, I'm going to come before you even get me out of my boxers. You know that, right?" Harley's voice was unsteady.

"Then have some self-control," Ryan replied smartly and wrenched the underwear from him.

Harley shivered naked on the table as the other man perused him with hot eyes. *Get on with it!* he wanted to cry. But as much as he was baffled by this new, dominant, teasing side of Ryan, it was also undeniably hot. Never mind that Ryan was probably going to walk out the door straight after. Harley couldn't think of anything else beyond getting fucked.

Ryan smiled as Harley's desperate cock twitched against his belly. He squatted down, gripped Harley's shaft in one hand and started to blow him.

Harley's eyes rolled back in his head, and he grabbed at Ryan's hair. Oh, fuck, he was going to come right now, with that tongue lashing over the head of his cock and that mouth swallowing almost his entire length. He wasn't going to make it past the hors d'oeuvres. He held on for as long as he could with Ryan's hot mouth sliding wetly up and down his shaft, until he couldn't take anymore.

"Ryan..." he gasped out, and tried to push the other man off him as his entire body started to tremble.

Ryan lifted his head. He gripped Harley's cock hard and jerked him, bringing him off spectacularly all over Harley's stomach and chest. Harley shuddered and thrashed on the table, then let his head drop back with a thud, groaning softly in delight.

Ryan laughed. "You really don't have any self-control at all, do you?" he asked in amusement with a fond note in his voice.

Harley opened exhausted eyes and glared at him. "May I remind you I was two seconds away from coming when we started, so I think I did pretty well to last as long as I did, considering you walked in here in nothing but a towel, like every gay man's wet dream."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Know what I think?" He grabbed Harley by the hips and pulled him up off the table. "That you better make it up to me." And he spun Harley around and forced him face down.

Oh, fuck, this was just getting better and better. Harley couldn't remember the last time he'd been treated so masterfully, and he loved it. He was Ryan's slave right then, and his lover owned his body. He hoped Ryan used him mercilessly.

He squirmed on the table with his cock twitching again as Ryan lay over him and started to kiss the back of his neck. Ryan's rigid cock pressed against his ass, and Harley shifted back boldly against it, groaning. It didn't matter that he wasn't ready to get hard again; he still wanted to be fucked.

Ryan's breath was hot and rapid on Harley's skin. His teeth nipped at his shoulder and his tongue slid down his spine slowly and firmly. Harley's back arched and his nails scrabbled at the table. He let out a low moan as Ryan's mouth reached his left buttock and planted light kisses all over it, licking, sucking and biting. His hand massaged Harley's other cheek firmly, then dipped down between his legs to take hold of his balls.

Harley writhed, spreading his legs a little wider, feeling the first rush of blood back to his cock. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ryan reach for the tube of lubricant lying on the table beside him, and he tensed in excitement.

Ryan spread him open with one hand and with the other squeezed the tube over him so a generous amount of lube fell between his buttocks. Harley caught his breath in shock at the coldness and slid about on the table in bliss, his cock getting hard nicely now. Ryan's hand moved between his cheeks and two fingers started to rub at him, massaging the lube in firmly.

"You have a nice ass, Harley," his partner said quietly.

"Thank you," Harley gulped in reply, resisting the urge to tell Ryan that if it was so nice, he better hurry up and fuck it.

Ryan lowered his head and once more kissed Harley's buttocks as his fingers stroked, slowly but surely working him open.

Harley groaned as one finger slid inside and started to move gently backward and forward. He pushed back against it and reached beneath himself to stroke his cock.

"What're you doing down there, Harley?" Ryan questioned teasingly. "After your poor showing in round one, I hope you're not going to get carried away again."

Harley bit his lip and took his hand away. "I won't," he said, and caught his breath as Ryan slipped another finger into him.

Ryan took his time, his fingers sliding slickly in and out, building his rhythm, clearly in no hurry, while he bent down and sucked lightly at Harley's balls.

Harley groaned. He could barely contain himself from begging for it once again. His cock was rock hard, and his ass ached for more.

Ryan reached for the condom, and Harley heard the packet being torn open, the latex rolled on and the squirting of lube onto it. He shuddered in anticipation as Ryan rubbed his cock slowly against his entrance.

"Please..." Harley couldn't help but push back desperately.

"Please what?" Ryan leaned forward, pinning Harley to the table, gripping both wrists and holding them down before he pressed firmly into his ass.

"Oh, Jesus, oh, fuck...*fuck me*," Harley gabbled as he was penetrated, the iron-hard length gliding slickly into him all the way.

"My pleasure," Ryan growled, and he started to thrust, slowly, rhythmically, building his pace. They were both sweating, and their damp skin stuck together as the table rocked beneath them.

Harley's body arched beneath Ryan's. His wrists flexed in Ryan's hands, but he couldn't get free of the tight grip and he loved it. His cock slid against the smooth pine of the table with every thrust his lover made into him, giving him sweet friction, but at the same time, he wished he could jerk off.

His gasps and moans were loud, and Ryan was breathless behind him. He started to struggle to get free. Ryan released him and held him by the shoulders as he fucked him harder and faster. Harley slid a hand beneath himself and started to stroke, but it wasn't that easy when he was pinned flat to the table.

Ryan solved his problem. He stood, gripped his hips and pulled Harley back to the edge of the table, so only his torso was over it and he could get his hand around his cock and jerk off easily. This was more like it. Harley craned his head around and was rewarded when Ryan pulled him upright with one arm around his chest, swooped onto his mouth and kissed him.

Harley groaned, their tongues tangling, his hands moving behind him to grab at Ryan's ass. The position was limited, and Ryan shoved him back over the table. Harley cursed under his breath, leaning on one arm while he masturbated fiercely and reveled in the cock in his ass. When Ryan had fucked him that first time in his bed, he'd hit Harley's prostate on several occasions, even if he hadn't realised it. Now he rather hoped he could get Ryan to do the same again.

He tried to angle himself on the table so Ryan's cock went toward the front of his pelvis, wriggling and writhing and using Ryan like a dildo.

Ryan slowed and almost stopped, and his grip on Harley's hips loosened. "Show me how you want it," he said in a low voice, withdrawing nearly all the way.

Breathless with excitement, Harley reached behind himself and gripped the base of Ryan's shaft. He positioned himself right at the edge of the table with his ass thrust up. He moved backward swiftly to impale himself, and Ryan penetrated him again, hitting his prostate.

"Oh, *fuck!*"

"That what were you were looking for?" Ryan sounded amused.

"Fuck yes!"

"In that case, let's go for it. You have permission to come whenever you want."

"Why thank you, Sir," Harley shot back sarcastically, and earned a stinging slap on the ass for his trouble. This merely aroused him more, and he cried out as Ryan started to thrust purposefully into him again.

God, he was close. Ryan was touching his prostate with every thrust and he reached around Harley to enclose his cock, moving his hand away, jerking him swiftly. It felt like Harley had died and gone to heaven. His senses were scattered, and his ass and cock became the focus of his world. He could think of nothing else except the orgasm mounting throughout his body and how it was about to blow his head off.

His ass clenched hard around Ryan's cock and the climax hit him as he spurted jerkily over Ryan's fingers and the table, gasping out in his pleasure, his body convulsing.

Ryan's fingers gripped his ass with bruising pressure, keeping Harley in place as he rode out his own climax, thrusting several times hard and fast into him until he came slowly to a halt.

The only thing holding Harley up was his lover's hands. As soon as he loosened his grip, Harley collapsed onto the table.

Chapter Fourteen

Harley lay motionless on the table with Ryan still buried in him. Ryan's legs trembled with the after effects of orgasm, and he had a strong desire to sleep. What exactly had just happened? He'd lost complete control. He'd been rough. He suspected he'd hurt Harley.

His lover's hair was damp at the nape. Ryan lifted a hand and pushed his fingers through it, moving them up over Harley's scalp. "Did I hurt you?" he asked quietly.

"No," Harley replied in a mumble.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." Harley sighed. "It was fantastic."

He had that right. Ryan eased himself free and rolled off his condom, tying it in a knot. He went over to the trashcan and discarded it, then he moved stark naked to the sink and started to wash his hands.

Behind him, Harley said provocatively, "You better put that towel back on, mister, or we'll be going all night."

Ryan laughed uneasily because his senses were restored now. He dried his hands on a dishtowel and turned to see Harley pulling his boxers over his hips, his face flushed and a silly smile on it.

Something in Ryan's chest clenched. He looked away and plucked his towel from the floor, tying it securely around his waist. He'd told the truth when he'd said he'd been jerking off in the shower. He'd come back here with the best of intentions, perhaps out of guilt after making Harley cry because God, that had hurt. Just a bed for one night and resisting any seduction Harley might have had planned, and then as soon as the hot water hit him, he was thinking of the artist in the alleyway that afternoon, that warm body pressed against him, and he was suddenly stiff and desperate.

The time was long past for being coy. Harley wanted him and Ryan needed to get off, so he might as well give it to him. Never mind that little voice which told him he shouldn't lead Harley on by fucking him, when he'd had tangible proof that night of how Harley felt about him. Never mind that he would hurt him again. He was a slave to his dick just like any other man, and those who showed as much interest in him as Harley did were ripe pickings. This was what he told himself, but something deeper inside him wanted Harley for far different reasons.

"Are you okay?" Harley asked quietly, moving closer. Ryan nodded, looking down into his honey eyes. The guy always looked hot as fuck after sex, all hot and bothered with his hair all tousled and sweaty. He awkwardly returned the kiss Harley gave him, then turned away.

"Listen, I need some shut eye. I'm going to go up, if that's okay." He saw the immediate reaction on Harley's face to his snub and felt like the shit he was.

Harley moved over to the sink and took a cloth off it. Then he started to wipe his semen off the table. He waited until Ryan was at the door before he said, "So that was my payment for letting you stay, was it?"

Ryan turned back with a frown. "No, Harley," he protested.

"What was it then?" Harley's face was stony, his tone belligerent.

Ryan sighed. He was dog-tired and he was an asshole. He didn't want to do this now. But it was only right that Harley asked, even if Ryan wasn't sure he had a ready answer. He fumbled for words. "I...made you cry, and I felt sorry for you."

He regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth. Harley's face paled.

"You fucked me because you felt *sorry* for me?"

"No..." Ryan tried to say, reaching out to touch him, but the damage had been done.

Harley shoved him furiously backward, almost putting Ryan on his ass. He grabbed his discarded clothes from the floor and stalked past Ryan.

"Go to bed," he spat over his shoulder. "I want you out in the morning."

But Ryan wasn't one to be walked away from, and he always had to have the last word. "Just a minute," he snarled, chasing Harley into the hallway, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him back as he tried to go upstairs.

"Don't come the innocent with me," he growled. "You want me any way you can get me, you said so yourself, and you lay there and *begged* for it. So don't fucking start with the puppy-dog eyes. We're both big boys here."

Harley's face was white and pinched. He shrugged himself roughly free. "You bastard. I had you so fucking wrong. Get out of my house right now."

Ryan stared him down a moment, his guts churning with regret. To be sure he was the cruelest son of a bitch that ever lived, and he could see by Harley's face that this had done it. Whatever thing had once been going on here was over and done. After spending six months pining for this man, he'd lost him once again in the space of a couple of days. He was a fool, and he despised himself.

"No," he said abruptly without conscious thought and caught the other man once again by the arm. Harley was on the first stair when Ryan pulled him back, and he struggled and tried to say, "Get your fucking..." before Ryan pinned him against the banister and kissed him.

"No." The clothes fell from Harley's hands, and he turned his head away, trying to push Ryan back, but Ryan cupped his chin firmly in one hand and kissed him again.

"Yes, Harley," he said through it, "yes."

He was out of his mind. He didn't know what he was doing, only that he couldn't let Harley go this way. Harley's mouth inflamed him, made his entire body melt into desire, and the towel fell from his waist so his hard-on jabbed insistently into Harley's hip.

"No." It was a half-hearted groan this time, and Harley's head fell back so Ryan could devour his throat.

"Yes." Ryan lifted Harley, his legs around his waist, and carried him up the stairs.

Harley gasped, clinging to him, the fight gone from him as Ryan kissed him all the way up the stairs.

The rational part of Ryan's mind had ceased to work and he was on autopilot, his cock in control as he carried Harley into his room and dropped him on the bed. He knelt between his legs and tugged the boxers off him.

Harley immediately shifted over to the bedside table and withdrew a condom, tearing it open hurriedly and rolling it onto Ryan's rigid cock.

Ryan leaned down to kiss his lover, and Harley clutched at his shoulders, wrapping his legs around his back. The lube was downstairs, but a quick quest with his fingers told him Harley was still wet and open enough. He gripped himself and plunged inside.

Harley cursed loudly. His nails dug into Ryan's back and he kissed him frantically, their tongues entangling.

This position was their most intimate yet, and Ryan drew back to look down at Harley's beautiful face, the long, thick lashes veiling his eyes, small pants of breath spilling from his lips.

The other man was hard beneath him, and Ryan might have teased him about coming so quickly that first time, but he was more than impressed with Harley getting it up for a third time in less than an hour. He wondered if he would be here all night trying to get him off, though, and the thought didn't bother him. The way he was feeling, he would do anything Harley wanted.

He reached down and started to jerk Harley off, increasing the pace of his thrusts and biting at his lover's neck. Harley arched beneath him, his body undulating perfectly in time with Ryan's own.

The bed creaked beneath them as they moved together, the headboard banging against the wall. Ryan soon felt his lover start to clench around him, which was good because he was close himself. His lips nuzzled Harley's temple and his hand stroked the damp hair back from his forehead. He liked watching the ecstasy on his lover's face. He suspected he could never get tired of it.

Harley's mouth opened and he cried out, hips bucking up, his legs and ass tightening around Ryan. Ryan thrust into him another few times, watching as Harley came into his hand and over his stomach.

Ryan's hand milked every drop from Harley before he let go. He hadn't come, but was reluctant to carry on now because Harley was virtually comatose beneath him. He wasn't into necrophilia.

He stopped moving, and Harley opened his eyes suddenly. "I want to see you come," he said urgently with pupils hugely dilated, and he pushed at Ryan's hips so Ryan slid himself free.

Harley rolled the condom off him rapidly and dropped it on the bed, then he pulled Ryan back to him, between his legs.

Ryan knelt there and watched Harley's hand as it wrapped around him and started to jerk him off swiftly. Ryan groaned, getting back to the edge again quickly, his cock poised over Harley's abdomen, which was already liberally splashed with come.

Just the sight of Harley's face concentrating on bringing him off was enough. Their eyes met and Ryan gasped a couple of times before he spilled his load all over Harley's waiting body. He knelt there a moment with head bowed, trying to get his breath back, and he was further surprised when Harley sat up and put his mouth around his softening cock, licking every last drop from the slit with a wicked tongue.

Ryan squirmed a little and gripped his lover's hair, groaning before Harley pulled back with a small smile of satisfaction and flopped down on the bed. Ryan fell beside him, worn out. From the corner of his eye, he saw Harley reach for tissues and wipe the semen from his stomach. Harley turned onto his front and laid his face against Ryan's chest.

"I love you, Ryan," he said quietly with lips touching the spot where his heart beat.

Ryan stared down at him, but the other man's eyes were closed as though he couldn't bear to look him in the eye while he confessed this.

Ryan swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. He put an arm around Harley's shoulders and said gently, "I know you do. Go to sleep."

He leaned down to kiss Harley on the top of the head, then he closed his own eyes, willing himself toward sleep to escape his mental turmoil.

Chapter Fifteen

Ryan was still there in the morning when Harley awoke. He hadn't crept out after their rather impromptu lovemaking as Harley had presumed he would. They were still lying as they'd fallen asleep, on top of the covers, Ryan on his back with his arm around Harley.

Harley disentangled himself gently and got up. He went into the ensuite, closing the door as quietly as he could, and got into the shower.

He was sore between his legs, but that fact merely aroused him as he remembered how he came to be sore in the first place. He was already sporting morning wood as it was, and he merely grew harder as he started to soap himself.

He remembered every kiss and every touch from last night. He also remembered every cruel word Ryan had thrown at him and how Ryan had refused to leave his house.

No one had ever made Harley come three times in one session. No one had ever made him confess his love so shamelessly, especially after behaving like a complete bastard the way Ryan had.

He hated himself for his weakness. He crept back into the bedroom and pulled on pajama pants, then he drew the light throw from the foot of the bed and covered Ryan's glorious body before he pounced on it. He headed downstairs. It was after eleven and he expected Maria to have been and gone, perhaps despairing of Harley ever rising from his pit, but no, she was there, and as he entered the room, memories of last night overwhelmed him.

His eyes darted guiltily toward the kitchen table on which lay several bags of groceries, and his stomach turned in horror as he remembered a certain something they'd left discarded on there after their session the previous night.

Maria turned to face him with one eyebrow raised. "Are you looking for this?" She held up the tube of lube.

Harley wished he could sink through the floor. He mumbled an affirmative and almost snatched it from her before he hurried to the fridge and took out some orange juice.

"Is Ryan here?" she asked behind him as he took two glasses from the cupboard.

"Yeah," Harley muttered, his face so hot he was sure he was going to explode.

Maria squeaked in delight. "Oh, Harley, I'm guessing you boys had yourself some great fun down here last night."

Harley choked on a mouthful of orange juice. “He stayed because he’s been thrown out of his apartment,” he said stiffly. “I’m sure he’ll be leaving this morning.”

“Oh.” Maria looked as crestfallen as he felt. “Are you all right, my sweet?” She put an arm around his bare shoulders and squeezed him.

Harley nodded. “I’ll get my own breakfast later.” He picked up the glasses. “I’m going back up to bed.”

“Okay, then,” Maria said as he retreated from the kitchen. “Give my regards to Ryan.” Her face was studiously innocent as he turned back to glare at her.

Ryan had shifted onto his side facing the door when Harley got back to the bedroom. He placed one glass on the bedside table nearest Ryan and another on his own, along with the lube. He lay back down next to the other man, still tired and wondering if he could grab another hour before Ryan awoke and crept out of his bed.

Harley lay on his side facing Ryan, their bodies close but not touching, and he studied his perfect face a moment, the long sweep of his lashes against his cheeks and his sensual mouth. His body burned with the memory of last night. He closed his eyes and tried to settle into sleep, but this lasted only a minute before he itched to look at Ryan again.

Ryan was awake. The two watched each other for a moment while Harley fumbled for awkward words, staring into the sapphire eyes.

“Morning.”

“Morning.” Ryan’s voice was a little gruff with sleep. He sounded even sexier than usual.

“Sleep well?”

“Yeah.”

This was hardly a surprise, Harley thought smugly. He’d done more than enough to make sure Ryan slept like the dead.

“Good.”

There was silence, their eyes locked on each other’s.

Finally, Ryan broke it. “Do you want me to go now?”

Harley swallowed. He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Ryan gave a sigh and rolled onto his back. “I was an asshole last night. I was an asshole the day before when I fucked you. And I was an asshole six months ago. I’m sorry.”

Harley didn’t speak. He suspected Ryan was about to say way more than he ever had, and he didn’t want to prevent the other man from finally unburdening himself.

Ryan put the heel of his hand to his forehead for a minute as though he had a headache. His jaw clenched, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. “I don’t know why you would allow me into your home and your bed after the way I’ve treated you...”

“You *do* know why,” Harley couldn’t stop from interrupting.

Ryan’s eyes turned to his. He swallowed. “There’s nothing much to love about me, Harley. I don’t understand why you do.”

Harley gave a gentle smile. “Oh, there’s plenty to love about you.”

Ryan’s eyebrows drew together in incomprehension. There was the slightest moistening of his eyes. “I’m afraid,” his voice was barely a murmur. “Of how I feel about you.”

Harley was dumbstruck at this brutal frankness. He rolled onto his front, slinging an arm across Ryan’s waist, and buried his face against his neck. With his lips nuzzling, he whispered, “But you don’t have to be afraid, because I’m here.”

Ryan’s response was instant. An arm came around Harley’s back, holding him close, the other hand tangling in his hair. He kissed the top of his head. “I have nothing whatsoever to offer you.”

Harley lifted his head. “Yes, you do. *You*. That’s more than enough.”

Ryan bit his lip. One hand cupped Harley’s cheek, his thumb running over his top lip. “What do you want to do about this?” His voice remained low and intimate.

“I want you to stay here with me.”

“As what? Your boyfriend?”

“Call yourself whatever you want. My lover, my partner, my...” The word trembled on his mouth, and he fought it back for only a moment before he let it fall free. “Soulmate.”

He saw the instant reaction on Ryan’s face. His dark blue eyes were full to overflowing. He brought Harley’s face down to his with his hands and brushed his lips across his. “Romantic devil, aren’t you?” he asked in an unsteady whisper.

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” Harley leaned down to kiss him, and his fingers wiped away the tears spilling down Ryan’s cheeks.

Ryan gathered Harley against him, their limbs tangling, holding him hard.

“You’re something else, you know that, don’t you?” he muttered into Harley’s neck. “I never met anyone like you in my life before.”

Harley’s breast swelled with emotion. His fingers dug into Ryan’s muscular back. They lay silently in each other’s embrace for the longest time.

Harley had fallen asleep when he came back to wakefulness to feel the steady growth of Ryan’s erection against his own. He pressed his own cock forward, and Ryan shuddered with need. He groaned and possessed Harley’s mouth fiercely.

His kiss told Harley everything he needed to know. He drowned there wrapped in Ryan’s arms, the larger body consuming him, making him feel weak with desire and at the same time, protected.

Their tongues tangled, their breathing hot and rapid, and their mouths split apart so Harley could trail his lips down Ryan's neck, to his shoulder, along his clavicle to his sternum and then down his chest. He pushed Ryan firmly back as he slid down his body, lips playing with each nipple in turn, tonguing them as they rose into stiff little peaks and Ryan's back arched in pleasure.

He slid down farther, pressing kisses to that washboard stomach, pushing Ryan's thighs apart so he could settle between them. His only thought was to taste every part of Ryan he could reach, and if that meant introducing the other man to something he wasn't familiar with, so be it.

Ryan gasped as Harley went down on him without warning, sucking him as far down as he could go, drawing back to lick across the head of his rigid cock, squeezing his balls lightly in his palm.

Ryan writhed, groaning beneath him, looking at Harley from under his thick lashes. Harley smiled up at him saucily. His hand left his balls, and his fingers stroked the sensitive skin behind them lightly. Ryan evidently liked that. He moaned, and his legs moved a little farther apart. Harley's finger sought his entrance and stroked around it gently.

Ryan stiffened a little in shock. He tried to close his legs, but Harley was between them, still sucking his cock with enthusiasm. Ryan gripped Harley by the hair, not hard enough to hurt. "Don't," he said breathlessly.

"Let me," Harley urged, the blood pounding with excitement in his veins. "I won't hurt you, I swear."

Ryan stared down at him a moment, his face flushed, and then he did as he was told when Harley said in a whisper, "Put your knees up."

Ryan watched as Harley reached over for the lube and squirted some on his fingers. He settled back between Ryan's legs and started to suck him off again. Harley had never met a man so appreciative of a blowjob as Ryan, but then every single touch from him always seemed to get Ryan going, from what he could remember of their previous encounters. With Ryan so heavy and hot in his mouth and his hands gripping his hair, Harley throbbed with need.

Ryan flinched at the cold lube on him as Harley's finger touched his entrance, lightly at first, then applying more pressure. He rubbed around and over and pressed gently, the slick little hole fluttering and finally giving under him, opening up to grasp his finger.

Ryan drew in his breath, and Harley thought he would come, he was so aroused at doing this to his lover. He pressed his digit in farther and crooked his finger within Ryan, pressing on the little bump he could feel within.

Ryan almost shot off the bed. He cursed at the top of his voice, his cock almost choking Harley, his entire body shaking as though electrified. Harley eased back and looked up at him, again pressing on his prostate.

"Oh, my God..." Ryan groaned, thrashing from side to side. "What are you...?" His hand tightened in Harley's hair as Harley stroked him gently.

“Making you come.” Harley’s tongue delved into the wet slit of Ryan’s cock. “You want to, don’t you?”

“Fuck, yes,” was Ryan’s growled response. He seemed almost insensible with desire beneath Harley, trembling all over. He must have been close, but Harley hadn’t quite finished with him yet.

He let go of his cock and slid down to his balls, sucking one into his mouth. Ryan groaned in delight at the new sensation while Harley continued to finger him, moving on to the other ball, licking and nibbling before he moved down farther, tonguing at the skin behind them.

He felt Ryan stiffen as though he would protest again, but he knew his lover was too far gone to stop him this time. He pushed a second finger into him, Ryan’s wet entrance accepting him easily, and fucked him with them rhythmically while he insinuated his tongue between Ryan’s cheeks, licking with gentle, teasing strokes.

Ryan moaned in reluctant excitement. Harley lifted his head. “Turn over,” he said, drawing his fingers free.

With pupils huge with lust and his cock swollen and leaking, Ryan did as he was told, presenting himself on hands and knees, his spine arched, the black tattoo stark between his powerful shoulders, his ripe ass there for the taking.

Harley almost whimpered. He stroked his own stiff shaft and eyed the firm cheeks of Ryan’s backside. Helplessly he rubbed his cock slowly against Ryan’s ass and heard the other man catch his breath as he looked over his shoulder. *Oh, it would be so easy*, Harley thought as one hand spread Ryan open to him and he looked at the wet entrance just waiting for him. One thrust and he could be in there, riding Ryan for all he was worth.

The look in Ryan’s eyes brought back his self-control. That time was not now, but in the future, when they’d discussed it and Ryan had agreed to it. He smiled ruefully at Ryan, spread him with both hands and buried his face between his buttocks.

“Fuck...” Ryan ground out, shuddering as Harley’s tongue swept over him. “I always thought you were so innocent, Harley, when in fact you’re a dirty, dirty boy.”

Harley smiled. Ryan trembled and gripped the bed covers as Harley dug the tip of his tongue into him, reaching beneath him to cup his balls, massaging them. Ryan started to groan, his hand around his own straining shaft, his breath coming in gasps.

Harley flicked his tongue rapidly over the small, pulsing hole, wetting it thoroughly, and then he pushed two fingers smoothly inside, feeling the orgasm rising through Ryan’s body.

“Yes...” Ryan gasped. “Yes, Harley, oh, God, yes...” He let loose with a cry, his ass clenching hard around Harley’s fingers, his cock shooting jets of semen onto the bedcovers. Harley bit at one of his buttocks with a groan. He put a hand to himself and gave his cock a few swift tugs, unloading onto Ryan’s ass in a torrent of come.

Ryan quivered as the fluid hit him, and he sank onto the bed, moaning softly, barely conscious.

Harley, panting for breath and sweaty, fell onto Ryan's back, arms encircling his lover's torso, face against one buttock.

"I never met anyone like you before, either," Harley told his wonderful lover, continuing the conversation as though the very pleasant interlude hadn't happened. "Say you'll be mine."

Ryan reached behind him and gripped Harley by the wrist. Harley moved up his body and tucked himself into Ryan's side. Ryan rolled over to put one strong arm around him and nuzzled his neck.

"I'm yours," he whispered.

The two of them lay together in bed for the longest time, few words passing between them, saying everything they needed to with their touch. Ryan buried his face against Harley's neck, his eyes closed tight as he considered he'd just committed to being with another man—but he didn't have any doubts over Harley being the right one. They had a long road to travel together. Ryan knew that putting in hard work would reap the best rewards. He could trust Harley with his heart, because Harley would love and worship him forever.

He leaned close to his lover and kissed him softly. Harley's mouth stretched into a smile beneath his own. Ryan smiled too. Finally, after six months, he was where he wanted to be. From now on, he would always listen to his heart rather than his head.

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Scarlet Blackwell

Coming Soon:

Just Desserts

A quirky holiday romance about Faith, Hope, and...er...glow-in-the-dark condoms!

The Dickens with Love

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Three years ago, a scandal cost antiquarian “book hunter” James Winter everything that mattered to him: his job, his lover and his self-respect. But now the rich and unscrupulous Mr. Stephanopoulos has a proposition. A previously unpublished Christmas book by Charles Dickens has turned up in the hands of an English chemistry professor by the name of Sedgwick Crisparkle. Mr. S. wants that book at any price, and he needs James to get it for him. There’s just one catch. James can’t tell the nutty professor who the buyer is.

Actually, two catches. The nutty Professor Crisparkle turns out to be totally gorgeous—and on the prowl. Faster than you can say, “Old Saint Nick,” James is mixing business with pleasure...and in real danger of forgetting that this is just a holiday romance.

Just as they’re well on the way to having their peppermint sticks and eating them too, Sedgwick discovers the truth. James has been a very bad boy. And any chance Santa will bring him what he wants most is disappearing quicker than the Jolly Old Elf’s sleigh.

Warning: This book contains an ocelot, songs by America, Stardust martinis, tinsel, long-lost manuscripts, Faith, Hope and...Love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Dickens with Love:

I dreamed that an ocelot was chewing on a first edition of *A Christmas Carol*. When I tried to snatch the book away, it sank its fangs into my hand.

Head throbbing, I opened my eyes to watery green daylight. I was in a hotel room. A very comfortable hotel room that smelled of orange furniture polish and sex. The fluffy duvet and long draperies were in matching old-fashioned pink and gray cabbage rose print. Rain trickled down the windowpanes of a pair of French doors and sent sperm-shaped shadows twitching and jerking across the sage green walls.

My head hurt. That was because I’d had too much to drink. My hand hurt. That was because a strange man was lying on it.

I wriggled my hand out from under my naked companion and studied him. Sedgwick Crisparkle looked less angelic and more rakishly debauched that morning. He had quite a heavy beard and the longest eyelashes I’d ever seen on a guy. He did not snore, but he made a gentle puffing sound. He looked deeply asleep and unreasonably content.

I flexed my fingers a couple of times, then sat up carefully, wincing, and looked around for my clothes. They were on the floor near the door where I’d apparently dropped them. I inched over, trying not to wake my host, and got slowly, cautiously out of bed.

I had to stop halfway to the door to give my spinning head a rest. How the hell much had I had to drink the night before? Not that much really, but I hadn't eaten. Those shooting stars, or whatever they were called, packed an unexpected wallop. I tried to make out the numbers on my watch. They seemed very tiny. I peered harder.

Six thirty. Plenty of time. I didn't need to be at work until four. I could go home, sleep more, shower, and...call Mr. S.

"Not feeling well?"

I jumped, whimpered and clutched my head. "Must you shout?"

"Sorry." Part of what he said was lost in a gigantic yawn. "Didn't mean to startle you."

I heard the rustle of bedclothes being thrown back and the pad of bare feet on carpet. The drapes were jerked shut and the room returned to a soothing darkness. I heard him pad past me on his way back to bed, so when a warm hand was laid on my naked shoulder I did another of those starts and yelps.

"You have a very nervous disposition," Sedgwick said disapprovingly. "You ought to consider supplementing your diet with bee pollen."

I gazed up at him, opened my mouth. Closed it. Closed my eyes. Why not? I was clearly still dreaming. *Bee pollen?*

"I think you should come back to bed." I opened my eyes at that particular note in his voice. Sedgwick was smiling a funny sort of shy half-smile. "I think you'd feel much better in bed."

He put his arm around me and I permitted myself to be led back to bed.

When I woke the next time the sun was shining and a busboy was carefully lowering a large tray with covered dishes to the table in front of the fireplace.

"Lovely," Sedgwick was saying as he signed the busboy's chit.

I raised my head, peering owlishly over the edge of the duvet, and the busboy grinned at me before taking his bill book and departing.

When the door had safely closed, I climbed out of bed, pulled on my jeans—to Sedgwick's evident disappointment—and investigated the breakfast tray. A white teapot, two gold-rimmed china cups, a jar of honey, a small basket of muffins and nut breads, a bowl of fresh berries. One plate offered eggs Benedict with shaved honey ham and what appeared to be an herbed Hollandaise sauce. Another plate had thick round Belgian waffles, richly, sweetly scented of vanilla, cinnamon and topped with whipped cream, fresh strawberries and pecans.

"I wasn't sure what you liked," Sedgwick said at whatever he read in my expression. "We can share or I can order you something completely different." He was wearing the kind of gorgeous silk dressing gown people only wear in old movies and the horn-rimmed glasses, but even behind those severe glasses his face looked much younger and softer that morning.

I dropped down on the fat comfortable chair cattycorner to the table. “No. This is...amazing. Any of this is fine.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a breakfast like this.

He looked smug. “We’ll split everything down the middle.”

“We will if we eat all this.”

He laughed. “I admit I don’t usually eat like this, although I do like my breakfasts. I’m on holiday, though, so...when in Rome.”

“I’m very glad you’re not in Rome this morning.” I heard myself say that and cringed. Talk about sappy. I added quickly, “I’d be eating a bowl of Cheerios right now.”

“I’m glad I’m not in Rome too.” He smiled right into my eyes.

After that I couldn’t think of anything to say, and I devoted myself to eating that fantastic breakfast.

As vocal as Sedgwick had been in bed, he was not terribly chatty over breakfast. It seemed to be a replete and satisfied silence, though. He appeared content, and each time our eyes met, he offered that disarming smile.

In fact, it felt so natural and comfortable between us, I was encouraged to ask, “Will you let me have another look at *The Christmas Cake*?”

Sedgwick’s gaze dropped to the egg-topped muffin he was neatly cutting through. “No.”

“No?” I felt bewildered, not least by the brusqueness of this. “Why?”

He sighed. “After last night I’d hoped you’d let this go.”

What the hell did last night have to do with it? “I was hired to appraise the book. I’m being paid to do that. If I ‘let this go’ I also have to let go of that commission. Which I need.”

He said quietly, “James, I think we’re both realists.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“If you don’t stop now, you’re liable to spoil this, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. Spoil this? How is asking to see the book spoiling anything?” And now I was starting to get annoyed.

Behind the severe glasses, Sedgwick raised his green-gold eyes, gave me a long, direct stare.

“I don’t know what that look is supposed to mean.”

“It means we’re having a very nice time together. Let’s not ruin it by bringing up...unpleasant memories.”

It took me a beat or two to work out what he was referring to. The rush of anger and hurt left me feeling winded. Lack of oxygen made my voice come out flat and compressed. “I thought you didn’t believe the rumors about me.”

He said with all the dispassionate exactitude one could ask of a science teacher, “What I said was, no one accused you of being directly involved in murder or forgery. That is *all* I said.”

I'm sure my disbelief showed on my face. Hopefully nothing else showed. The laugh that escaped me took us both by surprise. "You're right. My mistake."

I got up, my knee knocking the edge of my plate and tipping it over. The waffle landed in a sticky plop face down on the plush carpet. I didn't give a fuck about that. I didn't give a fuck about anything at that point. It was all very clear, diamond-edged and razor-bright. He didn't trust me. He thought I had possibly been involved in murder and forgery, but he liked having sex with me—or possibly with anyone and I happened to be willing—and he didn't want me to spoil that by bringing up something as awkward as business.

Sedgwick rose too. "James."

I ignored him, finding my shirt and buttoning it up quickly. I got one of the buttonholes misaligned, so it hung crookedly—appropriately, it seemed—but I didn't care. Was not going to stay in that room one instant longer than I had to.

"James—?"

I was hunting with fierce attention for my other shoe. I found it under his side of the bed.

"Apparently I've offended you. I...didn't intend to."

Now that was almost funny. I slipped the shoe on. I was missing my socks, but that really seemed a small price to pay for getting out of there without committing murder for real.

"I'm not sure what I—oft times I put things more bluntly than I intend," Sedgwick was saying. He sounded a fraction impatient. "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

I found my jacket and headed for the door. He was right behind me.

"James, I really don't *see*—" He put a hand on my shoulder, and I spun around and shoved him back. The arm of the sofa caught him behind his thighs, and he half fell back over it, glasses crooked, blinking up in astonishment at me.

I said, "Enjoy the rest of your stay in L.A., asshole."

I managed not to slam the door on my way out.

Two men. One passion. No choice.

Beyond Meridian

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A Men in Space Story

Captain Rick Raine got more than he bargained for when he agreed to take on a brash young man as a crewmember along with contraband cargo. Karl's spirit intrigues him, but he didn't sign up for battling privateers, the United Planetary Alliance—or his traitorous body's response. Especially to a naïve kid who cheats at holo poker and knows a whole lot more than he should.

Deep in the heart of enemy space, Karl's goal, to rescue the woman who saved him from a life of sexual servitude, is finally close enough to touch. Unfortunately, so is Captain Raine, who becomes erotic poetry in motion when he pilots the ship. Raine's an honest thief, but Karl can't trust him with UPA secrets that could get them both killed.

But when Karl signed on for this mission, no one told him to hang on to his heart...

Warning: hot man-on-man sex, talking spaceships, eight-legged robots, space pirates, a potty-mouthed space cowboy, a beautiful woman in distress and a sad lack of laser sword battles.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Beyond Meridian:

Naturally the kid showed up at the crack of the dawn with his damn cargo. Okay, maybe it wasn't dawn exactly, but still, it was way too early for Raine, who hadn't gotten much sleep last night. The lights of the space dock had his eyes watering. Raine blinked at the kid—what was his name again? Kyle? Kasper? Karl? Karl! Karl looked way too smug, standing on the catwalk while Raine leaned against the hull of his ship. He'd opened the hatch when he got the alert that someone had entered his port.

"You serious? You found something that fast?" Raine shook his head.

Karl smiled, and damn, Raine had been right in his assessment the night before. The smile lit up his whole face, made those eyes sparkle. He didn't look like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders anymore. It suited him, turned him from a pretty boy into something special. Raine couldn't help but smile back.

"I'm just that good," the kid said with a wink, and now there was a surprise.

"You picked up that sense of humor I was talking about too."

Before Karl could reply, his mouth snapped shut and the smile drained from his face. At first Raine didn't know why, but then he turned and saw Leah coming out of the ship. She was adjusting the tie on her top, knotting it at the back of her neck. It was designed to show off the blue and lavender tattoo on her lower back, leaving much of the skin bare.

“Mmm, good morning,” she said as she stretched. “Thanks, Captain. I’ll have Madam update your tab.”

If looks could kill, Raine knew he’d be dead ten times over right now. He’d rather have the kid smiling than staring daggers. Course, the kid hadn’t seen anything yet.

As if right on cue, Michael emerged from the ship, his golden hair sticking up in all directions. He gave Raine a sleepy smile. “Thanks, Captain.”

“Stars,” Karl muttered, crossing his arms and looking away as Raine saw the two workers off, a kiss for Leah and a nice ass squeeze for Michael.

Raine ignored the death glare for the moment. “Where’s this cargo of yours, kid?”

“Getting inspected. It’ll need your authorization before it can be sent to your dock.”

“I hope you negotiated a damn good price.” Raine walked along the gangplank toward the wall of the spaceport, where he could access his account and authorize the shipment. “Where are we taking it anyway?”

“Neo Delhi.”

Raine rolled his eyes. It wouldn’t be anything fun, then. Neo Delhi was ridiculously picky about what was and was not let onto the planet.

He punched in his code and skimmed the authorization request. “And how much are we getting paid?”

“It’s twelve grand for the shipment. You can keep the profit. Like I said, I just need transport to Mendhem.”

“And transport back. I didn’t miss that part. Wasn’t that drunk last night.” Twelve grand was more than fair.

“No, you were too busy doing other things last night.”

Raine punched in his approval for the cargo before whirling around. “What’s wrong, kid, you have a problem with sex?”

He was gratified to see a pink blush rise on the kid’s cheeks, pleased at embarrassing him. Karl would really need to relax if he planned on traveling with Raine.

“I have a problem with people paying for it,” Karl said through gritted teeth.

“You are really on the wrong planet, then.” Raine closed out his transaction with the terminal. The cargo would be delivered as soon as it cleared inspection. “I’m a businessman. I don’t have a problem with making a business transaction. It’s not like I didn’t deliver on my part of the bargain. I get what I paid for and they get a little more toward clearing out their contracts.”

Karl snorted. “Right. What doesn’t go to the Madam or Sir for room and board and whatever other fees they can think of. You’re living in a dreamland if you think it’s a fair transaction.”

“Look, kid, I don’t give a shit about saving the solar system and all that. The arrangement is what it is.”

“Right.” But those eyes stayed hard, like two shards of cold blue glass.

It sounded like a damn good time to change the subject. Raine moved back toward his ship. “What the hell is the cargo, anyway?”

“The official version?”

He turned and raised an eyebrow at the kid who hadn’t moved. “What’s the contraband?” Because honestly, you didn’t pay twelve grand to take just anything to Neo Delhi.

Karl smirked again, though this smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Lingerie.”

Raine barked out a laugh. Must be some kinky shit, because they didn’t let that kind of stuff in past customs on Neo Delhi. “Hidden in what?”

“Crates of clothing for sale. There are false bottoms.”

Trust the kid to find some shady deals his first time out. Raine shook his head. “Well, come on. I think it’s about time I show you around my ship.”

It was worth it just to see the kid smile again.

Just when Karl thought he had Rick Raine figured out, the man went and did something else that surprised him. He’d seen the arrogant trader in the bar, the oversexed rogue on the gangplank, and now, as Raine showed off his ship, Karl saw something else, something he couldn’t quite identify. There was affection in his voice, and if Raine had been talking about a person, Karl would have said it was love. He even caressed the hull, showing off strong, well-formed fingers that made Karl wonder what else those hands were good at doing.

He shook himself out of those thoughts, forcing himself to pay attention.

“She’s a modified F2400 series out of Heijing. I had all her engines refitted two years ago, so she’s almost brand new.” Raine spoke as they entered the ship. “Standard crew for a ship of this kind is six. There are two sets of personal quarters—one for the captain and one for the first mate. Berths in the hull for the remaining crew.”

“Yet you run her by yourself?” Karl followed on Raine’s heels, trying to take in all the details, memorizing the way through the cargo hold and past the personal quarters, up toward the bridge.

“I have two maintenance bots,” Raine explained. “They keep the engines going. Fine repairs I do myself. And as for piloting her, well, Dina all but pilots herself.”

Karl opened his mouth to ask about that, but they’d stepped on the bridge at that point and the front wall sparked into life. A woman appeared on the screen, with long chestnut hair and blue eyes. She paid more than a passing resemblance to the ship’s captain and Karl wondered if that wasn’t intentional.

“Good morning, Captain. Unknown individual on the bridge.”

“You have an AI,” Karl breathed. He’d only heard about technology like this. They certainly didn’t have anything like it in the UPA.

“Dina, this is Karl. He will act as first mate on our next cargo run. Karl, this is Dina.”

“Um, nice to meet you.” Karl waved to the image on the screen, unsure how to act toward the ship’s personality.

“A pleasure to meet you as well, First Mate Karl.”

He cringed. “Just Karl is fine. Thanks.”

When he turned back to Raine, the man was giving him an odd look, eyebrows scrunched together as if deep in thought. Karl didn’t quite know what to make of that. He looked around the rest of the bridge, noting the lack of what seemed to him to be standard bridge equipment. There was no navigator’s helm, no other screens except for the large front wall. A few panels took up the places between the two seats welded into the floor, but Karl didn’t see the standard controls for actually piloting. Did Dina really do all the flying herself?

“Captain, you have fifteen messages from the space port taxation authority. You owe twenty-one hundred on the dry dock.”

“Fuck,” Raine muttered. “Your supplier didn’t happen to advance you any of that cash, did they?”

Still a bit caught up in his thoughts, Karl shook his head. “What? Uh. No. Payment upon receipt.”

“Course. How much you got liquid, kid? I need to pay off the port authority and resupply before we head out.”

Karl had managed to get an account for his use on this mission. It wasn’t unlimited however, and he knew he needed to reserve much of it for the rest of his journey, for getting Sam out even if he had to buy her himself. He did plan on paying Raine for the transport, just not right now. He wasn’t that naïve; he knew Raine could take the money and run. “I can front you a grand,” he said carefully, hoping that sounded reasonable.

Raine frowned. “Damn it. Well, kid, looks like we need to raise some capital before we can get the hell out of here. Luckily, the casinos are open.”

Karl blinked at him. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Gambling to earn money?” It sounded like a terrible idea to him.

“It’s the only way, kid. Unless you can magic up the twenty-one hundred in back taxes, the ship ain’t leaving dry dock. And that means you and me both are stuck here. No cargo gets delivered. No trip to Mendhem.”

“I could just find another ship,” Karl said, marveling at the cheek of this guy.

“Cargo is already on its way to my hold, kid. No spacer is gonna want to step on my toes. C’mom.”

Karl wondered when exactly he’d lost control of the situation. Ever since arriving on Meridian it seemed his steps had carried him along, caught up in what he’d set in motion, unable to stop. He couldn’t go back even if he wanted to. Squaring his shoulders, he bit out, “Fine.”

Raine gave him a lazy smile with heavy-lidded eyes. “You’ll see, kid, it’ll be all right.”

Karl wished he could believe him.



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