

An architectural drawing of a house plan is shown, featuring various rooms and dimensions. A yellow pencil and a pair of compasses are placed on the drawing. The drawing includes labels such as '+7.755', '+6.570', '7005', and '795'.

# SWEET SURRENDER

A photograph of a small, white, single-story house with a red roof and a red chimney. The house has a gabled roof with decorative brackets under the eaves. It is surrounded by a green lawn and a tree with yellow autumn leaves on the left.

ASHLEIGH WALTON

This is for all those who believed in me even when I didn't, especially Joanne, Paola, and Tammy. A special thank you to Vern, Beth, Barbara, and Greg for all their support and help.

## Chapter 1

DEREK assessed himself carefully in the mirror. He adjusted his tie, then fiddled with his dark hair for a moment, but decided it would be better not to touch it any more. The tie looked nice as it was, and once he left the mirror, he'd just never look in one again. If his hair was sticking up all over the place, he'd rather not know about it. He leaned in close to check for any blemishes that may have been hiding earlier. Nope, just his regular old face stared back at him. He stood straight and ran his hand down the lavender and gray paisley silk tie, second-guessing himself again. Maybe this was too dressy.

"Hey, pretty snazzy," Brenden said, entering the bathroom.

"Do you mind?" Derek said with mild annoyance. "I'm trying to get ready here."

They were only two years apart, both in college, and sharing a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment off campus. He and his brother were pretty tight, but sometimes Brenden was way too nosy.

"I just have to pee, jeez!" his younger brother complained. "The door was open, for chrissake."

"Fine," Derek grumbled before leaving the bathroom for the sanctuary of his bedroom.

He was contemplating his new shoes and whether he should have worn them around the apartment for a few days, when Brenden came in and flopped down onto the bed. “What are you so worried about?”

Derek gave him a cross look. “Who says I’m worried?”

“Jesus, you’ve been getting ready for two hours. You act like you’ve never been on a date before.”

“Well... I haven’t. Not for a long time.”

“I know,” Brenden said quietly. “Give yourself a break, dude. You know, *you* may not like him.”

Derek huffed out an ironic laugh. “Not fuckin’ likely. You saw his picture. He’s totally hot.”

“Yeah, and I’m lookin’ at you. You look *good*, bro.” Derek looked down at himself, not sure Brenden saw anything more than the older brother he loved and admired. Brenden heaved a huge sigh. “Why can’t you see it?”

“What, that I’m a total dweeb?”

Brenden sat up quickly, his face angry and tight. “I thought we were all done with this shit! Fuck, Derek, you aren’t a fat kid any more. Stop feelin’ sorry for yourself, man. Look at how many responses you got from that ad.”

“It doesn’t matter how many I got. Most of those were just wanting sex.”

“And how many of them were droolin’ over that picture of you?”

“Who cares how I look, doofus? I gotta at least act like I know what to do on a date. What do I talk about? What if he wants to go to a club and dance? I hate dancing. I’ve spent most of my life hiding behind all that fat, and now that it’s gone, I don’t know what to do. I can’t be the charming fat

guy or the clown trying to make people laugh instead of stare.”

“One thing you still are is obsessive compulsive,” Brenden said with a grin. “What the fuck difference does it make if your shoes are too new?”

Derek cringed at Brenden’s ability to see through him so easily.

“Go out and enjoy the dinner at least.”

“But, what if...?”

“You’re gonna ‘what if’ your life away. I thought you lost all that weight so you could go out and do the things you always wanted to do. Well... isn’t this one of the things you’ve wanted? To find a boyfriend to treat you decent and not like shit?”

“Yeah,” Derek admitted softly.

“So put your goddamn shoes on and get your ass moving, or you’ll be late. You know how you hate when someone keeps *you* waiting.”

“All right, all right,” he said with a sigh, still feeling unsure and only slightly less dweebish. Maybe he could just leave the apartment for awhile, waste some time at one of the bookstores in town, and then come home and tell Brenden it was a bust. But once again, Brenden was two steps ahead of him.

“Look, man, if you don’t go out with this guy, then you’ll have to get your nerve up all over again the next time someone asks you out.”

“You’re right,” Derek sighed as he stepped into his shoes. “Are you going to Shana’s tonight?”

“Nope, she’s coming over here.”

“Why?” he asked, his voice bordering on a whine.

“C’mon, you know she loves you,” Brenden said, still grinning. “It took all my charm to convince her we couldn’t *accidentally* show up at the same restaurant as you guys.”

“Oh Jesus,” Derek said with a loud sigh and roll of his eyes.

“Look at it this way, if the date is terrible, you can have all the sympathy you want from Shana.”

“Brenden,” Derek complained. “C’mon. I don’t want her asking thousands of questions, especially if it goes to shit. You’re her boyfriend, can’t you just tell her...?”

“We’re talkin’ about Shana here. Since when have I ever been able to tell her to do anything? Besides if you stay out late, maybe she’ll fall asleep before you get back.”

Under normal circumstances, Derek liked Shana a lot. She was good for Brenden, tempering his party-boy tendencies with her level head and her desire to do well in her own studies. However Derek was more of a private person. He wanted to keep this date for himself. Good, bad, or indifferent, it was going to be his date, and he didn’t want people making it a big deal.

Of course that would have worked better if Derek hadn’t been the main person making an issue out of the date in the first place. Brenden was right. Better go and get it over with, and then he could move on.

“Okay, guess I’ll see you later, then,” he said, carefully slipping his suit jacket off the hanger.

It didn’t surprise him that Brenden followed him to the front door of their apartment. They didn’t say anything.

Derek just turned and gave him a small wave goodbye, Brenden countering with a thumbs up.

Derek drove to the small Italian restaurant unable to keep his thoughts away from Gerry. His date. The guy who had answered his personal ad. The one who... oh Christ, he had to stop this. Gerry was the only guy who had written more than *Hey baby, I can show you a good time* or something equally as lame. Gerry had filled his two paragraphs with enough details about himself to make Derek feel comfortable about responding back and included a photo. Gerry was thirty years old, eight years Derek's senior. He was self-employed, running a small landscaping business. After a few e-mail exchanges, they decided to meet. A public place, of course, and Gerry had suggested Lembo's.

Derek had never heard of the restaurant before but got the driving directions from the Internet several days ago. He had already done a test run, just to make sure he wouldn't get lost. Thankfully they also had their menu online, and he was able to pick out exactly what he should eat. He checked his watch after parking the car and saw that he was still a little early, leaving plenty of time to use the bathroom and wash the nervous sweat from his hands.

Looking down at the sink and the lather he worked up between his hands, he never once glanced into the mirror. After he dried his hands, he grabbed hold of the door handle and took a deep, cleansing breath. Everything was going to be fine. *He* was going to be fine. Another breath, and then he was out the door and up to the hostess's podium.

"Good evening, sir," a young, blonde, petite woman greeted him. Her smile seemed a bit forced, but Derek

supposed he'd get tired of having to smile all the time, too, if he had to do it for his job.

"Hello," he said, returning the smile automatically. "I'm meeting someone, and I'm not sure if he's here yet." His heart started beating double-time, and he tried not to look past her and into the dining room.

"Are you Derek?"

"Yes," he said slowly, taken somewhat by surprise.

"Your party is waiting for you." Her smile now seemed warm and genuine. "Follow me, please."

She led the way to a small round table in the back of the restaurant as she politely chatted with him, asking how his day was and so forth. He answered absently as he took in his surroundings. He was pleased to see that the tables were not situated too close together, affording an intimate dining atmosphere. Gerry was already at the table looking over the menu and as they got closer to the table, Derek was relieved to see that the photo had been genuine. In fact, if anything, the picture didn't do him justice. Gerry was ruggedly handsome, with short-cropped brown hair.

Gerry must have heard their approach because he stood, a smile at the ready that showed off the dimples Derek already found irresistible. He hadn't lied about being tall, either. Derek was just shy of six feet, and Gerry only had a couple of inches on him.

"Thank you, Kimberly," Gerry said, his eyes still on Derek.

"Enjoy your meal, gentlemen. Your server will be with you in a few moments," Kimberly said before walking off.



“God, it’s great to finally meet you,” Gerry said, taking his seat again, gesturing for Derek to have a seat as well.

Derek did so, asking the only question that popped into his addled brain. “You know her?”

“Hmm? Who?” Gerry asked with confusion.

“The hostess,” Derek said quietly, canting his head toward Kimberly’s retreating form.

“No,” Gerry answered with a grin. “Just read her nametag.”

“Oh,” Derek said, quickly looking down at his menu as he felt the heat creeping into his cheeks. He had trouble seeing the menu clearly, and he was so nervous, all his preparation was for naught. He couldn’t remember his carefully chosen meal; the only thing running through his head right now was the fact that he was really here. And so was Gerry.

“I like your tie,” Gerry said softly. The low timbre of Gerry’s voice sent a tingle up Derek’s spine, and he looked up quickly as his fingers fluttered around his tie. He now noticed that Gerry was dressed far more casually in just a white dress shirt, the top button left open.

“Uh, I just bought it,” Derek confessed.

“For tonight?” Gerry asked, his voice raising a pitch and his eyebrows lifting in surprise, but the smile was friendly.

“I thought this place was more formal,” he said, looking discreetly around at the other diners. Most were dressed up, but a few were in casual attire.

“I was pretty nervous, and afraid if I wore a jacket and a tie, I’d have sweated through the jacket in no time flat. Not a

good first impression to be stinking up the joint, eh?” Gerry said with a chuckle.

Derek self-consciously wiped his hands slowly down his thighs. He didn’t think Gerry was making fun of him, and he couldn’t imagine Gerry being nervous about anything. He exuded confidence. Perhaps it was Gerry’s way to make him feel comfortable.

“I needed a new suit anyway,” Derek said with small smile as the waiter came to their table.

Derek quickly fished his glasses from the inside pocket of his suit and slipped them on as the waiter introduced himself as Paul. He took their order, Derek remembering his choices once he could actually read the menu. They decided to share a bottle of wine, and it gave Derek a little thrill to listen to Gerry question the waiter about their wine selection. Wine was one of the few alcoholic beverages Derek liked, and he was enjoying becoming quite the wine aficionado. It was nice to see that Gerry seemed to have some knowledge about it was well.

“You look good in those,” Gerry said, his voice going low and deep again.

“Huh?” he said absently as he slipped his glasses back in his pocket.

“Your glasses.”

“Oh, I only need them for reading and working on the computer. I’ll probably need them for driving in a few years.” He felt a little funny that Gerry liked seeing him wearing his glasses. Personally Derek hated them, and one of the first things he intended to do once he got some free time was to have corrective laser surgery.

Gerry studied him for a moment before asking, “So, you made it through all your finals okay?”

“Yes, thank God!” Derek said with a sigh of relief. In one of his e-mails to Gerry he stated that he’d feel like celebrating at the end of the week because he’d be done with school until the fall when he continued on with his studies. “Now I just have to get through graduation.”

“Are your parents making a big deal of it, then?”

“Not really, I just hate all the crap that goes with it. The ceremony, all those people, and it’s going to be outside. Besides I’m not really finished with school. I’ll be going into the graduate program next.”

“Really?” Gerry said, leaning in closer. “What’s your field of study?”

“Architecture.”

“That’s great! I know a little about that, and I really admire you guys.”

“You do?”

“Sure. All the math and drawing and shit. You have to know what a building can take structurally, and there’s so much new technology to keep up on. You’re going to help build beautiful things, Derek.”

Derek was momentarily sidetracked by the sincerity in Gerry’s voice. Most people didn’t understand much about architecture, and the reaction he usually got when he told them about his field of study was a nod of the head and some type of non-committal word like *cool*. “You do the same with landscaping.”

“Mine’s a small business,” Gerry said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I do mowing and trimming, some planting. I don’t come up with any plans or designs.”

“I bet you do more than you think,” Derek said as the waiter came back with their drinks. Paul presented the wine, opened it, and poured some for tasting. Once Gerry gave his final approval, Paul poured a glass for Derek, then filled up Gerry’s glass, and with a promise of bringing their salads next, left the table.

“Well, let’s just say what we do results in beautiful things,” Gerry said with another smile, lifting his glass.

“I can agree with that,” Derek said, lifting his glass in mutual respect for their creative professions.

They chatted about their plans for the upcoming summer while they waited for their salads. Derek would be interning at a local architectural firm and foregoing any vacation he might have had for the experience he would gain. The season would be busy for Gerry as well—as long as there was a good mixture of sun and rain.

Once their food came, Derek could feel Gerry’s eyes on him as Derek carefully poured a small amount of dressing onto his salad.

“Health-conscious?” Gerry asked.

“Trying to be,” he answered, sitting back slightly, feeling a little awkward about eating now.

“I need to be more like that.”

“Are you kidding me?” Derek said incredulously. “You look good. I bet you don’t have an ounce of fat on you.”

Gerry chuckled, saying, “If we weren’t in a restaurant I’d lift my shirt and show you I can pinch more than an inch. I

eat junk all the time, and I don't step foot in a gym. I probably need to lose a good twenty pounds."

"Don't say that," Derek said quietly, taking the cloth napkin from his lap and placing it on the table.

"Oh, trust me," Gerry continued, his voice filled with humor. "I am so...."

"Don't," Derek warned gravely, starting to feel queasy. "For God's sake, don't say that you're fat." Gerry set down his fork and looked at Derek with questioning eyes. "Sorry," Derek mumbled.

"No, I'm the one that's sorry," Gerry said softly. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"I know. It's just that... I *was* fat. In fact, the term morbidly obese was what my doctor told me. It took almost two years to get to this point," he said, gesturing toward himself.

"That's fantastic!"

"Not when you hate working out and you love junk food," Derek said with a small grin.

"I can imagine," Gerry said, his eyes still wide with surprise.

"Do you really think you're fat?"

After a moment's hesitation, Gerry confessed, "No. I just thought it might help you relax a little. You know, make fun of myself a little."

"You're the first date I've had in a long time," Derek said with a self-deprecating sigh. "Nothing would make me relax more than you being yourself. My brother had to practically toss me out of the apartment tonight."

“I’m glad he did,” Gerry said, his smile returning.

Now that he’d gotten one of his most guarded secrets out in the open, Derek was able to ask his next question. “Why did you want to go out with me anyway? I was serious in my ad about wanting to find a relationship. I’m young, but I’m done with all the one-nighters and sleeping around.”

“That’s what I liked about you. Your ad made it sound like you had your head on straight, and we were looking for the same thing. I’m happy to hear you’re all done with that sleeping around crap. It’s not very fulfilling or safe.”

“Very true. And you? Have you finished with all that?”

“A long time ago,” Gerry assured him. “It was getting me absolutely nowhere.”

Paul was back with their main course and it was nice to have the more serious conversation out of the way so they could relax and enjoy their food and each other’s company.

They talked about a variety of subjects. Gerry told him about his mom, who had raised him on her own after his father took off when Gerry was five. He also told Derek how he was an average student, couldn’t wait to get out of high school, having no desire for higher education. However, with dreams and aspirations to have a business of his own and needing the tools necessary to make it successful, he had enrolled in college by the time he was twenty-one. He’d had one serious relationship in his mid-twenties, but hadn’t been ready for another one until now.

Derek countered with how his parents had been married since 1984 and had a pretty decent marriage. They had wanted children right away, but it took a few years before Derek was born, and then Brenden followed a couple of

years later. Derek had always loved learning but was terrible at sports. He fell into bad eating habits and steadily gained weight from the first grade and all the way through high school. When he started having problems sleeping a couple of years ago, his mom was finally able to convince him to go to the doctor. He was diagnosed with sleep apnea and borderline diabetes. The doctor had been harsh with him, giving him the facts that could be his future, which could be cut tragically short if he didn't lose weight.

He'd had a couple of crap boyfriends, one in high school who demanded they keep their relationship a secret, which, at the time, wasn't a big deal for Derek because he hadn't yet come out to his family. And then he had another one when he started to lose weight. That guy was just a party boy and only interested in using Derek for three things: an apartment to crash at, a car to use at his disposal, and a body to use when he hadn't found a better offer. Unfortunately it took Derek awhile to figure that out, and that was after he'd already fancied himself in love with the guy. There was a lot of breaking up and getting back together before Derek was finally able to put that relationship to rest.

Once they had gone through the dinner course and lingered through dessert, they slowly drank some coffee. The crowd had thinned considerably, and Derek felt mildly guilty for tying up one of Paul's tables for the majority of the evening, possibly causing him to miss money he could make from other customers. He quietly shared his thoughts with Gerry.

"We'll just have to leave a good tip," Gerry said with a wink. They'd already agreed when they set the date up that

they'd be going Dutch. It had made sense at the time—neither would feel any obligation toward the other.

Once they finished their coffee and paid the check, they stood to leave. Paul swung by their table one last time, giving them a wide smile and inviting them to come back soon. They walked side by side out to the parking lot, and Derek pointed to the green Escort. "That's me."

"I really enjoyed tonight," Gerry said as they walked to the car. "I'd like to do it again."

"Yeah, I would too," Derek admitted. He leaned his back against his car door, relaxed and feeling good about the evening and about Gerry.

Gerry dug into the back pocket of his trousers and pulled out a business card and handed it to Derek. It was slightly crinkled from being in Gerry's pocket and the warmth of it had Derek rubbing it between his fingers for a moment before actually reading the card. "Donnelly's Landscaping?"

"Not very original, I know," Gerry said with a grin and a shrug. "I wanted something easy for people to remember, and I figured if I used my last name it would help get a good place in the yellow pages without using some dumbass name with a bunch of A's at the beginning." They shared a laugh before Gerry turned serious. "Why don't you call or text me in a couple of days, and we'll set up something for next week?"

"Sounds good," he said with a nod as he slid the card into the same pocket as his glasses. He knew it would be safe there until he got home.

"Any fun plans for the weekend?"



Derek's heart sped up a little, thinking that maybe Gerry was going to ask him out again already. "No, just have to do laundry and get some groceries."

"Mmm," Gerry hummed sympathetically. "I've got to take advantage of the nice weather and get as many jobs done as possible."

"Do you work most weekends?"

"Usually in the mornings, but I like to try to keep at least my Sunday afternoons free. Just depends on what type of jobs I have lined up. Lots of yard clean-up from the winter and mulching this time of year."

"You do all that by yourself?"

"No, I have a couple guys that help me out."

"For some reason I got the impression that it was just you."

"It's a growing business, and I can't do it all myself any more. I don't really have employees. I just hire them as independent contractors since the work isn't steady enough to guarantee them full-time work."

"I hope you have good weather for the weekend, then."

"Thanks. You have fun doing all that laundry and shopping."

"Yeah, can't wait," Derek said with mock enthusiasm, then threw in, "Graduation's Sunday."

"Oh, the *not a big deal* graduation?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Derek said with a laugh. "I'll have to squeeze it in between all that laundry and shopping."

Gerry joined in the laughter for a moment, but sobered quickly and seemed to be searching Derek's face for

something. He must have found it, because he moved in closer, straddling Derek's leg as he whispered in his ear, "I wanna kiss you."

Derek's stomach dropped, and his breath came out in a whoosh. The heat from Gerry's body was hitting him in such a delicious and welcome way. He hadn't felt the warmth of another body in such a long time. His mouth went dry, and he tried to swallow, but was having trouble doing anything at the moment. He didn't think he could form the words if he tried.

"That okay?" Gerry's whispered question made Derek glad he had something solid behind him because he felt boneless.

"Yeah," he managed to croak out.

Gerry moved his head back a few inches and their eyes met. Then Gerry's eyes dropped back down to Derek's mouth. He felt Gerry's hand cupping the back of his head, and his eyes fell closed just as Gerry's lips descended on his. It was a gentle kiss, with Gerry's tongue tracing a hot, wet trail over Derek's lips before dipping into Derek's mouth so their tongues brushed lightly. Derek moved his hands to Gerry's hips to anchor himself, for he felt sure he was going to slide down the car and become a puddle at Gerry's feet. Gerry's lips gently sucked and nibbled, and although the rest of Derek's body felt like mush, at least one part of him was hard. And he was ready for more. So much more.

Gerry broke the kiss a moment later and leaned his head against Derek's. "I gotta go," he whispered, his voice full of desire and need.

"Yeah, me too," Derek agreed, but neither moved.

"I really want to see you again."

"You will," Derek promised.

Gerry moved back and slowly slid his hand from the back of Derek's neck. Derek felt Gerry's fingers gently glide over his cheek and his thumb brush over his still-parted lips. "G'night," Gerry said as he started walking backward a few steps.

"Night," he said, wishing the night didn't have to end, but knowing it needed to, at least for now. He watched Gerry turn and walk to a big black pick-up truck at the front end of the lot. Gerry waved goodbye before jumping into the truck and starting it. Hearing the roar of the engine finally got Derek moving. He lifted his hand, gave a small wave, and got into his car.

Derek wasn't able to keep his thoughts from going back to Gerry and their evening together, so the drive home seemed like it was almost nothing. He was dreading going inside in case Brenden and Shana were still awake. He opened the apartment door quietly and was relieved to see the living room was empty, with only a small light burning to welcome him home. Toeing off his shoes at the door, he picked them up, snapped off the lamp, and made his way to his bedroom. He'd just gotten his jacket off when a soft knock sounded at his door.

"Go to bed, Shana," he said with quiet authority.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Brenden would've just come in," he said as he loosened his tie.

"Please, just let me come in for a minute. I won't be able to sleep at all wondering how it went."

“All right,” he sighed, opening the door for her.

Shana looked him over carefully a minute before emitting a high-pitched squeal, throwing her arms about him. “You liked him.”

“How do you know?” he asked, her happiness and excitement for him making him smile.

“Because you look... different.” She backed away from him, gesturing wildly with her hands. “Are you going to see him again?”

“I think so.”

“Oh my God! I’m so happy for you.” Quickly hugging him again, she continued, “Promise me you’ll tell me all about it over breakfast.”

“I promise to tell you *some* of it over breakfast.”

Her eyes and her smile widened. “Oooh, secrets. It must’ve been good! Okay, sweetie, I’ll leave you alone now.” She kissed him on the cheek and headed back out the door. Derek was thankful that Brenden was the one that would have to deal with her the rest of the night.

After he hung up his suit and threw his shirt in with the rest of the dirty clothes, he got into bed, realizing he was still smiling.

DEREK couldn’t figure out why Gerry was kissing him and humming “Pomp and Circumstance” at the same time. He wanted to tell him to shut up and get his clothes off, but then he heard Brenden calling his name. He had a moment to think, *what the hell is Brenden doing here?* And then the

dream was gone, and reality suddenly swept in as soon as he opened his eyes. Brenden was standing by his bed wearing Derek's graduation cap.

"What are you doing?" Derek asked sharply, irritated to be woken up during a perfectly good dream.

"You're graduating today, dude!" Brenden said, jumping on the bed, both feet firmly planted on the mattress, hands on the ceiling as he made the whole bed bounce over and over again as if it were a trampoline. "C'mon, I wanna take you out for breakfast."

"No," he said, trying to burrow under the covers and pillows. "Go away! You're making me seasick."

"If you don't go out with me, I'll call Mom and Dad," Brenden threatened in a sing-song voice. "They'll be happy to come over early and make a big freakin' deal over you."

With a belabored sigh, Derek threw the covers off, which wasn't easy since Brenden was still standing on the bed. It was then that he heard what sounded like a heavy metal version of "Pomp and Circumstance." At least that solved the mystery of Gerry's humming. "What the fuck is that?"

"Isn't it great?" Brenden said, jumping off the bed and flying out the door, shouting as he went, "I found it on the Internet this morning!" Brenden turned the music up louder before reappearing in the doorway, a big grin on his face.

Derek was still holding onto his grudge about being so rudely awoken and tossed out an angry, "Why are you wearin' my fuckin' cap?"

"Might be the only chance I get to wear one of these things again."

Derek squinted at his brother, whose smile was still there, but there was a serious undertone to the joke. He swung his legs out of bed and scrubbed his hands over his face. “You’re going to graduate. You only have one more year.”

“God, one more year,” Brenden said, flopping down onto the bed beside him, the smile finally slipping away. “I don’t think I can stand it, Derek. I’m not like you. It’s so fucking *boring*. I barely made it through this year.”

“You know, Gerry said he didn’t start college until he was twenty-one.”

“Oh really,” Brenden said, brightening a little. “What else did Gerry say?”

“He has his own landscaping business.”

“You know, you could’ve told me all this yesterday instead of sneaking outta here early in the morning to do laundry all goddamn day.”

“I did the grocery shopping too,” he defended.

“If you didn’t want to talk about him, all you had to do was say so.” Derek gave him the evil eye until Brenden finally relented. “Okay, I would’ve bugged the shit outta you until you spilled your guts. Especially after Shana told me you had a good time.”

Derek looked down at his feet and watched as he flexed his toes for a minute. “It’s hard to explain. I did enjoy myself... and I like him. A lot. I just don’t want to... jinx it.”

He got a sympathy bump of their shoulders from Brenden, but the silence only lasted a second or two. “Are you going to see him again?” Brenden asked, starting to bounce the bed again in his excitement.

“He gave me his number and told me to call him in a couple a days.”

“Call him and ask him to come to breakfast with us.”

“He’s gotta work today. Besides you don’t get to meet him yet.”

“Why not?” Brenden asked, sounding affronted, stopping all movement.

“Cause we’re still trying to get to know each other, and I don’t need my nosy little brother getting into the middle of it.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Brenden asked, “So, when are you going to call him?”

“Tomorrow, I think.”

“Why not tonight?”

“Because he knows I have graduation today. And I don’t want to call too soon. He said call in a couple of days. That’ll be Monday.”

“Damn, for a math nerd you sure as hell don’t know how to count. Saturday is one day and Sunday is two, which equals a couple. Call him tonight.”

“Tomorrow,” Derek said decisively. He got off the bed and headed for the bathroom. “Are we going to breakfast or what?”

“Breakfast,” Brenden said with a disappointed sigh.

It bothered Derek that his brother was suffering from a bout of insecurity. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, it was most often about school. It wasn’t a secret that Brenden felt that he was severely lacking in the brains department when compared to Derek. The funny thing was Derek would

have traded all his brains for even just a tenth of Brenden's self-confidence and athletic abilities.

At least they'd have some time together before being with the family, and he could try to counteract whatever Brenden was feeling. Besides, he was sure that Brenden wasn't even near finished grilling him about Gerry. However, he could live with that since he'd get to call Gerry tomorrow.



## Chapter 2

GERRY rifled through his mail as he walked through his house. He set the bills in the to-be-paid pile on his desk, pitched the junk into the garbage, and threw his Netflix envelope on the couch so he could open it later. He couldn't remember what movie they were supposed to send him, but he hoped it was something with a lot of action. He wasn't in the mood for anything that he had to use his brain for.

He'd made it through Saturday and Sunday without thinking of Derek too much. Being busy had helped, and he'd been good about not checking his cell phone every five minutes to see if Derek had called. But now it was Monday evening and Gerry decided he must have really blown it Friday night. It could have been when he really put his foot in it by trying to make light about needing to lose weight. In his own defense, Derek had never once mentioned being overweight or needing to watch what he ate. Gerry had no idea that it was a sensitive subject.

The conversation went smoothly after that little bump, so maybe it was the kiss. Dammit, he hadn't meant to kiss him, but he found Derek so irresistible. However, he didn't want Derek to think that he was only after one thing. At least he'd had the forethought to ask. Something his mom had taught him. Of course she'd been talking about girls and how nice it was if a man *asked* before just *taking* the first

kiss. But Gerry was never one to throw away free advice. He thought Derek had liked it. No, he *knew* Derek liked it, had felt the evidence pressing against his thigh. Maybe Derek wasn't ready for that yet.

Derek was a lot younger than he would usually go for. But Derek's ad and profile on the Internet dating site had been well-thought out, clearly detailing exactly what Derek was looking for. The photo Derek had attached to the profile was nice and hadn't been overly flattering. Gerry had debated for two days whether he should respond or not, but every time he decided to keep searching, he'd go back and check Derek's profile once more.

Gerry had been thoroughly charmed as soon as Derek sat down at their table. Derek had been visibly nervous and over-dressed, but Gerry thought that made the young man all the more attractive. And, Jesus, when he'd slipped on the wire-framed glasses, Gerry had to hold back from kissing him right then and there. He hoped that some day he would get to tell Derek how fucking sexy he looked with them on. Maybe when it was the only thing Derek was wearing. "Don't get ahead of yourself there, slick," he murmured to himself.

As he walked through the kitchen, he checked the digital clock on the microwave and saw it was already after seven. He was sweaty, dirty, tired, and probably stank to high heaven. A hot shower was called for, and he pulled his shirt over his head as he continued on his way to the bedroom. Unclipping his phone from his belt, he checked it one last time, just in case he somehow missed the ring tone or the vibration that let him know he had a call or text. Nope. No alerts that he'd missed anything. Just like it had

been all damn day. He set the phone down on his dresser and went into the bathroom.

After getting the shower started, he began peeling the rest of his clothes off, thankful that he'd had air conditioning installed last year. He liked being outside in the sunshine and heat, but when he had to work in it all day it was nice to come into a cool house and relax. Plus, he could take a hot shower, work out all the kinks from his back and his muscles, and get out and not feel like he had to take another shower five minutes later.

He was just about finished washing off all the soap from his body when he thought he heard his phone ring. He quickly spun the dials to silence the loud spray of water and listened for second. It *was* his phone. *Shit!* He hurried out of the shower, slipped on the tile floor—but thankfully didn't fall—ran into the bedroom and grabbed his phone. He didn't even waste any time trying to look at the number, just flipped it open. "Hello," he answered breathlessly.

"Gerry?"

"Yeah," he said, not quite able to recognize the voice.

"It's, uh... it's Derek. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No," he said, looking down at himself dripping all over the hardwood floor he'd installed over the winter. "Just got home from work a few minutes ago."

"Oh. Good. I didn't want to bother you at work"

"You can call any time," Gerry said quietly. "You're not a bother."

"Okay," Derek said, a smile in his voice. "I didn't think you'd be working this late."

“Normally I’m not, but I was short-handed. One of my guys had to leave town unexpectedly. If I don’t get a certain amount done each day, then I’ll never get caught up. I probably should’ve stayed out at least another hour, but I’m whipped.”

“I can let you go if you’re too tired.”

“Derek,” Gerry said with a half-laugh, “trust me, I wanna talk to you.”

“I had a nice time on Friday night.”

Gerry smiled hearing the sincerity in Derek’s voice. “I did too,” he confessed and had to stop himself from asking how soon he could see him again. “How did your graduation go?”

“Boring as hell,” Derek said emphatically.

“If you hate that stuff so bad, why’d you go? It’s not mandatory, you know.”

“Yes, but my parents wanted to see me graduate. Since they’re paying for my education, I kinda owe ’em all the ceremonies and stuff like that.”

“That’s nice,” Gerry said, and he meant it. Family was important to him, and it was good to hear that it was to Derek as well.

“Do you need some extra help tomorrow?” Derek asked, bringing Gerry’s thoughts back to the conversation.

“You offering?”

“Sure. My internship doesn’t start until next week.”

“I’m not one to look a gift horse in the mouth,” Gerry said lightly. “I can only pay you ten bucks an hour.”

"Sounds a lot better than the zero dollars I'll be getting slaving away at Beckett & Foster."

"All right, if you're sure. What time would you like to start?"

"What time do you?"

"I'm up by five thirty and out the door by six."

"Okay. Where should I meet you?"

"You're serious?"

"What? You think I'm too much into *math and drawing and shit* to be able to do hard labor?" Derek teased.

"No," Gerry said through his laughter as he recalled those were his own words he used to describe architects. "I have to pick up some materials and place a couple of orders for mulch, so how about we meet at Starbucks on Fifth and Main around eight."

"Okay, see you then. Guess I'll let you go."

"Yeah, I better get this soap washed off me."

"You're in the shower?"

"I was," Gerry chuckled, "right now I'm standing in my bedroom."

"Naked?"

"That's how I usually take a shower. You got a different way?"

"No," Derek said slowly. "Just didn't realize I was talking to you while you were... you know, naked."

"Understandable since you can't see me."

"Hmmm."

Gerry wanted to tell him to come over, and he *could* see him, but knew it was probably too soon for that. Everything

about Derek showed that he was careful and thoughtful about his choices. Gerry didn't want to push things too fast and make Derek go back into the guarded shell he'd been living in.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then?" Gerry asked softly, side-stepping the whole naked issue. Anything he said about that would come out lame.

"Yeah."

Their goodbyes were a bit awkward as Gerry was sure they were both thinking the same thing. Being naked. Together. Gerry had made it through the whole weekend without jerking off thinking of Derek, but once he stepped back into the shower, he let go, and it wasn't too difficult to come up with a fantasy. As the water cascaded over his body, he lathered up his hands and let them roam.

As he took a pass over his abdomen, he thought of Derek starting to undress. He watched as fantasy Derek loosened his tie and then slowly slid it from his collar, tossing it aside when it finally came free. Before Derek removed his jacket, he reached inside the front pocket, pulled out his glasses, and looked at Gerry with a sexy grin.

Gerry's dick was filling up nicely with that image alone, but Derek still had a few moves left, disrobing slowly and throwing each article of clothing over his shoulder. By the time Derek was down to just his underwear, Gerry was stroking his cock at a slow and steady pace. He wanted this to last, but the fantasy had been in the back of his mind since Friday night.

With one hand busy stroking, the other cupping his balls, the heat began to build inside of him. "Keep going!" he bid. He watched as Derek slowly slid his boxers down his

thighs and let them pool at his feet. When Derek reached for his glasses, Gerry moaned out, “No, leave ‘em on.”

Another erotic smirk from Derek as his hands fell to his waist. “*What do you want me to do now?*” Derek asked with a quirk of his brow.

“Touch yourself.”

“*How about this?*” Derek asked as he moved his hands behind him, and arched his back so that his hard cock jutted out proudly in front of him. “*You like that, Gerry?*”

“Oh, fuck, yeah,” Gerry breathed, the fire in his belly spreading, his balls tightening.

“*I wanna watch you come.*”

“Only be a few seconds for that,” Gerry warned, breathing faster.

“*Good. Do it!*” Derek encouraged, licking his lips. “*Wanna watch you shoot. C’mon, Gerry. Come for me.*”

Gerry’s strokes became more hurried as he leaned against the shower wall, planted his feet firmly, and let loose. He watched his come arch into the air, quickly mixing with the spray of water before swirling down the drain. All too soon the water that had felt so good mere moments ago felt harsh and stinging—just like the reality of jerking off by yourself to a fantasy of someone you hoped would be your boyfriend.

He finished cleaning himself up, his thoughts turning to what to make for dinner. He certainly didn’t feel like cooking anything at the moment and something simple like peanut butter and jelly and some chips sounded like a gourmet feast right now. He started to whistle as he dried off, looking forward to what tomorrow would bring.

AS SOON as Gerry pulled into Starbucks, he saw Derek's car parked toward the back of the lot. He could see Derek through the windows of the coffee shop. Derek was reading the paper, a cup of coffee sitting on the table, and of course, he was wearing his glasses. Gerry closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath while he made a mental note *not* to fantasize about Derek and his glasses since he was now sporting a hard-on. Doing his best to inconspicuously adjust himself—which hadn't gotten any easier since his teenage years when he could pop a boner for no obvious reason—he walked into the shop. There was a long line at the counter, so he took a seat across from Derek.

"Morning," Derek said with a smile as he looked up from the paper.

"Been here long?"

"A few minutes," Derek said with a shrug.

It looked as if he'd been here longer than that as Gerry took in the scattered sections of the newspaper across the table. "Anything interesting going on in the paper?" he asked, hoping that a boring conversation of world events would help get his body under control.

"Not much. Usual bad news about the economy and crime and crap," Derek sighed, putting down the paper and, thankfully, taking off his glasses. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but hasn't the economy hit your business hard? Aren't people cutting back on extras like hiring someone to do their lawn?"



“Yes and no,” he answered, eyed Derek’s coffee, and then turned to look at what seemed to be a growing number of people waiting at the counter. “Mind if I have a drink of your coffee? I haven’t had time to get my daily requirement of caffeine.”

“Uhh, it’s probably cold,” Derek said, his cheeks coloring slightly.

“Cold in just a few minutes, eh?” Gerry teased with a grin. “I don’t mind if you don’t.”

“You can have the rest of it if you’d like. I’m not a big coffee fan, but didn’t want to come in here and buy nothing.”

Gerry took the cup and took a healthy swallow. He found it interesting that Derek had been here long enough to make the liquid go cool when it was usually served steaming hot. It was also interesting that Derek claimed he wasn’t a big coffee drinker when he had drunk two cups at the restaurant the other night on their date. Hopefully that was a good sign that Derek had been enjoying himself and wanted to prolong the evening.

“So,” Derek prodded after Gerry had taken another gulp. “What about your business.”

“Oh,” Gerry said between swallows. “Well, some of my customers told me they wouldn’t need my services, but I’ve picked up some nice-size accounts because I’m able to bid lower than the big landscaping companies. Plus, I do some handyman-type stuff, which people need no matter what the economy is doing. If your sink gets clogged up or your floor boards are rotting through, you still have to take care of those things.”

"It's good you're able to diversify," Derek said, sounding relieved.

"I like the sound of that," Gerry said with a smile. "I'll have to tell my mom that one."

"She doesn't like what you do?"

"It's not that, she's just a natural-born worrier. She's afraid that people won't pay me, and I'll lose my house."

"You own a house?" Derek asked, surprised.

Gerry finished off the rest of the coffee and nodded. "Yeah. It's just a small one, all on one floor. I got it at a good price because it needs some fixing up, and I can do that a little at a time. Plus it has a nice bit of land with it, giving me the space I need for all my equipment and supplies for the business."

"Sounds nice," Derek murmured.

Gerry glanced at the huge clock on the wall and with more than a little reluctance stated, "We better get going. How 'bout you ride with me? A couple of the places don't have much room for parking."

"Sure," Derek agreed as he put his glasses into a hard-covered case. "Just let me go get my lunch from the car."

"Your lunch?"

"I do get a lunch break, don't I?" Derek asked with a teasing grin.

"Of course."

"Then I'll need to go get it."

Gerry watched the way Derek moved as he walked across the parking lot to his car. He was a nice-looking man. They were similar in height, and he had an adorable cowlick

that stuck out at the back of his head. Gerry hadn't fallen this hard for someone this fast since... never. Maybe Derek was just the right combination of all the things he'd always been looking for.

"What's wrong?" Derek asked as he joined him at the truck, a personal-size cooler in one hand and a gallon jug of water in the other.

"Hmm?"

"You look all serious and mad about something."

"Just thinking," he answered as they got into the truck. "Got a lot to do today."

"I'm ready," Derek said with a smile as he buckled his seat belt. "Am I the only guy working with you today?"

"No, Jeff's meeting us at the client's house. In fact he should already be mowing. I dropped off my trailer there first so he could get started while I did other errands this morning."

They chatted along the way, Derek inquiring what the day's work entailed and what Gerry would expect out of him. "Manual labor, dude," Gerry said laughingly. "You are going to sweat way more than you ever have at the gym."

"Sounds like a better way to work out anyway," Derek said as they pulled up to their first job. Gerry's trailer was there, but unfortunately all the equipment was still loaded on it and there was no sign of anyone else around.

"Fuck," Gerry swore loudly. "He promised he wouldn't do this again!"

"He's not very dependable?"

Gerry thinned his lips and shook his head as he tried to calm down. "I knew him in high school. We'd lost touch for

awhile, but then I ran into him a few months ago. He's down on his luck, was laid off from his job, and then his wife threw him out of the house. I needed someone else to help and told him it was hard work and not a lot of pay, but at least it would be something to help him until he found something better. I think he's mixed up in something bad, though. He misses work a lot, sometimes comes in trashed, and he's living with some girl even though him and his wife just split up. There's only so much you can do for a guy, you know?"

"It's nice that you tried to help him, though," Derek sympathized.

"I better call him and see if he forgot to set his alarm or something. Do you mind getting started?"

"No," Derek said, already reaching for the door handle.

"Just walk the yard real quick and look for any big sticks or garbage. There's a couple cans on the trailer. One's for recyclables and the other is for garbage. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

With a nod and an "Okay," Derek was out of the door.

As he watched Derek canvass the yard, he grew more and more frustrated at his inability to reach Jeff. He left messages on Jeff's cell, the girlfriend's phone, and the home phone asking Jeff to call and let him know what was going on. Gerry liked to give people the benefit of the doubt, but Jeff was really pushing it. If Derek hadn't offered to help today, it really would've put him in a bind. Now on top of everything else, he'd have to make some calls today to see if he could find someone that could work the rest of the week.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur as they efficiently finished by noon the jobs of mowing and preparing

the beds for mulch. Derek was attentive and hard-working, with an eye for detail. They took a quick lunch break, Gerry grateful and touched that Derek had packed enough for them both to eat. Gerry usually just got some fast food at whatever place was close by. Derek had grilled a couple chicken breasts, cut them into strips, and had made his own honey-mustard dipping sauce. There were celery sticks, pretzels, and no-sugar applesauce. They sat under a big tree in the backyard chatting about the day and enjoying the food.

“You know,” Derek said between bites of crunchy celery, “my brother needs a job for the summer. He used to work at a golf course, but he didn’t care for the hours. He always had to go late at night to do the watering and then get up extra early to do maintenance. If you want, I could call him to see if he’s interested.”

“Sure,” Gerry said, glad for any help he could get in hiring someone. “I can use all the help I can get. Ask him if he wants to start yesterday.”

Derek chuckled and pulled his phone off from the clip on his belt. Gerry had to smile when Derek didn’t even offer any type of greeting to his brother, just said, “Dude, you still need a job?” Gerry got up to walk back to the truck to give Derek some privacy. He didn’t want it to be awkward for Derek if his brother decided not to work for him.

Derek joined him a few minutes later. “He can’t work today ’cause he’s already got plans with his girlfriend. He says he can start tomorrow if that’s okay with you.”

“Does he work as hard as you?” he asked, semi-seriously.

“He loves being outdoors, so I think he’ll do okay. I know he’ll like the hours a lot better than the golf course.”

“Thanks for calling him.”

“You’re welcome,” Derek said with a warm smile.

They stood there for a moment, just staring at each other. Gerry was very tempted to kiss him. However besides being cautious about who might see them, he was mindful he had a professional demeanor to maintain. He cleared his throat and looked down at his shoes for a moment, anywhere but at Derek to get his thoughts back where they should be. “Guess we better get back to work.”

“Yeah,” Derek agreed, disappointment tingeing his voice.

By the end of the day, Gerry was surprised at how much they’d actually accomplished. Derek didn’t complain once. When Gerry asked if he wanted to quit for the day around five o’clock, Derek’s only reply had been to ask if Gerry had done all he’d planned for the day. Of course the answer was no, and they worked until dark. By the time they made it back to Derek’s car at Starbucks, they were both dragging, each ready to get home and relax. Gerry had shown Derek where they would be starting the day tomorrow so he and Brenden could just show up around eight. They bid each good night with a hug, which was kind of a disappointment, but Gerry figured there really wasn’t any point to getting into anything further at this moment.

The next morning Gerry was pleasantly surprised when he rounded the corner and found Derek and a person he assumed was Brenden already making the rounds in the yard, picking up the detritus. Before he was even out of the truck, the brothers were on their way over to meet him.

Derek did a quick introduction as Brenden and Gerry shook hands. Gerry would never have guessed that the two were brothers. Where Derek was dark, Brenden was fair. Brenden was smiling and his stance was relaxed and open and while Derek wasn't frowning, he looked more guarded in his expression and mannerisms.

"Derek, why don't you go ahead and start on the beds while Brenden and I have a talk about the job."

"Sure thing," Derek agreed readily, jogging over to the front of the house.

Gerry watched until Derek bent to begin his task and then turned back to Brenden. "Your brother tells me you've worked at a golf course before?"

"Yeah, man, but that was a difficult gig," Brenden answered. "I hated the hours, doing a split shift, you know? Early mornings and late nights just about kill any chance at a social life."

"My work hours can be a bit difficult," Gerry said, keeping his voice friendly but firm. "I like to start at least by eight and sometimes don't quit until dark. A lot depends on the weather. I may not have anything for you for a week or we could be working fourteen days straight. Your work has to be thorough and clean. If a customer gets in your face, just direct them to me, even if they tell you you're doing something wrong. You do things the way I tell you and no one else."

"I'll pay you at the end of each week as an independent contractor so you'll be responsible for your own taxes. If you make enough working for me, I'll give you whatever tax forms you need at the end of the year. If you decide you don't want to work for me, I'd appreciate being told." He noticed the

earphones around Brenden's neck and pointed to them. "You can listen to your music, but watch it with singing along, especially anything lewd. You can wear shorts, but wear athletic socks and work boots, if you got 'em, for safety. Keep your T-shirts free from any vulgarity. I don't mind your cell phone being on, but any excessive talking or texting comes out of your time, not mine."

Brenden stuck his hand out again. "Sounds good to me."

"All right, let's get to work," Gerry said cheerfully as he accepted the handshake. He was happy to see that when asked, Brenden was familiar enough with the equipment that he could get the mower off the trailer and use it without instruction. Derek worked at trimming the bushes while Gerry worked on the edging. When it was time to move to the next job, Gerry was pleased that Derek chose to ride with him, letting his brother follow along in the Escort.

"I hope you don't mind that I had to talk to Brenden one on one."

"No," Derek said with a shake of his head. "I mean, this is your livelihood, you have to be upfront with people, and it shouldn't make any difference because he's my brother."

Gerry smiled his thanks before changing the subject to one he'd wanted to get to for two days. "You wanna catch a movie together this weekend?" he asked, taking his eyes off traffic a moment to glance at Derek, who was grinning.

"Yeah, I'd like that. What type of movies do you like?"

"I like most of them, as long as it's entertaining, I don't mind losing myself in a movie for a couple hours. What about you?"



"I'm pretty much the same. I don't care too much for horror, though."

"No *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* types then, huh?"

"Ah, no," Derek said emphatically. "Now a good thriller, that I'd go see in a second."

"A Hitchcock fan?"

"The man was great at suspense. The ones where you don't see the killer or the gore, that's the scary shit, 'cause you never know what's coming. If I watch a horror movie, it's because I want to be scared. Today most of them throw a couple naked people in them and have a bunch of blood and gross stuff, like that alone's gonna scare me."

Gerry grinned at Derek's enthusiasm. "I don't know of any good horror movies out right now, not with the blockbuster season upon us. Anything out that you've been wanting to see?"

"Nah," Derek said with a shrug. "I usually wait till they come out on DVD. I can't remember the last time I went to an actual theater to see a movie. When I get home tonight I'll look up the movie page on the Internet."

"Friday night, then?"

"As long as my boss lets me off on time."

"Oh, well, I'm sure if you tell him you have a hot date, he'll understand."

"You think?"

"Mmm, pretty sure."

"So... Friday night. I guess I can wait that long."

“Good,” Gerry answered automatically, then frowned. “Wait for what?”

“To be alone with you again,” Derek confessed, his voice low

“Oh, that’s not fair,” he groaned.

“And those looks you’ve been throwing me for two days are?”

“What looks?” he asked innocently.

“Aw, c’mon, I’ve caught you at least a half a dozen times in the last hour.”

“Guess I’ll have to work on my stealth mode.”

“Especially with my brother around.”

“Why, is he going to beat me up or something?”

“No,” Derek laughed. “I’ll just have to listen to him all night long talking about you and calling you goofy names like *lover boy* and shit like that.”

“Oh well, if all he’s gonna do is tease the shit out of you, then I’ll just keep looking my fill.”

Derek grinned, but looked down to his knees. Gerry hoped that this teasing side of Derek meant that he was feeling more comfortable around him. He’d still have to go slow with Derek, but slow wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. In fact it could be a lot of fun.

DEREK was true to his word and the next day had come prepared with a list of movies, theaters, and start times. They picked a drama starring actors they both liked and decided to go out for dinner afterward. Gerry was pleased

that they had a lot of work to keep them busy until Friday afternoon, giving him less time to think about their date. Brenden was proving to be a good and conscientious worker. The week certainly turned out a damn sight better than it had started. He was able to get a lot done with the help of Derek and Brenden, which put him in an especially good mood.

On Friday he cut the guys loose around four so he'd have time to get home and clean up his equipment and himself before he went to pick Derek up at six thirty. It had been Derek's shy suggestion that they only take one vehicle to the theater, and Gerry had asked if he could pick Derek up.

At first Gerry wanted to drive his motorcycle, to feel Derek hugged up tight against his back. But he wasn't sure how Derek felt about bikes and Gerry didn't like driving it late at night, potentially disturbing his neighbors. This way he could bring up the subject of his bike by suggesting a ride for Sunday to a park where they could do some hiking.

Gerry grinned as he looked at the paper Derek had used to write out the directions to his apartment. Derek's printing was precise and uniform, just as an architect's should be. He was finding out that Derek liked things well-planned out and didn't seem to like surprises. In some areas of life that was okay, but in others, you had to be ready to go with the flow. Although Gerry didn't like major surprises, like Jeff disappearing on him earlier this week, he couldn't spend his time brooding about being fucked over. He hoped Derek wasn't like that.

When he arrived at the apartment, he was surprised when Brenden greeted him at the door. "Hey, Gerry,"

Brenden said with a smile. "C'mon in. Derek'll be ready in a minute."

"Thanks," he said, stepping inside. It was a small apartment, with the kitchen and living room flowing together and a hallway to the right of the kitchen, which most likely led to the bedrooms.

Brenden closed the door and crossed his arms over his chest. "I really appreciate you giving me a job and being straight with me about how you like things."

"Oh sure," he said absently, looking at the bookcase that took up one side of the room. It was filled with books, DVDs, and photos. Gerry wanted to walk over and look at them, to try and see what Derek's earlier life was like through those photographs, but thought he better stay exactly where he was.

"You seem to really like Derek."

"I do," he said sincerely, turning his full attention back to Brenden.

"People treated Derek shitty most of his life because of the way he looked. He's still getting used to the fact that when people look at him they don't see the person he used to be."

"I noticed that."

"He's different with you, though." Gerry raised a brow, but otherwise kept silent. "You know, if you hurt him, you'll have to deal with me."

Gerry wasn't surprised that although Brenden was younger than Derek, he was fiercely protective of his brother. Even though they had all only worked together a few days, it was hard to miss that the brothers shared a close

relationship. It was easy to see that Brenden felt he had to be Derek's defender.

"We're still working on getting to know each other, but I promise it's not my intention to hurt him."

Brenden studied him for a minute before nodding. "Okay, then."

"So, did you stay home just to tell me all that? Shouldn't you be out with your girlfriend?"

"I did wanna catch you alone," Brenden admitted with a grin. "Shana and I are going to a club later. Derek made me promise not to tell her you were coming over, or she'd have been here too."

"Well, thank you for that. Don't know if I could've handled two of you giving me the once-over."

"Oh man," Brenden said, laughing, "she will be relentless when you meet her. She'll ask you a ton of questions and want to know exactly where you guys are going and what you'll be doing."

Gerry made a face at that bit of news. "And she'll have to be satisfied with not knowing," Derek said decisively as he entered the room. Gerry was gratified to see that this time they had dressed similarly in jeans, T-shirts, and tennis shoes. He noticed, however, that as with most of his clothes, Derek chose things that were at least a size bigger than necessary. The only thing that had fit him properly had been the suit he'd worn on their date last week.

"Ready to go?" Derek asked, already heading for the door.

"Sure. See you later," Gerry said, lifting his hand in farewell to Brenden before following Derek.

They made it to the theater in plenty of time to get good seats. Derek declined any snacks or drinks since they were having dinner later. While waiting for the movie to start, they had fun trying to guess the answers to the trivia questions that flicked across the screen. Once they had cycled all the way through, they used the rest of the time to chat about their favorite movies and actors. While the lights in the theater were up, they sat in their seats, not touching, but as soon as they dimmed, Gerry moved his leg to press his thigh against Derek's. He smiled when he felt an answering push against his leg from Derek. Next was a shift in their seats so their upper bodies were leaning against each other.

The movie was good, which induced a lively discussion on the way to the restaurant that Derek had picked out. The place wasn't as intimate as last week, but it was casual dining in a nice atmosphere that wasn't too loud.

As they waited for their food to arrive, Derek leaned forward slightly and asked, "Have you come out to your family yet?"

It wasn't an unexpected question, but Gerry was a bit surprised by it all the same. He hadn't expected Derek to bring up the subject in a public place. It made him feel good that Derek felt comfortable enough to discuss it. "Well, there's just my mom, and yeah, she knows I'm gay."

"You don't have any other family?"

"Just some cousins scattered around the country. We've never been close. My dad's family... well, my dad didn't stick around long enough for Mom to find out much about them."

"And you've never wanted to look for them?"

“A time or two,” he admitted with a sigh. “But mostly I was really angry at him, you know, for leaving my mom with a kid and no money, for never even trying to see me. He disappeared completely. My mom couldn’t even find him to try to get him to pay child support.”

“She did a good job of raising you.”

Gerry smiled fondly. “We had some rough times, moved quite a bit when I was young, and she had to work a couple of jobs more than once. Overall, though, I had a good childhood.”

“She took it hard when you told her?”

“About being gay?” At Derek’s nod, Gerry continued, “I’ve got two words for you. Irish Catholic. She’s stubborn as hell from top to bottom and very firm in her beliefs.”

Derek winced in sympathy. “When did you tell her?”

“When I was twenty-six.”

“During the serious relationship you had?”

“Yep. I thought it was going to last forever and figured it was time for my mom to know the truth. She didn’t talk to me for two months. And when she finally did, all she would say is that she was praying for me.”

“But you must’ve patched things up. You talk about her with such affection.”

“She finally accepted it, but it wasn’t easy getting there. I take her out to dinner every Saturday night.”

“*Every* Saturday night?” Derek repeated with surprise.

“Well, sometimes I have to skip because of work, but it’s a way to keep in touch with her, find out if she needs

anything done at her house that I can take care of for her, make sure she's doing okay."

"It's good that you're there for her."

The arrival of their food interrupted them for a few minutes until they got everything situated. Gerry picked the conversation back up by asking, "What about you? How did your parents take it?"

"They were shocked, but my mom is okay with it, she just wants me to be careful. My dad had a real hard time with it at first. He tried to tell me that it was just a phase. He said I should go ahead and experiment, but I'd settle down soon enough and find the right girl."

"When did you know you were gay?"

"I pretty much figured it out when Brenden was going crazy over girls and talking about them all the time and how cute they were and stuff. I felt that way about guys and for a long time I thought I was just weird."

"High school must've been really fun for you," Gerry said sarcastically.

"I basically hung out with the other geeks and kept to my studies until my senior year when I found a guy who was a lot like me. It was exciting and scary all at the same time. Brenden caught us kissing one night, and I was more freaked out about it than he was. He said he'd already figured it out."

"You're lucky to have such a good relationship with your brother."

"I know."

They kept the conversation light for the rest of the meal, talking about their favorite music and television shows. It



was ten thirty by the time Gerry paid the bill, which he insisted on since he was the one that had asked Derek out. The drive to Derek's apartment was subdued, both more than a little tired from working all day and having a nice evening together. Gerry parked the truck, turned the engine off, and turned toward Derek.

"Do you have any plans for Sunday afternoon?"

"No, just maybe watching a playoff game."

"I thought you weren't into sports," Gerry said with surprise.

"Just 'cause I'm no good at playing doesn't mean I don't enjoy watching 'em," Derek chuckled.

"Oh, of course," Gerry said, embarrassed at making such an assumption. "I was going to see if you'd like to go for a ride with me and then maybe a hike at Silver Springs."

"A ride?" Derek asked skeptically.

"I own a motorcycle. It's a lot easier on gas than this guzzler," he said, patting the dash.

"Yeah, that'd be cool. I've never ridden a motorcycle before."

"Maybe you could make one of your tasty lunches for us?"

"I can do that." They sat there in awkward silence for a moment until Derek offered, "Do you want to come in for a while?"

"More than anything, but...."

"But," Derek prompted.

"I like you a lot, Derek."

“Oh, I get it,” Derek said his voice a mixture of hurt and anger. “If you don’t want to go out with me, all you have to do was say so. I’m not going to fall apart or anything.” He grabbed the door handle and was already halfway out of the cab by the time Gerry was able to get a hold of his arm.

“No! No you don’t get it. Just wait a minute, will you? Give me a chance to explain,” Gerry said, slightly irritated that Derek had jumped to conclusions.

Derek relented and slid back onto the seat, closing the door, his hand still grasping the handle tightly.

“I told you I was done with fucking around, and I meant it. I want to be with you.” Derek looked at him skeptically, and Gerry took Derek’s hand into his own. “I do,” he said with conviction. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot. But I want there to be more between us than just sex. I want us to get to know each other better, do things together.”

Derek slowly moved his hand from the door to his knee. “How long do you think we have to wait?”

Gerry smiled in relief. “I don’t know. I’ve never waited for sex before.”

“But you want to with me?” Derek asked in disbelief.

“Don’t you think you’re worth it?” Derek’s only answer was a shake of his head and a shrug of his shoulders. Gerry moved closer to him, asking, “Are you okay with waiting?”

“I’ve never been with anyone who wanted to wait. When I...” Derek broke eye contact and hung his head.

“You don’t have to tell me. Whatever happened in your past can stay there as far as I’m concerned.”

Derek squeezed Gerry’s hand tightly, but still wouldn’t look at him as he said, “I used sex to feel wanted and

desirable, but all it really turned out to be was meaningless and stupid. I did it... a lot. It's been a long time since I've been with anyone. I've been tested, though, and I'm healthy."

"Thank you for telling me," Gerry said with sincerity. "It's good to know that we're both clean." He had to straddle the floor console, but was grateful that his truck wasn't equipped with bucket seats. He was able to get close to Derek and not feel like he was too far into Derek's personal space. "You are worth it, you know," he whispered. "Whatever may or may not happen between us, I hope you'll always remember that."

"It sounds like you're setting us up for failure."

"No," Gerry denied with a shake of his head. "I want to explore these feelings I have for you, Derek, and it takes time to do that. Diving into a relationship too fast hasn't worked out for me in the past, and this time I want it to."

Derek looked down at their joined hands momentarily before lifting his eyes to look into Gerry's. "Yeah, that makes sense and all that, but it's... difficult to see the wisdom of it when you're sitting right beside me."

Now it was Gerry's turn to look down between them and when he started to move back to his side of the truck, Derek tugged on his hand. "Just stay here a minute," Derek implored.

Gerry swore his intentions were good when he leaned in for a kiss, but things escalated quickly from just kissing to more exploration. It was difficult not to with the encouraging moans from Derek. Or were they from him? Who moved closer first? Was it Derek, or had they moved together as one? Gerry's hands were busy trying to touch whatever part of Derek he could. Derek's arms, chest, nipples, none of

them were safe from his touch. Derek was giving just as good as he got. Was it just seconds that they'd been kissing, or had it been hours?

It was getting hot in the truck, their breathing becoming ragged as Gerry kissed his way to Derek's neck. Derek arched his neck perfectly to give him better access. Gerry wanted better access, needed more access. His hand dipped between Derek's legs, palming his crotch. He moaned against Derek's hot skin as he felt how hard Derek was for him. He pressed his hand against him, Derek thrusting his pelvis into him at the same time.

"We need to stop," Gerry whispered, not taking his mouth away from Derek's neck.

"Not yet," Derek said, thrusting again.

"Not like this."

"Yes, just like this," Derek pleaded as he thrust over and over against his hand, which Gerry realized he hadn't moved even an inch.

"All right, if that's what you want," Gerry growled, covering Derek's mouth with his once again. He used his hand and his mouth to take Derek where he desired, and he greedily took every moan, every thrust from Derek to store in his memory for later. When Derek came, Gerry almost did as well. He wanted this to be for Derek and didn't want to take more than what was being offered.

Derek fell back against the seat, the side of his body pressed up against Gerry. He moved his hand between Gerry's legs, but Gerry stopped him. "No, you don't have to."

"I want to."

“And I want you to, but not here. I want us to be free next time.”

“Free?”

“Free from clothes, free to move around, free to watch each other, free to be naked.”

“Jesus,” Derek said softly, closing his eyes, letting his head fall so that the side of their foreheads met. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll do it later, at home, thinking about you.”

“For wanting to wait, you sure as hell aren’t making it easy,” Derek groaned.

Gerry chuckled, then nuzzled him so Derek would lift his head, and they could kiss one last time. “I’ll see you on Sunday,” he said, moving back into his seat.

“What time?”

“How about ten? We can get an early start on hiking and then stop for some lunch.”

“You won’t have to work in the morning?”

“Probably a little, but I’ll be here at ten if that’s good for you.”

“Yeah, it is,” Derek said with a smile. He leaned in for another quick kiss, then was out of the door.

Gerry watched him walk up to the front door of the apartment building, where Derek turned and gave him a wave before going inside. Gerry closed his eyes and took a couple deep breaths hoping he could last all the way home. That final image of Derek under the light of the doorway was going to be difficult to get out of his head. Derek’s hair was all messed up, shooting out in all different directions, and

his T-shirt was only half-tucked into his pants and although he couldn't see it, he knew right where the wet spot was on the front of Derek's jeans. He started the engine before he could change his mind and run after Derek to help relieve the pressure in his own pants.

## Chapter 3

DEREK glanced at his watch again and swore that the damn thing must be broken. Surely it was five o'clock. The hands on the face of the watch, however, proved him wrong once again. It was a quarter till five, two minutes since the last time he'd looked. Fifteen minutes to go. Fridays usually went slow, but this one seemed to be dragging ass like none other. Jesus, the day was never going to end at this rate.

He'd been working at Beckett & Foster for two weeks now, and he and Gerry had been dating for three weeks. They hadn't slept together yet, but Derek was hoping that was going to change tonight. He was cooking dinner for Gerry, at Gerry's house, nothing spectacular, just something easy and tasty. Over the last two years he'd found it was easier to make simple and quick meals that were good for him than try to eat prepackaged so-called *diet* meals.

Derek had been to Gerry's house several times, but Gerry was pretty adamant about keeping to the "no sex" rule until they got to know each other better. They had gone to the park and hiked, another day they'd gone to a wine-tasting event, and another time they went to a home and garden show. When Gerry found out Derek was a history buff, Gerry suggested they go to a historic town, a real working farm and village from the 1800s. It was a lot of fun going with Gerry, and Derek hadn't the heart to tell him he'd been there several times on field trips for school and had

even gone there a few years ago with his dad, from whom Derek had inherited his love of history.

There were also text messages and phone calls during the week, and if Gerry was working close to the office, Derek would have lunch with him. Derek couldn't think of anything that he didn't like about Gerry. They watched most of the same television shows, had similar tastes in movies, and could sit and talk for hours.

His favorite date had been the trip to the park when they went hiking. Derek had been proud of himself, as he was able to keep up with Gerry easily as they followed a couple of different trails. Before he'd lost weight, he would have never agreed to go on a hike, afraid that he would have lagged behind too much. He had hardly been out of breath, only a time or two on some steep inclines, and it was actually fun to walk with Gerry by his side.

It was also nice that he got a chance to see more of what Gerry enjoyed. Gerry stopped several times to look at different plants and trees to admire them or ponder at their growth pattern. Derek got caught up in his enthusiasm and listened attentively as Gerry explained about the origins of different species of trees and flowers as they made their way along the trails.

Then, of course, there was the ride on the motorcycle. The vibration of the bike felt strange, and the fear that he would fall off when turning corners had him nervous at first. However, he was able to adapt to it, especially since it gave him a good excuse to sit so close to Gerry.

Even though he felt more and more comfortable and confident the more time he spent with Gerry, there was still a little part of him that expected Gerry to break it off at any



time. He tried not to think of the future too much for fear that his imagination would run wild with the possibilities, both good and bad.

Thankfully his traitorous watch finally showed it was time to leave, and he gave one last look over his desk before he left. He tried to be patient as he waited for the elevator, then through the long line of cars waiting to get out of the parking deck, and finally out onto the street where he took an alternate route. It would take him a little longer, but at least he was moving and not just sitting with only his impatience gaining any momentum.

He stopped off at the store and picked up the groceries he'd need to prepare the meal and spent a few extra minutes deciding on a bottle of wine. Of course he chose the wrong line at the checkout, those to his right and left moving faster than the one he was in. He shifted from foot to foot and swung the small basket he was holding to and fro as the woman in front of him dug out her coupons. It was all he could do to keep his frustrated sigh from escaping when she pulled out her wallet and started to write a check. *For God's sake, who still writes checks these days?*

Once she finally finished with her purchase, Derek was relieved things ran more smoothly. On the drive to Gerry's house, he worked through his timetable for what he'd have to do when he got there. He liked things to be orderly and the best way to achieve that was to put some thought into it.

When he pulled into the driveway he only saw his brother's car, no sign of Gerry's truck. After a moment's disappointment, he walked up to the house. Gerry had told him where to find a spare key just in case he would be late.

After unlocking the door, he hesitated a moment before pushing it open. Was it too soon for this to feel so right? He was falling in love, something he'd always dreamed of, but was never sure he'd find. As the door swung open he looked into the living room and at the things that were Gerry. The large, comfortable couch where Gerry liked to stretch out and the wooden coffee table decorated with a bottle of beer and two or three Netflix envelopes. On one side of the room was the desk, big and sturdy with a computer monitor and keyboard sitting in the middle, a neat stack of mail on one side and a bunch of small scraps of paper scattered about. On the other side was the big-screen TV with all sorts of electronic equipment. Overall the room was tidy and had a homey feel to it.

With a smile he stepped into the house, happy to be there and feeling the excitement bubble up again as he thought of Gerry's big bed, hoping he got the chance to test it out tonight. He made quick work of getting things set up in the kitchen, finding his way around easily. The food, with the exception of the fish, was ready and the table set when he heard Gerry's truck pull into the drive. Derek looked out of the window and watched Gerry back up his trailer to the garage, and then Brenden and Gerry hopped out to unload the trailer.

Derek went out to see if he could help and as soon as he got close to the truck he could tell that something wasn't right. "Tough day?" he asked.

Gerry's brows were furrowed, his face dark as he grumbled, "Fuckin' bitch of a day," causing Brenden to throw Derek a look of sympathy at Gerry's harsh tone.

They worked in silence to unload the equipment and clean it off, Gerry finally talking when they'd finished. "See you tomorrow, Brenden. Thanks for agreeing to work."

"Sure thing," Brenden replied.

Gerry began walking toward the house, stopping when he was by Derek, reaching out to take a tuft of Derek's hair between his fingers and giving it a gentle tug. "Hey," Gerry murmured, giving him a small, grateful smile, "thanks for helping unload the trailer."

"Oh, no problem," Derek answered, smiling back, relieved that Gerry didn't seem quite so upset now.

"I'll see you inside. I'm gonna go wash up."

Derek watched Gerry until he got in the house and then turned to his brother, who was wearing a goofy grin. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything," Brenden said, holding up his hands defensively.

"Yeah, but you're thinkin' plenty!"

"You two are just so cute," Brenden said, reaching over to pinch Derek's cheek.

Derek dodged him easily and smacked Brenden's hand away. "Cut it out, you 'tard."

"Hey, gimme a break, it's been a helluva day."

"What happened?" Derek asked, the humor gone now.

"One of the mowers broke, and we spent half the day fixing it. He had customers bustin' his balls 'cause he wasn't gettin' to 'em fast enough. And to top it all off, he finally had it with Jeff and fired him."

"Shit, I can see why he's so pissed off."

"I'm outta here," Brenden said with a tired sigh. "He wants to get an early start tomorrow."

"Okay, see ya later," Derek said distractedly as he looked toward the house to see if he could catch a glimpse of Gerry. He'd never seen Gerry in anything but a happy or content mood. Gerry had barely acknowledged his presence when Derek had offered to help. Although Gerry had a right to be angry and frustrated, Derek felt a little selfish for hoping that it wouldn't ruin their night together.

When he got back into the house, he found Gerry sorting through the mail. "Junk and bills, that's all I ever seem to get," Gerry muttered.

"The one constant in our life," Derek said lightly. "Brenden told me what a shitty day you had."

"Yep."

"You know, if you need extra help tomorrow, I'll be happy...."

"No! It's not your job to bail my ass out all the time," Gerry said loudly as he slammed the mail onto the desk.

"I didn't realize that's what I was doing," he said with a puzzled frown.

Gerry finally looked at him, his dark expression clearing after a moment. "I'm sorry. It *was* a bad day, but I shouldn't take it out on you."

"We can do this another night if you want," Derek offered.

"I've been looking forward to being with you all day, and I sure as hell don't want you to leave. Just let me get a shower, I'll feel better after that."

“All right,” he said with a grin. “I’ll go ahead and put the salmon on. It won’t take too long to cook.”

“Sounds good,” Gerry said with a tired sigh, then with a smile added, “I’ll be back.”

He watched Gerry walk through the kitchen and into the bedroom and when he heard the shower start he finally moved into the kitchen. He set the oven and turned to the refrigerator to get the salmon out when Gerry came back in, barefoot and shirtless. Derek didn’t have time to react as Gerry stopped in front of him, put his hand to the back of his neck and pulled him close for a long, hard kiss. “I’m glad you’re here,” Gerry whispered before another kiss and then he was gone.

Derek stood in the middle of the kitchen as a slow smile spread across his face, and after a moment to absorb the kiss, he continued to cook dinner. The meal was ready by the time Gerry reappeared dressed in faded jeans and a green T-shirt, his hair spiky and wet. Taking his fill of Gerry, Derek realized he was no longer hungry. Not for food, at least.

“Looks good,” Gerry said, sitting down at the table.

“Not that much to it,” Derek said with a shrug as he sat opposite Gerry. “My mom showed me how to make some simple things that would be good for me to eat. It’s a good thing chicken and salmon are easy to fix.”

“Don’t you get bored with it? I mean, I hate cooking for myself, and I mostly just grab some fast food or frozen dinners.”

“It was tough when I first started eating right, and I had a few setbacks, but if I grilled up a bunch of chicken on the weekends and got each meal ready and packed up in the

fridge, I didn't have to think about it. I just grabbed one of the meals and ate it. Sometimes I get a craving for something sweet or something I shouldn't have, and I treat myself."

"That's good. You shouldn't deprive yourself of everything."

"Well, I still have to be careful. I don't want to gain back any weight."

"Some wouldn't be so bad, would it? Now that you're conscious of what you need to eat and keep active, that's all you need to be healthy."

"Gain too much back, and I won't be able to keep a hot guy like you," Derek joked.

Gerry dropped his fork onto his plate. "Is that how you see me?"

"As hot? Definitely, you—"

"No, I mean shallow. That all I care about is looks. I don't like you for what's on the outside, Derek. I like you for *who* you are."

"You were first attracted to my looks, you have to admit that."

"What I was attracted to was the way you wrote your personal ad. You were honest about what you were looking for, and you didn't try to make yourself into something you weren't."

"And all those times I've caught you looking at me?"

"Okay," Gerry admitted with a sigh. "Yes, I agree, physical attraction is part of it, but it wouldn't matter to me how much you weighed. It's you I want to be with."

"Okay, fine," Derek challenged, digging in his back pocket for his wallet. He pulled a photo out and laid it on the

table. “That’s a picture of me and Brenden a few years ago.” It showed Derek at his heaviest, with a round face and body. He didn’t like any of the photos of when he was younger, showing how heavy he used to be. However he kept this one with him as a reminder of what he didn’t want to go back to. He didn’t look at it often any more, didn’t need to.

Gerry picked the photo up and a small smile played at the corner of his mouth as he looked at it. “Is black your favorite color?”

“What?” Derek was taken aback by the unexpected question.

“You’re always wearing black, with the exception of your tie on our first date.”

“You remember my tie?”

“I remember everything about that night.”

“Oh.” Derek was flattered and surprised to find out that their first date meant as much to Gerry as it did to him. “Um, well, my favorite color is actually green, but I’m never sure what color looks good on me. Black is easy, it goes with everything.”

“You’d look good in green.”

It took a minute for Derek to get his thoughts back in the original direction they were headed instead of how good he’d look wearing the green shirt Gerry presently had on. He cleared his throat and pointed to the photo. “Would you have ever asked him out?”

“Him?” Gerry asked with the quirk of his brow. “You mean Brenden?”

“No,” he sighed with frustration, “I meant me.”

"I knew what you meant. It's just I didn't realize until now that you see yourself as two different people."

"I am, kinda. Just answer the question."

"No, in all honesty, I probably wouldn't have asked you out back then but not because you were heavy."

"Then why not?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because for one I wasn't ready for a serious relationship a couple of years ago, and secondly you probably wouldn't have thought I was serious in asking you out. You weren't as confident then as you are now."

"You would've dated me when I was fat?"

"Derek, physical attraction is only part of a relationship and for me it's only a very small part. Are you only going out with me because I'm, as you described, *hot*?"

"No," he admitted and cursed himself for blushing. It seemed like he was always blushing around Gerry. "You were the only one that answered my ad with some intelligence."

"Let me put it to you this way," Gerry said, leaning closer, putting his forearms on the table. "Yes, I think you're attractive. I think your glasses make you look sexy as hell. And you have a grin that when you use it, damn, I think all kind of lecherous thoughts. What keeps me coming back is your personality. You and I get along well. Our interests aren't exactly the same, and that's what makes it interesting. I enjoyed going to that historical place we went to the last weekend. I've never been there before, and it was fun going with you. You know this rotten day I just went through? It was thinking of you being here waiting for me that got me through all that. I couldn't wait to see you. Aren't all those



things supposed to be what you look for in a partner? What you want?"

"Yeah, but...."

Gerry took hold of his hand as he said, "No, Derek, there are no *buts*. You can't go back to the past and decide I wouldn't have liked you then. That's not fair to either of us. What I am telling you is that the weight doesn't matter. You're the person I want to be with."

Derek looked down at their hands, loving the feeling of Gerry's fingers entwined with his. His stomach was full of butterflies when he said, "I want to be with you, I'm just... nervous."

"That's okay," Gerry said, smiling. "I'm not going anywhere."

"No, I mean, I'm ready to *be* with you."

"Oh, well... that was fast, going from worrying about me dumping you if you gained weight to having sex."

"I know and I understand all the reasons that you wanted to wait, it just feels like we're making it into something bigger than it is."

"You just want to do it and get it over with?"

"I spend a lot of time thinking about it," he admitted shyly. "Don't you?"

"Yes," Gerry agreed, dropping his eyes momentarily. "Why don't we finish dinner first and discuss it later."

"Okay," he said, unable to keep the disappointment from his voice.

"Later," Gerry whispered his promise, giving Derek's hand a squeeze before letting it go.

Derek wasn't sure how long they lasted, maybe just a few bites before he heard Gerry's chair scraping on the floor. Then they both stood and kissed—desperate, hot, wet kisses—as they did a stumbling walk toward the bedroom. They paused only a moment so Gerry could get Derek's belt unbuckled and pants undone as Derek used the time to push up Gerry's T-shirt. There was more kissing, touching, and almost tripping a time or two, before they finally made it to the bedroom.

All the time spent fantasizing, and at long last he had in front of him the real thing, the real Gerry, without having to try and feel him through layers of clothes. It was much better than any fantasy he ever had. They let their clothes litter the floor so they could fall onto the bed unencumbered.

Gerry was on top of him and Derek reveled in the feeling of Gerry's weight and the fullness of their desire grinding against each other. He wrapped his legs around Gerry's hips, pulling him closer. His heart was beating fast in anticipation of what they were about to do. He'd had plenty of sexual experience, some more than satisfying at the time of occurrence, some of them just plain awful. He wanted this to be good, to have the feelings last at least until forever.

Those thoughts made him tense up. He knew better than to try to make this out to be more than it could possibly be. Over these past few weeks Gerry had seemed like he'd be an attentive lover, wanting to give as much as he took. Their make-out sessions always left him wanting more, and he was sure Gerry felt the same. That's why Gerry couldn't wait until dinner was over. Surely that was the reason, not just because he wanted them to fuck to get it over with.

“What’re you thinkin’?” Gerry whispered in his ear as he leaned his head against Derek’s.

“Nothin’,” he answered with a smile, gently bucking beneath Gerry. “You feel good.”

“Mmm, yeah, so do you,” Gerry said, lifting himself slightly to lean on his elbows so they could look into each others’ eyes. “You wanna stop?”

“No!” He tightened his legs around Gerry’s torso, not ready for him to take away one of the few things that felt right in his life. He dodged Gerry’s eyes momentarily as he admitted shyly, “I want it to be good.”

“Oh, it’s gonna be,” Gerry promised with a wicked grin.

“I want to be good for you,” he half-whispered.

“Just give that brain of yours a rest. Let your body do all the thinking and talking. Mine’ll answer right back.”

Derek craned his neck for a kiss, Gerry meeting him halfway, and Derek once again got lost in the kiss and Gerry’s body. They rolled about on the bed to get a better position, their bodies rubbing together, pushing their desire higher and higher. When Derek’s head lay on the pillows, Gerry asked a breathless, “This okay?”

“Yes,” he answered as Gerry got to his knees. Gerry leaned his body over Derek’s so he could get into the drawer of the bedside table. In this position Derek was able to thrust his pelvis against Gerry, causing Gerry to still his movements and close his eyes.

“Holy fuck,” Gerry ground out. “Stay still a minute, will ya?”

Derek wanted to give a teasing reply, but he still felt inhibited because of his own insecurities about his body. He

could manage a few things, like grinding against Gerry, because there really was no help for it. Sometimes he just had to let his body take the lead. For the most part, however, he would just take his cues from Gerry. He watched as Gerry pulled out a small bottle of lube and a condom from the drawer.

“Ready?”

“More than,” he said, letting his legs fall open. “Can we do it like this?”

“Facing each other?”

Derek could only nod. He’d only done it face-to-face a few times when he was heavier and it wasn’t very comfortable for him, even though it felt good. He was anxious to try again. With Gerry.

“You want me to fuck you, Derek? I just wanna make sure I’m reading all the signals right.”

“Yes,” Derek panted.

“You know, there’s something to be said for not waiting,” Gerry said, his hand trembled as he opened the bottle and squeezed some of the liquid onto his fingers. As Gerry looked up into his eyes, Derek could see he was nervous as well.

“Yeah, well, we did, so just shut up, and do it,” he said impatiently as Gerry positioned himself better between Derek’s legs. He was getting too excited and wanted to feel Gerry inside of him.

“Just relax,” Gerry said as Derek felt something cool and wet probing him. Gerry moved his finger slowly inside and Derek closed his eyes and concentrated on the feeling. There was a moment of discomfort as Gerry added another finger. He wanted to touch himself but knew he wouldn’t last long once he did. He wanted to wait until Gerry’s cock was inside

of him and he could wrap his legs around him, taking Gerry's weight on top of him without being uncomfortable, and they could kiss. "Oh shit," he moaned, opening his eyes to see that Gerry was watching him.

The fingers were gone, and he looked down between their bodies, mesmerized as Gerry fumbled with opening the condom package, rolled it onto his own dick, and then slicked himself down. Another glance at each other, and then Gerry was pushing Derek's legs up against his chest and farther apart. "Good?"

"Uh-huh," was all he could manage between breaths, and then he felt Gerry's cock nudging at his opening. He bore down a little as Gerry pushed in, the pain at being filled ebbing away as Gerry moved slowly into him, enabling him to get used to the feeling. When he could feel Gerry's hips pressed against him, he wanted to move, but it felt so good, this feeling of being possessed, that he didn't want it to end.

And then there was the bottle of lube again as Gerry drizzled some onto Derek's cock. He probably wouldn't really need much as there was enough pre-come to make him as slick as he'd need to finish himself off. Gerry was only moving his hand, though, as he stroked Derek's cock, coating it, and it was making his balls tighten and tingle, so he gave Gerry's dick an involuntary squeeze.

"Jesus, fuck!" Gerry shouted as he threw his head back and fisted Derek hard and fast for a minute. "Don't do that if you want me to last past two strokes."

"Sorry."

Gerry looked down at him with a sexy smirk. "Don't be sorry."

“Oh, fuck.” Derek wished he could tell Gerry just how sexy he was and how good his dick felt inside him, but again, he held back, somehow still afraid to say the words.

“I’m getting there,” Gerry teased, giving him a few small thrusts of his hips. Derek moaned his approval, and then Gerry leaned down, supporting his weight on his forearms as he captured every single sound Derek made with a kiss. Gerry began to move, shifting his weight slightly so that every time he thrust, his abdomen was brushing against Derek’s cock. The sensation was exquisite, and Derek’s hands, which had been lying useless at his side, latched onto Gerry’s shoulders.

Derek tried to hold onto the kiss, but couldn’t get enough oxygen in through his nose and had to break away, his breath sawing in and out of him. He buried his face in Gerry’s neck, covering it with hot, wet kisses as Gerry picked up the pace.

Their moans mingled, and Derek couldn’t tell one from the other. Gerry was whispering something in his ear. Unfortunately he was too far gone to even try to make sense out of it. “Oh, God, Gerry, I can’t hold it.”

“Don’t. Let it go, Derek. Just let go.”

Derek moved his hands to Gerry’s ass, pulling him into himself harder and faster until finally he could feel his dick pulsing between them, Gerry’s movements spreading his come all around. Gerry was pounding into him until he froze for a moment and grimaced as if he were in pain. A few more thrusts before Gerry fell on top of him, and Derek got to do the second thing he’d been dreaming about. He got to wrap his arms and legs around his lover to savor the feeling.

“Damn,” Gerry said before giving him a soft, tender kiss. “I need another shower after that.”

“I think we both do,” he said with a lazy smile.

“Maybe a nap first,” Gerry said sleepily.

“The bedding’s all... gunky.”

“So are we,” Gerry said with a laugh. “Just let me rest my eyes a bit.”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” he snorted. “I’ll just go clean up the kitchen while you *rest*.”

“No,” Gerry said as he rolled them onto their sides so he could snuggle into Derek. “Stay with me.”

Gerry’s eyes were already closed, and his voice was gravelly with sleep, so it wasn’t that much of a hardship to stay. It was much nicer in here, surrounded by the warmth of this man, instead in the kitchen by himself.

THEY woke up later in the night and took a nice shower together, making sure that certain parts were particularly clean. Then they raided the kitchen for sustenance and had the kitchen cleaned up in no time. When Gerry asked him to spend the night, Derek agreed readily. He definitely didn’t feel like driving home, and he wanted to spend as much time with Gerry as possible, wrapped up in their intimacy. They kissed and fooled around, but didn’t fuck again.

At five thirty, the shrill sound of an alarm woke him, and he felt the bed move as Gerry turned it off. “You can still sleep if you’d like,” Gerry said, nestling his body next to Derek’s, “or if you’d rather leave before your brother gets here, that’s okay too.”

"Doesn't matter if I see him here or back at the apartment; he's still gonna know I was here the whole night."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot for a minute."

"That's okay, you know... since you're old, you can be excused."

"Oh, do not tell me you just called me out for being older than you."

"Well, you are the big three oh."

"Just you wait. When you hit thirty, I'm gonna really let you have it."

"Really? Is that a threat or a promise?" he asked, squirming around to find just the right parts of Gerry's body.

"Three times not enough for you in one night?" Gerry asked, rolling on top of him.

"We only did it once."

"You came three times last night, if my old feeble mind is recalling correctly."

"Hmm, yeah, that's true," Derek said, trying not to grin as he wiggled around some more. "But so did you."

"Yes, twice in bed and once in the shower."

"Very good! I'm pleased to report your memory is perfect."

"Do I get a reward?"

"Sure, what would you like? A kiss?"

"That's good for a start," Gerry said before lowering his head to claim his reward. They took their time, exploring and tasting each other in a leisurely fashion. Things were just starting to get heated when Derek heard his cell phone go off, playing some ridiculous ringtone that Brenden had found and uploaded to his phone.



“What the hell’s that?” Gerry asked with confusion.

“It’s Brenden,” he sighed as he got out of bed to look for his pants.

“Why’s he callin’ so goddamn early?” Gerry grouched as he sat up and leaned against the headboard.

“Because he likes to be a pain in the ass,” he answered as he dug his phone out of his pocket. Unfortunately by the time he pushed the button, the call had already gone to voice mail. Walking back to the bed he threw the phone onto the nightstand and climbed back in, Gerry looking at him skeptically.

“Won’t he keep calling?”

“Probably not. I’m sure it was just to let me know he’s on his way over.”

“Well... that is kinda nice of him.”

“Yeah, but I’m still pissed off that he interrupted your *reward*.”

“Me too. At least he wasn’t pounding on the door at a critical moment. We can pick this up later.”

“Not until tomorrow.”

“Why?” Gerry asked with a puzzled frown.

“You take your mom out tonight.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Gerry murmured before saying brightly, “I could come over later.”

“Sure, if you want to.”

“Didn’t I just say that,” Gerry said with a smirk as he leaned over to give him a kiss. “I think you’re the one with the faulty memory.” This time when their lips met, it was with some urgency, and it wasn’t long before Gerry was moving off Derek and the bed.

“I better get ready,” Gerry said as he walked to the bathroom. “Are you gonna stay?”

Derek stretched out on the bed. “Yeah, I think I’ll just rest my eyes a bit,” he teased.

“Dickhead,” Gerry called from the bathroom.

He lay there only for a minute before deciding that he might as well get up. There were things he needed to get done, and the weekend was the best time to do it. He was lucky enough to have parents that would support him and all the things he wanted to accomplish in his life. As long as he was in school and working at his internship, they supported him. It had been Brenden’s idea to get an apartment off campus, and their parents agreed as long as Derek went with him. In return Derek helped his parents out as often as he could by doing such things as minor repairs to the house with his dad or tending the garden with his mom.

It was an hour’s drive to his parent’s house, and if he got an early start, he’d be back home in plenty of time before Gerry came over. He smiled at the thoughts of his evening with Gerry. They had never spent a Saturday together, and he couldn’t help thinking of a future together. He still tried to temper the feeling, but Gerry was right, the attraction went much deeper than the basics. He also knew that he was seeing the best side of Gerry, with the small exception of the bad day Gerry had yesterday. When they finally got to see all the good, bad, and ugly parts of each other, hopefully they would come through it together, and their feelings would be stronger than before.

## Chapter 4

GERRY filled the last cooler with ice, making sure the ice covered the liquid refreshment evenly before he shut the lid. Turning, he gave one last inspection to the garage. He'd moved all his equipment out earlier and sprayed the cement floor down to wash all the dirt and grime away. It looked as clean as you could get a forty-plus-year-old garage. Today was his annual Fourth of July cookout for friends and neighbors, and it was always something he looked forward to. Derek had readily and thankfully agreed to help him get ready for it. It was a few hours before people would start arriving, each bringing with them some type of food. Gerry provided the hamburgers, hotdogs, water, and soda. If anyone wanted anything harder to drink, they had to bring it themselves.

He walked out into the bright sunlight and watched as Derek set up lawn chairs in several groups under the shade of the trees. The property was, in fact, surrounded by trees and bushes, effectively making it very private. It was one of the things that had drawn him to the house when he saw it the first time, as well as the fact that it was on a cul-de-sac. It reminded him of the favorite place he'd lived as a kid, only bigger and better. His property actually was three lots together and sat at the back of the dead end.

He'd worked hard getting the outside to look good, as it wouldn't do to be a landscaper and have an awful looking yard. The inside of the house wasn't up to snuff yet, the other two bedrooms and bathroom at the opposite end of the house from the master bedroom needed a lot of work, and he just used them for storage at the moment. Being with Derek had slowed his remodeling work considerably, but he wouldn't trade one minute of his time with him.

Their relationship deepened with each passing week and sometimes Gerry felt like they had been together for years instead of months. Derek spent most weekends here now. They got together several times throughout the week as well, and he wanted to ask Derek to move in with him, but felt it was too soon for that.

Derek turned just then, and once he saw Gerry, gave him a goofy smile and a wave. Then he gestured with his arms to the chairs, as if presenting them to Gerry before pointing to himself as if he had done something fabulous. He laughed at Derek's antics, delighted that Derek continued to open up to him, to show his silly side along with his vulnerable one. Although they hadn't said *I love you* to each other yet, he knew it was only a matter of time before it slipped out.

Derek was already a big part of Gerry's life. When things went wrong or customers were getting on his last nerve, Derek always listened patiently and quietly except for murmured words of sympathy. In turn when good things happened, Derek shared in his excitement and joy. He liked to think he did the same for Derek. Sexually, they were more than compatible. Derek was still somewhat inhibited, but he was an attentive lover, paying attention to what turned Gerry

on and what didn't. Gerry didn't mind being in charge in the bedroom, he just hoped that Derek would soon feel comfortable enough to be more aggressive at times.

He walked over to the objection of his affection and draped his arms loosely over Derek's shoulders. "What would I do without you?" he asked before giving him a kiss.

"Ah, yes, I guess people would be sitting on the ground otherwise, 'cause it's so difficult to set up these thingamajigs. What are they called again?"

"Smartass," he grumbled, ruining the effect by giving him another kiss.

"I thought we were supposed to be working," Brenden called from the side of the house where he was setting up a small canopy for the stereo and speakers so music could be played.

Gerry sighed and lifted his eyes skyward.

"It was your idea to have him come early to help," Derek said.

"He's not this mouthy at work."

"That's because at work you're his boss. On the Fourth of July, you're his brother's boyfriend."

"I like being his brother's boyfriend."

"Mmm, me too," Derek said, stepping closer so their bodies were touching. They managed to get a few kisses in before Brenden interrupted them again. "I'm leavin' if you two don't stop."

"So?" Derek called back.

"He's right," Gerry said reluctantly. "We better get moving. People will be arriving soon."

Derek stepped back as he said, “I can’t believe you go to this much trouble for a barbeque.”

“It’s evolved over the years. One of my friends suggested having music, and then a few of them brought their own fireworks, it makes for quite a show.”

“And your neighbors really don’t care?”

“Most of them will be here. I turn off the music by nine at the latest and there’s fireworks going off all over the city.”

“You really do this every year.”

“When I was a kid, one of the neighborhoods my mom and I lived in had this big block party every year. It lasted all day and there were games for the kids. It was something I never forgot.”

“Then why isn’t your mom coming?”

“She doesn’t like big parties, the heat, or loud music,” he said casually. “If she can get out of going to a party, she will.”

“You have air conditioning, and if she went in the house she wouldn’t hear the stereo.”

“She wouldn’t like sitting in the house when she could be at home.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense. It’s a shame she’ll miss out on everything.”

He heard the casualness in Derek’s voice and knew that perhaps Derek had been hoping to meet his mom today. Gerry wasn’t being dishonest about the reasons his mom wouldn’t have a good time at the party, and at the moment, he couldn’t help being thankful that she was a homebody. Derek was going to have his hands full meeting all of Gerry’s friends and neighbors anyway.

“Do all your neighbors come?” Derek asked, pulling Gerry out of his thoughts.

“Some come just for the afternoon, some come just for the fireworks, and a few don’t come at all. It’s a good crowd, though.”

“So all your neighbors know you’re gay?”

“No one knew for the first couple of years after I moved here. A lady who lives at the end of the block, Mrs. Riley, kept trying to fix me up with her daughter, and I told her. As you can imagine, it spread like wildfire. She and some other neighbors stopped talking to me, but for the most part people seem to be okay with it.”

“Ever have a boyfriend here?” Derek asked with a mixture of worry and curiosity.

“Once. A few years ago, I invited a guy I was seeing, and everyone handled it just fine. There’ll be kids here, so it’s not like anyone, gay or straight, should be overly affectionate to push anyone’s buttons.”

“There’ll be other gay people here?”

“Sure,” he answered, realizing how much they still didn’t know about each other. They’d been so caught up in the euphoria of each other, wanting to spend every minute they could together, just the two of them, they had pretty much checked out of the world. “I can’t wait for you to meet my friends.”

“Mmmm.”

“C’mon, let’s go help your brother” he said throwing an arm over Derek’s shoulder. “And don’t worry, my friends will like you.”

Derek didn't look convinced, and it was obvious he wanted to change the subject when he asked, "What else needs to be done?"

"We still need to set up the volleyball net and croquet game."

"People shouldn't be bored," Derek chuckled.

"It just gives people a chance to come together and have a nice day where they don't have to do much more than relax."

By the time they finished getting everything ready, the first people starting trickling in. Gerry tried to stay by Derek's side, but soon Gerry was asked if he had an extra serving spoon, then it was an extension cord, which was in the opposite direction of the kitchen. By the time he'd gotten those two things, he had to run back in the kitchen for the napkins they'd forgotten to set out earlier, which lead to three or four more other things he had to see to.

With all the immediate problems solved, he eagerly sought out Derek. It took him a moment to see him sitting beside Gloria Stevens, the old widow that lived two doors down. She was a spy, even in her eighties, and one of his favorite neighbors. She loved to bake and was always plying him with delicious cookies, cakes, and pies. He watched for a few minutes as it looked as if they were deep in conversation, and he couldn't help smiling when Mrs. Stevens reached over and patted Derek's hand. His feet started moving in their direction before he realized it.

"I'm glad you could make it, Mrs. Stevens," Gerry said, leaning over to give her a kiss on the cheek. "Can I get you anything?"



“No,” she said with a smile as she held up a plastic cup. “Your young man took care of me. He took all my stuff into the garage and brought me a cup of my iced tea.”

“My young man?” Gerry asked as he exchanged an amused look with Derek.

“She told me you haven’t been around much lately, and I told her that was my fault,” Derek supplied.

“I’m pleased as punch you finally found someone,” she said kindly, patting Derek’s hand again.

He shared a smile with Derek before asking, “So, what have you brought for us today?”

“Same thing I always do: fruit salad and two apple pies. I also brought a lemon meringue, which Derek put in your fridge. He says it’s his favorite too.”

“It is?” he asked in surprise. He’d never seen Derek eat any kind of dessert besides fruit or something low in fat and calories.

“My grandma used to make the best pies around,” Derek said fondly. “I’m looking forward to having a piece of yours, Mrs. Stevens.”

“Now don’t you eat it just ’cause of me,” she said, taking hold of Derek’s hand. Looking up at Gerry, she continued, “You got yourself a real nice man, Gerry.”

“I think so too,” Gerry replied with a wide smile.

“Now off you two go,” Mrs. Stevens said firmly. “I’ll be fine. You need to take care of your other guests.”

“I’ll be back,” Derek promised before getting up and following Gerry to the grill. “She’s a nice lady.”

“Sharp as a tack too. She knows what’s going on with everyone almost before they do,” he said with a laugh. “When I told her I was gay, she just looked at me with that sweet, serene smile of hers and said, ‘That’s nice, sweetie’. I thought for sure she’d be the one to give me the most trouble about who I am.”

“Sometimes it’s surprising who accepts it and who doesn’t.”

“Yeah,” he murmured as he turned on the grill. “Will you watch this for me? I’m gonna go in and get the burgers and hotdogs.”

“Sure,” Derek agreed readily.

When he got into the kitchen, his friend, Valerie, was stirring up a big bowl of macaroni salad. They’d been friends since high school, and she had married her high school sweetheart, who also happened to be his best friend John. She and John were the only two of his friends that he’d told weeks ago about Derek. He usually spent a lot of time with them and their family, and Valerie wasn’t one to put off easily. She’d sussed out that he’d had a boyfriend pretty easily, and he held them off from meeting Derek with the promise they’d get to meet him today.

“Hi, sweetie,” she said excitedly, finishing her task in order to give him a hug.

“Where’s the rest of your tribe?” he asked, looking around. John and Valerie had two boys, Justin and Mike, and a little girl, Emma, ages eight, six, and four respectively, and they all had Val’s blonde hair and golden skin. Val always countered that with the fact that John had blond locks when he was young before his hair turned a light brown.

It was when Emma was born that Gerry started thinking about perhaps having a family of his own some day. He'd always had fun playing with the boys, but it was Emma that captured his heart the minute she wrapped her tiny fingers around one of his and wouldn't let go. Although he and Derek hadn't talked about their thoughts on children, he was anxious to see how Derek interacted with the kids at the party.

"Out front parking cars," she said with a sigh of exasperation. "You really need to put up signs or something next year." She lowered her voice as she confided, "People can't even do the simplest thing sometimes."

"How 'bout I put your kids in charge of sign making and posting."

"Never mind about that," she said with an impatient wave of her hand. "Where is he?"

He grinned and pointed toward the window. "He's at the grill."

Val craned her neck this way and that before finally saying, "Oooohh, he's so cute! Wait a second, who's the guy he's talking to?"

Gerry looked out the window. "Relax," he chuckled. "That's his brother Brenden. See the very nice-looking brunette talking to Mrs. Stevens? That's Brenden's girlfriend, Shana."

"Is he ready to meet all your friends?"

"He's a bit nervous, and I have a feeling he's going to try to stay on the edges as much as possible. Don't gang up on him all at once."

Val gave Derek another look before turning back to Gerry. “I don’t suppose you’ve told your mom you’re dating someone?”

“No,” he said shortly, picking up the bowl of macaroni salad and heading for the door.

“You can’t keep them from each other forever.”

“Says who?” he said pointedly before leaving. Realistically he knew Val was right, but everything was going along fine. Why rock the boat? He didn’t want to have to think about his mom and was spared continuing the conversation when John and Val’s kids found him and started plying him with questions: What games would they be playing? And when would the fireworks start? And how soon till the food was ready?

Gerry finally was able to join Derek at the grill to finish cooking the food. It wasn’t really a two-man job, but Gerry wanted to be close to Derek as people started to drift over to meet him. After everyone finished eating and sat around talking for a bit, a raucous game of volleyball started, the men against the women. Although Derek declined to play he encouraged Gerry to join in. Before the game was over, Gerry saw Derek by the croquet set with a bunch of the kids. His eyes kept drifting over to Derek each time he heard the children’s laughter or triumphant cries. As he looked on, Derek was helping Emma hold the croquet mallet and hit the ball. As a consequence of Gerry not paying attention to the game he was playing, he almost got knocked in the head by the volleyball, but luckily John smacked it away at the last second.

“Way to use your head, dude,” Brenden said with a smirk from behind him. “This ain’t soccer, you know.”

Never one to back down from a challenge, Gerry concentrated on the game, and the men won by just a few points. Noticing there were some new guests arriving, he bowed out of playing a re-match. He was busy for quite some time with the new arrivals and firing up the grill again for those that hadn't already eaten or were ready for a snack.

Although Gerry was busy, he made sure that he had a good view of Derek. He'd envisioned Derek sitting by himself most of the day since he didn't know anyone, and Gerry would have to try to get him to join in the fun. It was a pleasant surprise to see Derek having fun with the kids, keeping them entertained with a game of Simon Says. It was so distracting watching Derek jumping around, laughing, and being silly with the kids that Gerry would have burned the burgers if it hadn't been for Val coming over.

"He is worth his weight in gold," she said, her voice reflecting a mixture of gratitude and relief. "I haven't heard one 'Mom' from my kids all afternoon. Do you know how long it's been since I've been able to enjoy a family outing? And I think you have a rival for Miss Em's affections," she said, pointing to her daughter, who made sure she was always standing next to Derek.

"It doesn't count when it's my boyfriend. I just may be able to steal her away from you if she knows Derek is part of the deal."

"No stealth required," Val joked. "You can have her any time you wanted her." She turned serious as she asked, "So, he's a keeper, huh?"

"I hope so."

"I've never seen you move so fast. In fact I never thought I'd see the day when you were this serious about someone."

“Really? You never saw me getting involved with anyone?”

“Maybe not to the point of seeing someone regularly,” she finished with a shrug.

“My business is successful and growing. I own my own house, go on trips when I want to, and I can buy things that catch my eye.”

“Having a good job and getting the things you want is a good thing,” she said with a small nod.

“I gotta tell you, though, it’s really lonely sitting around with all my stuff and not having anyone to share it.”

“And Derek is good company?”

“He’s a helluva lot more than that,” he said emphatically.

“Then I’m happy for you.”

“I hear a ‘but’ in there.”

“You can’t keep Derek and your mom from each other forever. That’s not fair to either of them. She’s going to find out you’re dating again.”

“You know she hates coming over here. There’s no reason to think that’s going to change.”

“Cause she wants to keep you at her house for as long as she can. And don’t you think she’s going to figure out why you’re not coming around as often or staying as long on Saturdays?”

He recalled earlier how Mrs. Stevens stated that she missed seeing him around and Derek taking the blame for it. Val had a point. However it wasn’t something he even wanted to consider at the moment. He was too afraid that

the two people he cared about most in this world would end up hating each other. If they didn't know about each other, there wouldn't be a problem.

"You're going to have to deal with it sometime," Val warned. "Don't leave it to chance."

"We'll see," was the best and only answer he could give for now as Derek approached them, a trail of kids following him.

"We're thirsty," Derek said with a grin.

"Well, step right up," Val invited as she walked a few feet to the garage. "What does everyone want?"

While the kids kept Val busy searching for the perfect drink, Derek moved closer to Gerry so that they were not quite touching. "You're good with them," Gerry said, canting his head toward the garage.

"Young kids and older folks are a piece of cake. You usually know where you stand with them right away, and they're usually easily entertained." Derek wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. "Although, the older set I can usually just sit and talk to. I don't have to run around like an idiot to make them happy."

"Oh, I don't know, I kinda like seeing you run around."

"I hope it's for a totally different reason."

"No worries there," he said with a waggle of his eyebrow, getting the laugh he was looking for out of Derek. "Are you having a good time?"

"Yeah, I am. One question, though."

"Sure."

“Are you gonna be one of the maniacs setting off the fireworks?” Derek asked with genuine concern.

“No. I just light the first one or two.” He pointed to one of the partygoers. “See the guy over there with white hair wearing the muscle T-shirt, tattoos on his arms, and a big bushy mustache? That’s Barry. He’s a certified public display operator for fireworks.”

“Really? Wouldn’t he make a lot of money setting them off for the city or something?”

“Well, he *is* making a lot of money. He owns a company, and they’re hired to set them off for several cities around the state.”

“Wow, and he comes to your party?”

Gerry pointed to the clean-cut guy standing next to Barry. “Cause his partner, Ron, doesn’t get to spend a lot of time with him during the summer months and finally laid the law down to Barry that he needed to let the reins go a bit with his business and let someone else supervise the jobs. Besides with the Fourth of July, almost any party they go to will have fireworks. Barry always gets asked to set them off, so he’s in all his glory, and the kids think he’s better than Superman.”

“How do you know them?”

“I met Barry at a club a few years ago. I was by myself and bored and thinking of leaving when I felt this big paw of a hand on my shoulder, and there was Barry. Ron was out on the dance floor, and Barry was as bored as me, so we started talking.” By this time everything had finished cooking, so he plated it and turned off the grill. “C’mon, I’ll introduce you to them.”



Barry's natural charisma and charm brought Derek out of his normal reserve, and they were soon deep into a discussion about the recent initiative to legalize gambling in the state. People started to drift over to join in the debate, and Gerry took a back seat so he could observe Derek. It was great to see him get involved and so passionate about a subject. It was a side of Derek he hadn't seen before.

The rest of the day flew by filled with camaraderie and games. When it was time for the fireworks, everyone had set up their chairs in a semicircle to watch the show. After getting things started, Gerry went to sit by Derek as the small crowd cheered their appreciation. It was nice to enjoy the show with him, to sit close to each other and have some type of physical connection.

For the next twenty minutes they were entertained with the bright and beautiful pyrotechnic display. Once it was over, most people took their leave. Gerry was kept busy bidding his guests good night, and by the time most folks were gone, he looked around for Derek.

"I think he's in the house," Brenden said.

"Okay, thanks. By the way, you can have tomorrow off."

"Really? Cool!"

"I appreciate you helping out today, and you've been working hard all summer. You deserve an extra day," he said, giving Brenden a clap on the shoulder before heading into the house.

He found Derek in the kitchen sorting through what was trash and what needed to be loaded into the dishwasher. Someone must have brought the stereo back in and hooked it up because there was music playing in the background. It

was a slow jazz song by one of his favorite artists, and Derek was softly humming along. Not one to pass up an opportunity, Gerry stepped up close and whispered, “Dance with me.”

Derek looked momentarily stunned, then peered out the window. “Most everyone is gone,” Gerry assured him as he took Derek into his arms. As they began to sway to the music, Derek wrapped his arms around Gerry’s waist.

Leaning his forehead against Derek’s, Gerry began to quietly sing along with the music. The song talked about one lover enticing the other to run away together from outside influences, to enjoy their life together, and to be wrapped in each other’s love forever. As he continued singing, Gerry moved his head so his lips were right beside Derek’s ear. He could feel the moment Derek relaxed, and Gerry reveled in the feel of their bodies melting into each other. They didn’t really move from the spot where they’d started, only shuffled their feet occasionally, the movement of their hips most noticeable.

As the song finished, Gerry couldn’t resist slowly kissing a trail from Derek’s ear to his mouth, his hand moving to the other side of Derek’s neck for balance. They kissed for several minutes before he came back down to earth and realized that they still had some people outside. He brushed his thumb across the line of Derek’s jaw as he asked, “Wanna continue this later?”

“Yeah,” Derek breathed, still leaning against him.

Although he knew Derek wasn’t ready to hear the words *I love you*, Gerry was saying them with his body, in the tenderness of his touch and the sincerity of his kisses. He wanted to love this man for the rest of their lives, to give him

everything he could, and to make him happy. He was going to try his best to achieve that, and he knew Val was right. At some point he'd have to do what he feared the most, something that may cause him to lose Derek. He hoped they would all be strong enough to make it through and have the future he knew they both wanted.

## Chapter 5

DEREK sat on Gerry's couch as he read over the weekly written review from his summer advisor, Jamerson Keys. He liked working with Mr. Keys, an older gentleman who was past retirement age but still had a zeal for architecture. Mr. Keys had a nice way of blending his old school ways with modern technology, and Derek knew what he was learning from him was invaluable. They met every Friday afternoon to go over the work week. Mr. Keys also had to give him a written review that would be turned in to the school. Derek had to not only put in a certain number of hours as an intern, but he also had to get good reviews from his advisor in order to become a registered architect. He hoped his fall advisor would be as good as Mr. Keys. Derek had heard rumors that not everyone was as thoughtful and caring about the intern program at the firm as Mr. Keys, and some interns received overly harsh reviews.

Fortunately Derek's reviews had been consistent throughout the summer. Mr. Keys praised him for the thoroughness of his work, his problem-solving abilities, and his adaptability. The one criticism was always his lack of confidence and how critical it was to have the self-assuredness to defend his designs, meet with clients, or head a project. Today was the first time he got positive remarks in that area. Mr. Keys looked genuinely pleased with him and also stated he believed that Derek's continued

studies would help him develop the necessary tools he needed to become an outstanding architect.

Derek couldn't believe it was already August and fall classes would be starting in a few weeks. He'd be carrying a full classload as well as continuing part time as an intern at Beckett & Foster. They were one of the most prestigious architectural firms around, and he would be first in line for hiring once he graduated, if he kept doing well in the program.

He set the review aside, let his head fall back against the couch, and smiled as he gazed up at the ceiling. He couldn't have planned a better summer for himself if he'd tried. Things were going well between him and Gerry, with Derek pretty much spending most of his time at Gerry's house. He hadn't officially moved in, even though he was sure they were headed in that direction. Derek wanted to see how things went between them when he was under a lot of pressure with school and work.

He honestly didn't think there would be any difference in the way things were now. On the nights Gerry worked on the billing and accounting aspects of his business, Derek usually read a book or watched something on television. In turn, if he had some research to do, Gerry seemed content just to be in the same room as Derek. However, there was the issue of expenses to consider. Derek wouldn't be making any money until his second year as an intern.

He also had to take into account the apartment he shared with his brother. Brenden was the one who had wanted to move off campus, but Derek knew Brenden wouldn't be able to afford the apartment by himself. Although his parents were very liberal, he wasn't sure how

they'd feel about him moving in with someone after only knowing each other three months. He expected them to cut off all financial aid. They knew he was dating someone but hadn't pressed him for details. That would change if he and Gerry started living together. He'd want his parents to meet Gerry at that point so they wouldn't be overly concerned. Perhaps he should start peppering Gerry into his conversations with his folks. Sometimes Derek had a tendency to play things too close to his vest, unintentionally causing surprise and upset to his family and friends when he finally decided to show his hand.

Lifting his head he looked at the digital clock on the DVR unit across the room. It was almost six, and Gerry should be home soon. Gerry had sent him a text message earlier in the afternoon to call once he got off work. When they were finally able to talk, Gerry said he had to go to his mom's house to work on her car and that he'd bring home something for them to eat. Today had been a rainy day, and Derek had been a bit disappointed that Gerry wouldn't be home when he got there. Derek didn't hope for rainy days, but he didn't mind the side benefit. A day or two of rain always took some of the pressure off Gerry because it was good for his business and gave him time to do some projects around his house. It also meant that he was usually home when Derek got off work.

Severe storms were predicted for a couple of days, and it would mean rearranging some of their plans. They were supposed to go to an outdoor jazz festival tonight, but the thunderstorms forced the organizers to cancel. Barry and Ron were to meet them at the festival as Barry was working on some pyrotechnics for the show. Since their plans were

eighty-sixed, Ron decided he wanted to spend the evening alone with Barry, as it was a rare occurrence for them.

Derek was only a little disappointed. He'd never listened to jazz much. It was just one more thing that Gerry opened his eyes to, or in this case, his ears. Gerry loved jazz and country, two genres Derek didn't know much about, but he was finding he liked some of it. Of course that could be due to the activities they usually engaged in while listening to the music. Two things Gerry was very good at were slow dancing and making love. Derek definitely didn't have any complaints there.

He also liked Gerry's friends, in particular Barry and Ron. They'd gone out with them several times since the Fourth of July party, and Derek always enjoyed himself. In turn he introduced Gerry to some of his friends. Derek had only a handful of close friends, people he'd known since he was young and who had always accepted him for who he was.

He was having a lot of new and good experiences being with Gerry. Although Derek had had a couple of boyfriends in the past, they never went out socializing together. They had only done things by themselves like watch movies or television or have sex. His relationship with Gerry was so much more, and he was not only gaining confidence at work, but everything felt so right with Gerry.

Derek was pulled from his musings by Gerry coming through the door carrying a bag of Chinese takeout. One of the compromises Derek made with Gerry was that they would have one meal each week where Derek wouldn't worry about how many calories were involved or work out extra hard the next day. He had continued with his normal

routine, and although he had put on a few pounds since they'd started dating, he kept a careful eye on it, probably more than Gerry realized. It was one of Derek's biggest fears that he'd slip back into his old ways and gain too much weight back.

Gerry walked over to the couch and gave him a lingering kiss. "How was your day?" he asked as he handed Derek the food and headed for his desk to set his mail and keys down. Derek watched as Gerry turned off his cell phone before tossing it onto the desk. Gerry generally had his cell phone off in the evening. He had a regular phone and answering machine at the house so that he could screen his calls. This way Gerry didn't have to deal with any call that wasn't urgent.

"It was good," Derek said, grabbing the review and following Gerry into the kitchen. "Get your mom's car fixed?"

"Yeah, just needed a tune up," Gerry answered distractedly as he got some plates out of the cupboard. "She's bad about putting things off, and it's something that should've been done a long time ago."

"It's good you're able to do things for her. My mom would be out of luck with me when it comes to cars."

"I can't do a lot," Gerry said with a shrug, his head bent to his task of setting the table, "but I've had to learn how to do some mechanical things since my truck and mowers always seem to be breaking down. I'd lose a lot of time and money always taking them to a shop to be fixed." He looked up then and asked, "How'd the review go?"

"Read for yourself," Derek said proudly as he held out the paper to Gerry.



Gerry smiled as he took the review, saying, "It must be good." Derek grinned as he watched Gerry's lips moving silently as he read. He could tell exactly when Gerry reached the best part as a wide grin broke across Gerry's face, and he raised his eyes briefly to meet Derek's. Derek had been elated when he read Mr. Keys's words: *Derek, you've showed remarkable improvement since you began working here. Your grasp of design and safety was crucial to the Colby account. You did an excellent job of showing the Colbys the difference between what they wanted and what was possible, thereby saving a lot of time and aggravation. The Colbys have requested that you remain on their design team. Keep up the good work.* Once finished, Gerry set the paper down, saying, "I knew you could do it. I've seen your work, and you're really good at what you do."

"Mr. Keys helps me out a lot. He's more of a mentor than an advisor."

"But that's the way it should be. The firm's investing their time in you because they see so much promise in you."

"I was nervous as shit when I first started and kept making all kinds of mistakes. It's a lot different from the classroom."

"I'm proud of you," Gerry said, wrapping his arms around him and giving him a tight, lingering hug.

"So, uh, you think I deserve a reward?" he asked with a bit of bravado. He rarely initiated sex with Gerry, and was still unsure about it. He knew it didn't make sense to worry about Gerry turning him down, but it was that deep-rooted fear of rejection he was constantly trying to overcome.

"A reward?" Gerry repeated thoughtfully. "Well, I did buy dinner, you know."

“Yes, but you got it before you knew about the review.”

“True. So... any ideas about what you *deserve*?” Gerry asked, his voice deep with innuendo.

“Mmmm, a few. They all involve your mouth, hands, and other various body parts.”

“I think that sounds reasonable. When would you like to collect your reward?”

Before he could answer, Gerry tackled him, grabbing him around the thighs and carrying him over his shoulder into the bedroom. “I guess now,” Derek said a bit breathlessly. They both ended up on the bed, rolling around, kissing and laughing as they struggled out of their clothes.

When they were finally naked, Gerry slowed his kisses until they were just looking at each other, their limbs entangled. Keeping his eyes focused on Gerry’s and continuing in silence, Derek moved so that he was straddling Gerry. This time he was going to do things he’d been thinking of instead of following Gerry’s lead.

Derek started by whispering in Gerry’s ear, making sure his voice was low and sexy, “Will you just lie here and let me have my way with you?” Gerry bucked his hips up and groaned, making Derek grin. Oh yes, he knew what his man liked, and it was obvious that Gerry got more excited whenever Derek whispered or even just puffed a breath into Gerry’s ear.

“I thought this was supposed to be your reward.”

“I kinda like thinking about it being one for both of us.”

“Then I’m yours for the taking,” Gerry agreed, letting his arms fall to his side.

Derek started his explorations by sitting up and rubbing his ass slowly against Gerry's pelvis as he pinched Gerry's nipples. Spurred on by Gerry's excited moans, Derek leaned down and flicked his tongue over one nipple and then the other. He bit down lightly while his hand kept the other nipple occupied. As he listened and felt Gerry's response to his ministrations, he increased or decreased the pressure accordingly.

He didn't linger there for too long, wanting to explore more of the body that was laid out underneath him. Derek used his tongue to slowly burn a trail down Gerry's chest to his belly button, Derek's hands slowly following, the tips of his fingers grazing lightly over the skin taut with muscle. After a few kisses and licks, Derek moved to the hip bones, and this time his mouth followed his fingers. Derek became fascinated with the tan line that showed where the waist of Gerry's shorts hit. He knew Gerry didn't go without a shirt while he was working for clients, but when he was home, in his own yard, Gerry would sometimes take off his shirt. Now, before him, was the proof Gerry did it often enough so that his skin was the beautiful brown that Derek had always admired. But now the parts that didn't get to see the sun were irresistible to him.

He sat up, his butt now resting on Gerry's thighs. Now that it wasn't trapped underneath Derek, Gerry's dick sprang up, jutting out proudly, Derek's own cock twitching at the sight. Using just a couple of fingers, Derek pushed Gerry's cock down to his abdomen to trace the ridge from the head down to the base. A groan from Gerry had Derek looking up to see that Gerry's eyes were closed. Using soft, slow strokes,

he repeated the action several times until Gerry started to twitch and wriggle his hips.

Derek then moved to Gerry's balls, cupping them gently and giving them a little tug, earning him a grunt from Gerry. Raising himself up onto his knees, he nudged Gerry's legs apart, wide enough so that Derek could settle himself between them, lying flat with his head level with Gerry's crotch. Once he was comfortable, he pushed Gerry's legs even farther apart to continue his explorations. With just the slightest touch, Derek stroked the sensitive flesh underneath Gerry's balls. He traced his finger over and around the pink, crinkled hole before tentatively touching his tongue to it. He'd never done it before, but with Gerry he wanted to know what it was like. The reaction from Gerry, grabbing hold of Derek's head, was even more incentive to keep going. After another small lick, he became more enthusiastic, using the flat of his tongue, his mouth, and fingers. When Gerry started making desperate noises, Derek moved his attention back to Gerry's balls for a moment, sucking one into his mouth and rolling it with his tongue before doing it to the other, letting the anxiousness ebb a little. Finally a lick up the underside of Gerry's cock ended with a small taste of pre-come, and then he moved off to get the lube out of the drawer.

Gerry only watched him, didn't say anything, as Derek used the lube to slick up Gerry's cock and then used some to prepare himself to receive Gerry. Derek straddled him once again and together they worked to find the right position, the right angle. Once he was fully seated, Gerry grabbed his hands, and they linked their fingers together. Moving slowly

at first, keeping his movements small, he continued to get used to the sensation of Gerry filling him.

Letting go of his hands, Gerry sat up and wrapped his arms around Derek, kissing his neck. This position restricted their movements, so it wasn't long before Derek was pushing at Gerry's chest so he would lie down. Derek gained some leverage by leaning on Gerry's thighs. Then he could lift his pelvis high, Gerry's cock sliding almost all the way out of him before Derek would move back down, over and over, the excitement building once again.

"Watch me," Derek commanded as he began to touch himself. Gerry's hands went to Derek's hips, digging into his skin painfully, but he didn't mind. It felt good to let loose, to not think about anything but the feeling of being with Gerry.

Their breathing became harsh, and when Gerry began to curse and encourage in turn, Derek knew Gerry wouldn't last much longer. It made him feel powerful to know that he was making his man feel this way. That he was the one in control while Gerry lay underneath him. This was how it was supposed to be between two people. And he wanted it. He wanted it with Gerry.

Gerry came just before Derek, even though Derek had tried to time it right so they could come together. After a moment to catch his breath, he lifted himself off Gerry and fell onto the bed beside him, Gerry's arm automatically curling around him.

"I think you need to reward yourself more often," Gerry panted, causing Derek to laugh.

After several minutes of cuddling, Gerry's stomach rumbled loudly. "Guess we better feed you," Derek snorted.

“God, yes, I’m starved,” Gerry said, but neither of them moved.

“Shower first?” Derek suggested and Gerry nodded his agreement.

Once they were clean and dressed, they went into the kitchen, warmed up their food and sat down at the table.

“We need to start eating before sex,” Gerry said taking a bite of his curry chicken.

“Why? You don’t have enough energy to eat?” he asked with a smirk.

“No, smartass,” Gerry said with a roll of his eyes. “Because our food is always cold, and nuked Chinese food just isn’t the same.”

“Well, if I recall, I was the one getting tackled tonight.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know someone was going to go exploring for hours.”

“Mmmm?” he intoned innocently as he munched happily on his chicken and broccoli.

“I thought it was only gonna be a quickie, and we’d do more later.”

“Yes, well, that was better than a quickie, wasn’t it?”

“Quit fishing for compliments, you know it was good. *You* were good.”

Derek poked his fork around in his food as he peeked over at Gerry through his lashes. “You didn’t say.”

Gerry’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Me yelling *Oh holy mother of fucking Christ* wasn’t clue enough?”

“Mmm, yeah, I guess,” he said, trying not to grin.

“Besides, I think the neighbors from two streets over probably heard me when I came.”

“Now that you mention it, you were kinda loud,” he said with mock distaste. “We probably should think about getting a gag for you.”

“Coming from the guy who not more than two days ago was shouting *fuck me harder, Gerry! Oh yeah, don’t stop!*”

“Mmm, yeah, that was pretty hot,” he said feeling his face flush with the memory.

Gerry was just staring at him, smiling, not saying a word until Derek couldn’t stand it any longer. “What?”

“Nothing,” Gerry said, his attention going back to his plate, his fork jabbing at it lazily.

“You’re always after me to say what’s on my mind. C’mon now, use your words,” he teased.

“I was thinking how much I’m enjoying tonight. Not just the sex, but all of this,” Gerry said as he gestured with his utensil, waving it in a circle until it stopped in front of Derek.

“Me too,” he agreed softly.

They enjoyed the rest of their dinner in tranquil intimacy before they curled up on the couch to watch a movie and then to bed for another round of pleasure, not as slow and thorough as earlier, but no less satisfying. Sleep claimed them soon after they exchanged tangy flavored kisses and whispered goodnights.

WHEN Derek awoke the next morning, he could hear the rain hitting the roof. Gerry was still asleep, curled on his side, his breathing deep and even. Derek slipped out of bed, pulled on a pair of underwear and went out into the living room to turn on the weather channel. He’d love to spend a

lazy day with Gerry and was silently wishing for another day full of rain. When the television warmed up, he switched it to the correct channel. Since it was a commercial break, he padded into the kitchen to prepare a pot of coffee.

Finding his review on the counter he took it over and set it on the corner of Gerry's desk. He wasn't quite sure what to do with it. He could take it home, but he was hardly ever there. If he left it here, where would he put it? There were a few of his things here, toothbrush, shaving kit, a couple of pairs of jeans, but really no designated spot for his things. He smiled at the thought of Gerry making room for his stuff, to have their clothes hanging side by side in the same closet or neatly folded in the same drawer. Maybe they should talk about that later today.

He settled himself on the couch just as the local weather started to scroll across the bottom of the screen and heard the shower start a few moments later. It looked like the day was going to be theirs. No landscaping work to be done today. While Derek was thinking of things they might do today, Gerry's home phone rang and the answering machine picked up. Derek felt like he was eavesdropping, but there really wasn't anywhere he could go in the house without hearing the message. He heard Gerry's deep voice first: *You've reached Donnelly's Landscaping. I'm sorry I missed your call. Please leave your name and number, and I'll get back with you as soon as possible.* Then a woman's voice filled the room:

*Hello dear. I tried to call you on your cell phone, but it went right to voice mail. Guess that means you're taking another much-needed day off because of the rain. You work too hard! You're always running off to some job, and we*



*hardly get a chance to spend any time together. Anyway, I called to let you know plans have changed a bit. Anne Reynolds and her daughter Becca are in town, and they'd like to go out to dinner with us, but they won't be available until seven. You remember Becca from high school, don't you? Her annulment just came through and her mom's so relieved all that mess is done with. You know Becca was always so sweet on you and... well, anyway, we can go out to that Italian restaurant you like tonight. What's it called... Lembo's? Then we can all go to Mass tomorrow morning. See you later. Bye bye.*

Derek was trying to process it all when he heard Gerry's voice from the kitchen. "Hey, thanks for making coffee."

"You have a message," Derek said quietly.

"Sorry?" Gerry asked coming into the living room with a steaming mug.

"Call came in," he said, gesturing toward the desk.

Gerry stopped in front of his desk and pushed the button to play back the message with a sigh. "Someone probably wondering why I didn't come do their yard in the rain."

"No," he said simply, and Gerry shot him a puzzled look as the message started to play. Gerry stopped it at the part about Becca from high school.

"I thought you said your mom accepts that you're gay."

"She does."

"Seems pretty damn hopeful about you getting together with Becca."

"Becca was a good friend from school, that's all. Her family moved away right after graduation. I haven't seen her in years," Gerry said, giving a dismissive wave with his hand.

"Your mom says she was *sweet* on you."

"She thinks every girl has designs on me."

"Does Becca know you're gay?"

"I dunno," Gerry said, his brow crinkling up as he frowned. "I don't think so."

"It sounds like a set up to me."

"It's just... Mom does that sometimes. She brings a random girl to dinner," Gerry said, coming over to sit down beside him. "I guess she hopes there'll be some sort of an attraction. She'd like to have grandchildren."

"She can still have them," he said woodenly. "Does she know about me or that you're even dating?"

Gerry set his mug down on the coffee table and turned his body toward Derek before answering. "No."

"Why not?"

"It's not an easy answer."

"Of course it's not," Derek said sarcastically.

"Don't be like that." Derek could hear the irritation seeping into Gerry's voice.

"My parents don't know a lot about you yet, but they know I'm dating someone. And never just make plans *for* me."

"I'm the only family my mom has. I take her to Mass every week. She knows I'm gay, she accepts it, but...."

Derek waited for a minute before finally prompting, "What?"

"She believes that I'm not a practicing homosexual."

“A... what?” he asked incredulously.

“My mom’s priest told her that it was okay for me to be gay as long as I was celibate.”

“That’s fucking ridiculous.” Derek sputtered. “You obviously don’t even believe that.” Thoughts rushed at him, and he tried to stay calm, but it was impossible. “You said you wanted me to move in here with you.”

“I do,” Gerry said soothingly, putting his hand over Derek’s.

“But you weren’t ever going to tell your mom about me? What about telling me about taking your mom to Mass? You told me you take her out to dinner.”

“We go to dinner after Mass.”

Derek stood and walked a few paces away, needing to get some space between them. “Why the secrecy?”

“Because for some reason I thought you might freak out.”

“I don’t give a shit that you take your mom to Mass, I do care that you lied to me.”

“I wasn’t lying. I told you I take her out to dinner, which is true.”

“It’s a lie by omission. Makes me wonder what other things you’ve been *omitting*.”

“Nothing. See, I knew it was gonna be a fuckin’ problem! That’s why I wanted to wait to tell you anything about my mom. I take her to Mass because it’s a compromise with her. It makes her feel good and what’s the harm? What does it matter if I don’t tell her about my social life? Who tells their parents anything when they’re first dating someone?”

Derek narrowed his eyes at what he perceived as an insinuation that he hadn't told his parents about Gerry. Instead he focused back on what he thought was the greater sin. "You were just going to make me hide in the closet when she came over?"

"She never comes over here."

Derek threw his hands up in disgust. "I'm just getting where I want to be in my life, and you're shoving me right back where I don't want to be. Where neither of us belongs."

"What the fuck?" Gerry said angrily, standing up. "I've introduced you to all my friends. We go out all the time as a couple, for everyone to see! I just need you to understand this one thing."

"It's a pretty goddamn big thing."

"You have to understand, Derek. It's not going to be easy to change her mind about homosexuality. Okay, I admit I've been avoiding it by lying to you. Do you even know what it feels like to have your mom not talk to you for two months? To know that you made her cry? That she believes you're going to hell for the way you live your life? Not everyone has parents that accept you and love you just the way you are. You don't even know how lucky you are. How many gay couples are out there that have parents that won't have anything to do with them?"

"That's different. At least they *tell* their parents the truth. They love someone and want to be with them. You just want to pretend I'm not around when you're with your mom."

"You have to give me time to work on her, Derek. I didn't think I'd find anyone so quickly that I would want to spend the rest of my life with. If I do this right, she'll come around."

“You just said she’s not going to change her mind about homosexuals.”

“No, that’s not what I said. Jesus, why does everything have to be so negative with you?”

“So now it’s my fault?” he asked, his eyes wide with disbelief. His feet made an angry slapping sound against the floor as he quickly walked to the bedroom.

“You’re overreacting,” Gerry said, following him. “I’ll talk to my mom tonight, I swear.”

“Oh, will that be at dinner with Becca?” he sneered as he yanked on his jeans. “Your mom wants to go to your favorite Italian restaurant with them. You know, the one where we had our first date.” Derek knew he sounded spiteful, but was unable to stop himself.

“Shit,” Gerry swore under his breath. “Calm the fuck down.”

After pulling his shirt over his head, Derek said, “You really had me fooled into thinking you were different.”

“You always fly off the handle. If you’ll just think about it, you’ll see....”

“I’m flying off the handle?” he interrupted angrily.

“Yes.”

“So it wouldn’t bother you if I,” he said, pointing to himself, “your boyfriend, didn’t want to tell one of the most important people in my life that you existed.”

“You’re impossible to talk to when you’re like this,” Gerry grumbled. “You can only see whatever fucked-up thing you think it is I’m doing.”

“Fine, I guess I should just leave, then.”

“Yeah, maybe you should,” Gerry agreed hoarsely.

That stopped Derek in his tracks. He couldn't believe Gerry was just going to let him walk out of the door, not even try to fight for him. Shaking with anger, hurt, and disappointment, he shoved his feet into his shoes, grabbed up his work clothes from yesterday and headed for the door.

"Call me later when you calm down," Gerry said. Derek could hear the hurt in Gerry's voice, but there was still anger behind it as well.

"Yeah, I'll be sure to do that," he snarled.

"You know, I'm really tired of this shit. I always have to second-guess myself when it comes to you and how you'll take things. Call, don't call, whatever the hell you want," Gerry said with a sigh of defeat.

"You know, you weren't really being fair to me or your mom," Derek murmured, his hand on the doorknob, unable to look back at Gerry. "You were only giving a part of yourself to us. Guess we all lost out on the real you." He walked out the door, shutting it quietly behind him, and went to his car, throwing his clothes onto the passenger seat. The anger was seeping out of him, leaving him only with sadness and a searing sense of loneliness.

When he got back to the apartment, all of his emotions were bleeding into each other so he didn't know what to do or feel. For now he just wanted to go to sleep and shut out the world. He flopped face down on his bed wishing it was all a dream. He was contemplating crawling under the covers when Brenden came into his room without knocking.

"What're you doin' home?" he asked affably. "Thought you and Gerry would be out all day together."

"He's got a date," Derek mumbled.

“A date? Whaddaya mean?” Brenden asked in surprise as he sat down on the bed.

“His mom’s trying to fix him up with a girl he knew from high school.”

“No way!”

“They’re going to the same restaurant where we had our first date.”

“Really? I didn’t think Gerry would do... that. You know, go out with a girl just to please.”

“Yeah, neither did I,” Derek said glumly. “He really put one over on me.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Gerry wasn’t going to tell his mom about me. She thinks he’s this good little Catholic boy, who may be gay, but he isn’t a practicing one.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“She thinks he’s celibate. That he doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“Dude, it’s his mom. Who wants their mom to know they’re fucking around?”

Derek rolled onto his side in order to glare at his brother. “It’s not about the sex, you moron. It’s about love. She doesn’t think he should be allowed to love a man. To love me.”

“You... you guys are in love?”

“I thought we were.”

“Whoa,” Brenden said with quiet awe.

“I think I’m gonna go spend the rest of the weekend at Mom and Dad’s.”

“But....”

"I just need some time to think, and I'm afraid if I'm here, I'll just go back over there and ignore the whole thing just 'cause I don't want him to be mad at me. I'll give in just like I always do when it comes to stuff like this."

"If you need to get outta here for awhile, then I guess it's a good idea."

"I don't want to put you in the middle. If he calls you and asks anything, you can tell him where I am."

"Okay." They were silent for a moment before Brenden asked, "So you think you guys are gonna break up?"

Derek couldn't find the words to answer that, didn't want to. All he could do was shrug. He didn't want to break up with Gerry, but after two years of working on his body and self-confidence, there was no way he was going to go into hiding. All of Gerry's words and actions had pointed toward wanting the same thing, a life together, but for Gerry to just pretend to his mom about a major part of his life... that was something Derek couldn't accept. Derek had had plenty of experience with liars, and he didn't think that Gerry was lying to be mean or hurtful. He needed to believe it though, with his whole heart and soul. Hopefully a couple of days away would help him see things more clearly.



## Chapter 6

GERRY squirmed on the hard pew, trying to find a comfortable spot, but none was to be found, and they'd only been here no more than ten minutes, and Mass wouldn't start for another fifteen. He glanced at his mom, kneeling with her arms propped on the back of the pew in front of them as she fingered her rosary. She was saying her prayers by rote, her eyes focused on the altar at the front of the church. Even so he was sure that she made a note of everyone that entered the sanctuary. Katherine Donnelly didn't like to miss a thing.

He sighed, crossed his arms, and looked around at the stained glass windows and the statues, the same ones he'd seen since he was a boy. He had such fond memories of coming to church with his mom when he was little. Everyone was so friendly, and his favorite priest at the time, Father Fasline, was young and more contemporary than the more conservative older priests and nuns. Gerry had attended the parish school until eighth grade, and the school and church had been a major part of his life for a long time. He'd been baptized, received his first communion, and was confirmed here. Up until he graduated from high school, he'd always thought he'd get married here eventually.

It was one of the oldest churches in the city, and as he looked up at the ceiling, he was amazed at the architecture,

which of course made him think of Derek. He was sure that Derek would be fascinated with the church.

Leaning forward he whispered, "I'll be back." His mom gave a nod of acknowledgement, and Gerry was out of there like a shot. He knew his mom thought he was going to the bathroom, but he knew he wasn't coming back. Possibly never again. He'd come back and pick up his mom, but that was probably going to be it. Instead of someplace that had always felt peaceful and harmless, now it felt stifling and oppressive. Derek's words kept running through his head over and over about how everyone had missed out because Gerry was only letting people see a part of himself.

Saturday had been hell. He'd wanted to call Derek or go over to his apartment, but he knew that would be a mistake. They had things they needed to think about, and Gerry wasn't quite sure how he was going to handle everything just yet. He had called his mom, told her he would not be going to dinner with her, and asked her to make his apologies to Becca and her mom. He agreed to take his mom to church on Sunday morning with the intention of having a long talk with her afterward.

Gerry headed for the small diner that was within walking distance of the church. The morning was clear and cool, perfect weather to be outside. At the diner he ordered some coffee and tried to plan out what he'd say to his mom. He kept an eye on the time and gave himself plenty of time to get back to the church so he could be waiting in the parking lot when Mass was over.

Leaning against the truck, he smiled and said hello to his mom's friends until his mom finally came out. Her brow

was wrinkled with worry as she hurried over to him. “Are you sick?” she asked as he opened the door for her.

“No, I’m fine,” he assured her.

“Well, something’s wrong,” she observed.

He started the truck and began the drive to her house before saying, “We need to talk about a few things.”

“If it’s about Becca, I’m sorry,” she said contritely. “I know I shouldn’t have invited her and her mom without asking.”

“It’s not really your fault. I’ve never really stopped you from doing stuff like that. I just need you to stop doing it now.”

“Okay,” she said apprehensively.

“I’m dating someone.”

“Well, that’s wonderful! You should’ve brought her over.”

“Mom, you know I wouldn’t be dating a woman,” he said quietly.

“I thought... you told me....”

“I know what I said, and I was wrong to do it.” He felt lower than dirt for deceiving his mom in such a way. At the time it had seemed harmless. He hadn’t had anyone in his life who he wanted to be permanent. He’d foolishly thought if he did happen to fall in love again, he wouldn’t have to worry about his mom, that it would be easy to keep his partner and his mom separate.

“So you never meant it when you said you were going to live a celibate life?”

“No.”

“And you’re in love with this... man you’ve been dating.”

"I am, but we've had a big fight, and I'm not sure what'll happen now."

"Oh, well, perhaps that's for the best, then."

"He was angry because I haven't been honest with you or him."

"Can't blame him there," she said primly, clutching her purse tightly against her stomach.

"I want it to work out with Derek."

"That's his name? Derek?"

"Yes. And he's younger than me."

"How much younger?"

"About eight years."

"Awfully young to get serious."

"He's a serious guy," he said fondly. "He's been through a lot in his life, and he's ready to settle down with someone."

"Settle down? Are you two thinking of getting married?" she said, horrified.

"We haven't talked about that yet, only got as far as moving in together, which he wasn't sure about."

"Hmph. That so?"

"Mom, I love Derek, and I do want to spend my life with him. Gay marriage isn't legalized here, but it is in other states."

"You're just going to move away, then?"

"No," he sighed, shaking his head. "I just meant that if we do decide to get married, we could go somewhere else to do it. You need to know that it's something that I've been thinking about."

"That's all well and good, but Gerry, you'll be willingly damning yourself to hell."

"I don't believe that, Mom."

"You know I do," she said, her voice cracking.

"I didn't choose to be gay."

"No," she said adamantly. "You were not born this way!"

"Why would I choose to hurt you, Mom?" he asked, his own voice heavy with emotion. "Please, can't we just agree to disagree?"

"It's what I *believe*, Gerry. It's in the Bible. It's how you were brought up. You think I want my son, my only son, to spend his eternal life in hell?" She was crying now, her tears making her mascara run and clogging her voice.

"I tried, Mom, you know I did. I had a girlfriend in high school, joined the Youth Group, went to Bible study and on retreats. At the end of the day, in my heart I always knew who I was."

"I sacrificed everything for you."

By this time they had reached her small bungalow home, and he put the truck in park and turned off the engine. "It's not about appreciating all you've done for me, Mom. You know I do. I don't want to hide anything from you anymore. I want you to meet Derek, you'll like him. He's going to be an—"

"I don't care," she said angrily. "I don't want to hear anything about him. He's turned you back to a life you don't belong in."

"Mom, I never left it," he said. "I didn't want to hurt you, so I thought it'd be easier to just keep that part of my life from you. I figured what you didn't know wouldn't hurt you."

"I'm going to call Father Mark this afternoon and set up an appointment for you to go in talk to him."

"I won't go."

"You need counseling, Gerry. I know it won't be easy for you, but I'm sure Father Mark will be happy to work with you."

"Mom, you're not listening. I'm not going to go to church any more. I like who I am. I'm not a bad person just because I'm gay."

"You're leaving the church?" she asked quietly.

"I should have left a long time ago. It's just you and nostalgia that's kept me there this long."

"Fine," Kate said primly. "No need to trouble yourself any longer."

He sighed and lightly tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, hoping for patience. "I just don't want to pretend any longer. It's not like I'm throwing away everything you've taught me over the years. I just want to share my life with someone, someone I love. Isn't that what you wanted? I know you were hurt by my asshole dad, but you've dated since then."

"Don't call your father names," she said, sounding apathetic. "I did date some, but I was always working, and when I wasn't doing that I was taking care of you. When you got older, you were always involved in some activity, and there wasn't much time for anything else."

"I didn't want you to sacrifice your happiness for me."

"You're my son. I had one chance to get it right."

A stab of fresh hurt went through him. "And you think you got it wrong?"

She finally looked at him, the tears dried on her checks, but her voice was watery as she said, "I've believed all my life

that marriage is between a man and a woman. It's sacred. A family is a husband, wife, and children. It's a gift from God. Now you want me to... to just accept that *everything* I was taught, everything I believe is wrong."

"Not everything. I only want you to accept me, Mom. Your son."

"I know who you are," she said, affronted.

The anger finally seeped into his voice as he retorted, "No, you don't. You only see your God. Well, the God I was taught to believe in is loving and forgiving, and he created me just as he did you. I am your son, and that'll never change. I'm also gay and will be whether you accept it or not."

It was a moment before she responded, the tears flowing again. "I can't." She jerked the door open and ran to her door, fumbling a moment with her keys before shoving the right one into the lock and disappearing into the house. Gerry felt the need to run after and apologize and promise her that he'd go to church and try to live his life as she wanted him to. He knew the feelings and the need to please his mother would fade over time, just as they always did, but it still hurt like hell knowing he'd hurt her once again, intentional or not.

DEREK surveyed his work and smoothed his hand over the wall to check for any unseen bumps or blemishes as he listened to his dad sanding the ceiling. They were preparing Derek's old room to receive a coat of a sunny yellow to cover the dark blue it had been for as long as he could remember. When Derek had arrived yesterday, his parents, Bob and

Anne, weren't surprised to see him, but he knew they were wondering what was going on when he told him he was going to spend the night. His mom wasn't one to waste an opportunity, so she put him and his dad to work yesterday taping up all the woodwork and patching all the holes Derek had put in the walls from hanging up different things over the years.

This morning they had put drop cloths down and set to work. His parents hadn't asked him what was going on. Having lived with him all his life, they probably knew he'd come out with it when he was ready. He knew the conversation he was about to have with his dad wasn't going to be easy, but it was something he hadn't been able to get out of his head since his argument with Gerry.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?" his dad hummed absently.

"Do you ever wish I wasn't gay?"

His dad slowly lowered the pole he was using to aid him in his work. "That's a loaded question, son. I wouldn't be honest if I said no."

"Because you're ashamed of me?"

"No! Good God, Derek, I've never been ashamed of who you are. Ashamed of myself, yes, but never you."

"Why are you ashamed of yourself?"

"Because when you came out to Mom and me, I worried about how I would tell people and that you wouldn't be getting married and having children to carry on the Weston name." Derek opened his mouth to protest, but his dad held up his hand. "I know there's still Brenden and there's adoption and other choices for you. You are my first born, and you were everything that I'd ever hoped for in a son."



“Except I’m gay.”

“Not anything I’m proud of,” Bob admitted sadly. “Then there are the times when I wished it wasn’t so because I didn’t want someone to hurt you with their words or, God forbid, worse. As a parent you never want to see your child go through life being ridiculed, insulted, and hurt just for being who they are.”

“Did you ever think I was going to hell for it?”

“No,” his dad said bluntly. “First off you know we aren’t really big on religion around here. Your mom grew up going to church every Sunday, Bible study on Wednesdays, and I know she never thought for one minute that you were anything but a gift from God and exactly what He meant you to be.”

“I don’t think Gerry’s mom feels the same way.”

“You’ve met her, then?”

“No, only heard her voice on his answering machine.”

“From the sound of it you didn’t hear anything good.”

“Gerry told me his mom accepted him, but then she called to tell him some old girlfriend from high school was back in town and wanted to fix them up. We had a fight, and I found out that he never intended to tell his mom about me, that she couldn’t handle him having a boyfriend.”

“I thought it must be something serious to get you down here for the whole weekend. So you think Gerry’s ashamed of you?”

He thought about it, remembered Gerry’s words as well as how difficult it was to tell his own parents he was gay and the fear that he was going to hurt them. “No, but I basically accused him of it. His mom is the only family Gerry has

and....” He took a deep breath before continuing. “And now I can kinda see his point.”

“That’s how fights are, especially when you’re so young. You learn what’s important and what’s okay to let go. Your mom left me after we’d only been married a couple of years. Had to go crawling on my hands and knees to her parents’ house and beg her to take me back.”

“Mom left?” Derek repeated with surprise.

“I’d been listening to all my friends about what a wife should be, always have the house cleaned, have something wonderful cooked for dinner, the whole shebang. When I got home one night from a long day at the office, there was no dinner ready and the house was a complete disaster. I found your mom in the tub, soaking in a bubble bath. To make a long story short, your mom packed up a suitcase and told me that when I stopped being a selfish bastard she’d think about coming back. It wasn’t until the next day I found out that your mom had just learned her position was being eliminated and only had two weeks left with the company.”

“Why haven’t I ever heard this story before?”

“I acted like a total idiot, and your mom is a very forgiving lady, but I was embarrassed by my actions. If I had taken a minute to stop thinking about how tired and hungry I was, I would’ve wondered why your mom was taking a bath at six o’clock in the evening. She never did that, still doesn’t, only if she’s not feeling well, or I’ve been exceptionally male.”

“Did she come back after you apologized?”

“Nope,” Bob answered with a grin. “She told me she needed more than just words. I had to prove that I understood that it wasn’t 1950 and that she was a partner in the marriage, not a slave.”

“How did you convince her?” Derek asked with a puzzled frown.

“Well, I cheated a little. I went to my mom, and she said that maybe it would be nice if I cleaned up the house once in awhile, took your mom out to dinner on a weeknight so she wouldn’t have to cook. It still took me a couple days before I decided on a definitive plan. I cleaned up the whole house and picked out a meal that I could make from one of the cookbooks your mom received at her bridal shower. Then I invited her out to dinner, telling her I wanted to talk things over with her. She was pretty pissed when we pulled up to the house instead of a restaurant, and it took a little convincing, but she finally came in.”

“She was impressed, wasn’t she?”

“I think she was, but she held pretty firm until I told her she was right, we were both in this marriage equally and that I would do part of the housework.”

“I don’t remember you ever cleaning the house.”

“By the time your brother came along, we moved here, which has a much bigger yard. Your mom can’t stand working outside, so our agreement changed. She’d take care of the inside, and I’d do the outside.”

“And that’s all it took?”

“No,” his dad chuckled. “We had to keep constantly working at it. The key thing I learned was communication. I not only had to tell her how I was feeling, I also had to do a lot of listening. And like I said, you have to pick your battles. Things that were important to you when you were younger become less important when you’re with the one you love. Now, we best get back to work so we can at least get some primer on these walls before you have to leave.”

“Yeah,” Derek agreed, but it wasn’t long before he decided to tackle the next thing on his mind. “Dad?”

“I had a feeling we weren’t done,” Bob said with a grin as he lowered his pole again. “What else is on your mind, son?”

“I really appreciate everything that you and Mom have done for me. Because of your financial support I’ve been able to pursue my degree without hindrance, and it would make getting my certification easier once I’m finished with grad school.”

“Would?”

“Gerry and I were talking about moving in together. If I stay on course with as many hours in school and my internship, I wouldn’t be able to get a job. So I’ve been thinking of slowing things down a little. It’ll probably tack on another year, maybe two, before I can finish up school and then go after my certificate.”

“You think we’ll pull out our support if you live with Gerry?”

“Well... yeah.”

“It does pose a problem for Brenden. He’d have to find a smaller place or find a roommate, but I think he could do that easily enough. He’s pretty good at networking and might be able to find a roomie or two.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to pay for things if I was living with someone.”

“Son,” Bob said gently, resting his hand on Derek’s shoulder, “if you were going to be with someone who didn’t have a job and your mom and I would be paying for a place for both of you to live, then yes, I’d definitely have a problem with that. Everything you and your brother have told me

about Gerry points to the opposite. We'd like to meet him, of course."

"Of course," Derek said with a nod. "I would just feel kind of weird living with Gerry and not paying for anything, sponging off everyone."

"I can see where that might be a problem," his dad said sympathetically. "You really wouldn't be *sponging* though. You're working toward a goal. It might be a good idea to talk it over with Gerry."

"Yeah," he agreed softly. They stood there in silence for a few minutes until they heard his mom puttering in the kitchen.

"Ready to start priming?" his dad asked, letting his hand fall away from Derek's shoulder.

"Sure," Derek answered with a grin. They had started painting the primer on a wall when Derek said, "Thanks, Dad."

"You bet." He heard the pride and warmth in his dad's voice. Derek usually talked with his mom about things, but sometimes it was good to talk to his dad.

Derek stayed most of the day, wanting to get the first coat of yellow on before leaving. By the time he made it home it was already after six.

Once inside the apartment he found Shana alone on the couch watching television. "Brenden still out working?"

"He didn't work today," she answered shortly as she kept her eyes on the TV.

It had been a beautiful day, and Derek was sure that Gerry would've wanted to try to get some work done. "You guys do something special today?"

“No,” she said with attitude. When he didn’t have a reply to that, she continued, “Gerry called this morning and told Brenden that they’d start work again tomorrow.”

He sat down beside her, letting out a tired huff and was about to comment on how terrible traffic was when he saw that she had crossed her arms, and her mouth was set in a tight, grim line. “You and Brenden get in a fight.”

“We did not.”

He was taken aback by her formal tone and could tell she was clearly upset about something. “Was he being a dumbass?”

“*He* wasn’t the one.”

“Oh.” She must be mad at him, then. “I guess Brenden told you what happened yesterday.”

She finally turned to face him, her eyes stormy as she answered, “Yes!”

“I know you don’t understand. There’s different challenges that face me and Gerry.”

“Bullshit! Of course I understand that. *I’m* not the idiot.”

“Shana,” he warned, getting tired of her attitude.

“I saw it,” she insisted

“Saw what?”

“The love you two have for each other.”

“You... how? When?”

“At the Fourth of July picnic.”

He thought back to that day, but couldn’t pinpoint any time when they were too openly affectionate with each other. There were some glances exchanged, a press of their bodies for a moment. He shrugged and gave her a *haven’t got a clue* look.

"In the kitchen," she said with a wave of her hand as if he was supposed to know. With a sigh of exasperation she continued, "Dancing."

His face flushed instantly with the memory of Gerry singing to him in hushed tones, their bodies swaying together.

"Do you know what I would give to have Brenden look at me the way Gerry looked at you. It was such a..." She paused as tears gathered in her eyes. "He loves you, Derek."

"We're not breaking up." At least he felt more confident about that since speaking with his dad.

"You hurt him," she countered.

"I know. There were things we needed to think about, to do, before we could move on with our relationship."

"You better call him."

"I'm going to, in a few minutes." He studied her briefly before asking, "You don't think Brenden loves you?"

"No. He cares for me and we have a lot of fun together, but I don't think we're gonna last much past graduation. And that's okay. Sometimes I just wish Brenden would be the one."

"He could change, you know."

"Dude!" she said incredulously, doing a fair imitation of his brother's voice. They shared a small laugh before she continued. "I'm ready for a long-term relationship, and he's not. I'm not strong enough to walk away from him yet. I want to make it last as long as I can."

"I think he cares about you more than you realize."

"Well," she sighed, "I hope that's true. Now, enough of all this. Go call Gerry."

“Yes, ma’am,” he joked as got up to go to his room for some privacy. After he stood he paused a moment, leaned down, and kissed her forehead. “If I was straight, I’d steal you away from him.”

“All the good ones are either gay or taken,” she said with a melodramatic sigh, giving him a playful swat on the arm. “Now go!”

“I am,” he said, but he didn’t move a muscle.

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

“If you’re sure.”

“Yes!” she giggled as she made sweeping gestures with her hands.

“Having recently been a bad boyfriend, I could give Brenden some pointers,” he teased, gratified to hear her laughing. She just grinned and rolled her eyes as she pointed to his bedroom. As he walked down the hallway, he tried to think of how to start the conversation with Gerry. “Hello would probably be best, dipshit,” he mumbled to himself.

GERRY took a few last swings of the sledge hammer, breaking up the tile in his second bathroom. It was a project he’d been putting off and today had seemed the perfect day to tackle it. He’d thought if he stayed in this part of the house he’d be safe. He and Derek usually spent most of their time in the living room, kitchen, and bedroom. Problem was, everywhere he turned, there was a reminder of Derek. They had cleaned out the bathroom together prior to the Fourth of July picnic.



He spent the day taking out his frustration by working hard. He'd just have to clean up all the broken pieces of tile, and he'd be ready to move onto the next part. His plans were to expand the bathroom and combine the two bedrooms to make a master suite. The bedrooms were too small, and it made more sense to combine the two into one and then add another room on the opposite side of the house. Three-bedroom houses had a bigger resale value, and although he didn't plan on selling any time soon, he still needed to keep the bigger picture in mind.

His mom was weighing heavily on his mind. Although he didn't think she'd stop talking to him altogether, he dropped a lot on her today. He shouldn't have put it off this long, but done it gradually. Nothing he could do now but give her the time she needed to try to understand all of it.

After retrieving a big garbage can from the kitchen, he started throwing the bigger pieces of tile away before sweeping up the rest. Once that job was done he decided to quit for the day. He needed to try to get some sleep tonight so he could get up early tomorrow and start doing the landscaping work he hadn't felt like doing today.

Once back in the kitchen, he opened the fridge and looked at the variety of food but nothing appealed to him. In fact his stomach felt a little touchy. He grabbed a can of soda before swinging the door shut and headed for the bedroom to take a shower. Seeing his cell phone sitting on the dresser, he remembered his call earlier to Brenden. He'd been tempted to ask him about Derek, but refrained. He'd told Derek to call him when he was ready, and Gerry was sure that he would. Pretty sure. Well maybe if Derek didn't call by

Wednesday, then Gerry would call him. Or text him. Maybe he could just drop by Derek's office.

"Quit being a dumbass," he muttered to himself as his stomach flared up a little. He looked at the can he still held in his hand and made a face of distaste. Setting it down on the dresser, he picked up the phone, deciding to rest for a few minutes before washing the dust and sweat of the day off. After flopping down on the bed, he turned on his phone since he didn't want to have to run for the house phone if it rang.

He must have fallen asleep because, when he first heard the ringing, he thought it was coming from his alarm on the nightstand. Finally the sound penetrated his brain, and he flipped open the phone. "Lo," he answered groggily.

"Did I wake you?"

He jackknifed his body, sitting up quickly. "Derek?"

"Yeah," came the answer that Gerry was sure had a smile attached to it. Derek's voice turned serious as he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Just fell asleep. I was working on the bathroom all day. How 'bout you?"

"I was down at my parents' house all weekend painting." A pause. "Did you talk to your mom?"

"Yep. It was as bad as I thought, but you were right. I should've done it a long time ago."

"You, ah... you want me to come over."

Yes, yes, *please come over!* Gerry tamped down his initial impulse. "I don't think so. I'm pretty tired and don't feel good. Tomorrow's going to be an early start, so I better pass."

"You don't feel good? What's wrong?"

"Upset stomach. No big deal."

"Mmm."

"Just worked too hard probably."

"Yeah, I can understand that." More silence until a heartfelt, "Gerry, I'm sorry about yesterday. You were right. I jumped to conclusions and didn't think things through."

"I'm sorry for not telling you about my mom."

"Are we gonna be okay?"

"I think so, but maybe we should take things a little slower."

"Oh. I guess that's probably a good idea."

The disappointment in Derek's voice was evident, and in truth Gerry was disappointed too. He just wanted to make sure that they talked things through, and he couldn't do that tonight. It had been an exhausting weekend, both mentally and physically. "How 'bout I call you tomorrow night?"

"I'd like that." The smile was back in Derek's voice, and that made Gerry feel infinitely better.

"Talk to you then."

"Night," came the soft reply.

After closing his phone, he rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. His heart felt lighter, and he could feel his old optimistic side coming back. Tomorrow didn't seem as gloomy as it had before.

## Chapter 7

FRIDAY found Derek in the lunch room at work, sketching in his notebook as he waited for Gerry to return his text. Although they'd spoken each night and their conversations were nice, they were brief. Derek could hear the exhaustion in Gerry's voice and was reluctant to keep him on the phone for very long. Brenden had shared that Gerry set a rigorous schedule for the week to keep up the workload. The rain had been a needed boon to his business since July had been a light month for landscaping. The push for winter clean-up and preparation for summer was over.

They made plans to go see a movie on Saturday, but Derek admitted to himself that he missed seeing Gerry as much as he'd been used to. Exchanging some texts during lunchtime was another way to reconnect. He was surprised, though, when his phone rang, indicating a call instead of a text. Gerry's number flashed onto the caller I.D.

"Hi," Derek answered warmly. "Taking a break?"

"Just finished up a job and I'm on my way to the next."

"Been a hard day?" he asked when he heard how tired and dull Gerry's voice sounded.

"Not too bad."

"Did you sleep okay last night?"

"I fell asleep shortly after we hung up last night, slept through the night, and I still feel tired."

"Maybe you should go to the doctor," he suggested. He was used to Gerry being vibrant and having energy to burn.

"It's just been a bad week. We still on for the movie tomorrow?"

"Absolutely."

"Can I come pick you up?"

Derek actually hadn't thought about it any other way. Going slow was one thing. He definitely didn't want to go backward. "Yes," he answered with a grin.

"Call me tonight, and we'll firm up the details."

"You got it."

"All right, I better get back to work."

"Me too."

They exchanged quick goodbyes before Derek cleaned up and hurried back to his desk. The rest of his afternoon should be relatively easy. Mr. Keys had done his weekly review this morning. No clients were scheduled in, and Derek's task was to make sure that any blueprints not in use were stored properly, any reference materials were put back in place. He also had to be available to help any of the architects if needed. He always enjoyed putting the blueprints away, loved the smell of them and the way the paper felt in his hands. It was always exciting to know that these plans were going to bring to life someone's dream home or an office building or even a cultural building.

He was on his way back to his desk when he felt his phone vibrate. He pulled it from his belt as he continued to walk and saw his brother's number flash onto the screen.

Hurrying to his desk, he answered the call once he was finally seated in his chair. "Hello."

"Derek?"

Brenden's tone immediately alerted Derek that something wasn't right. If his brother was calling, it must be Gerry. "What happened?"

"Gerry's sick."

"Sick?"

"He's been puking all afternoon, but he wants to finish up this job before he goes home. He looks like shit, and it's taking him like ten times longer than usual to do anything." Brenden was speaking in hushed tones, but Derek could hear the panic.

"Where are you guys at?" he asked as his own anxiety started to rise with Brenden's, but he knew he had to keep it in check. He wrote down the address as his brother rattled it off before he rose and headed for Mr. Keys's office. "Call nine-one-one. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"He won't like it if I call the paramedics."

"I don't care. Something's wrong, and if he won't go to the doctor, then we'll make sure he gets there."

After quickly explaining to Mr. Keys that he had an emergency and would need to leave, Mr. Keys didn't hesitate to tell Derek to take the time he needed and to call if he wouldn't be in next week. Thankfully it was only going to take about ten minutes to get to Gerry, and luck stayed with him as traffic was fairly light. By the time he pulled up behind Gerry's truck and trailer, the paramedics were already there, assessing Gerry as he sat on the ground, leaning against the trunk of a tree.

“What’re you doin’ here?” Gerry asked, tossing an angry look toward Brenden.

“Don’t blame him. If you would’ve gone to the doctor, he wouldn’t have called me.” Derek’s tone and demeanor was harsh, but underneath it all he was scared. Gerry was pale and sweating and the emergency technicians were working with hurried movements. It didn’t look good.

“What hospital would you like to go to?” one of the technicians asked.

“I’m not going to the hospital,” Gerry said. “I need to finish up here.”

“Don’t worry, Brenden will finish up and take the truck and trailer to your house when he’s done,” Derek said, looking over to his brother.

“Yeah, man, no problem,” Brenden agreed readily. “Go to the hospital, Gerry. I’ll make sure everything’s done here.”

Gerry looked uncertain for a moment but then doubled over in pain.

“Sir, we can’t force you to go, but we highly recommend you let us take you.”

“Something’s not right, Gerry,” Derek pleaded. “Just let them take to you to the hospital. If they don’t find anything, then you can tell me ‘I told you so’.”

It seemed like several minutes went by before Gerry nodded his agreement, and the EMTs got him loaded into the ambulance. “Any preference in hospital?” one of them asked.

“Mercy’s closest,” Derek blurted out. He’d thought about it on the way over, and Mercy beat out City by at least ten minutes.

“That’s fine,” Gerry agreed.

"I'll be right behind you," Derek said as he rushed to his car.

As soon as he made it to the hospital and found a parking space, he went into the emergency department. The nurse at the admitting desk asked Derek if he'd be able to fill out any paperwork while he waited to hear news about Gerry. At first Derek didn't think he'd be able to answer many of the questions on the forms, but he was surprised at how much he did know. The small conversations he and Gerry had over the last three months about everything from insurance to allergies had paid off more than he would have ever guessed. He wasn't even finished when he was called to the front desk again.

"You can go back and see your friend," a friendly nurse said, taking the clipboard from him. "Go through the double doors, and he'll be in the second room on the right."

The doctor was in the room when Derek opened the door and from the looks of him, it had already been a long day, as the varied stains on his white jacket could probably attest to. He gave Derek a brief smile before launching into his speech. "You're Derek Weston?" Derek only had time for a nod before the doctor continued. "I'm Dr. Carmichael. You did the right thing in calling the paramedics to bring Mr. Donnelly in. He's got appendicitis and will be taken up to surgery in a few moments."

"I want to wait," Gerry said firmly.

Derek's brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Why?"

"I haven't even had a chance to call my mom."

"Mr. Donnelly," Dr. Carmichael cut in, and Derek could tell he was trying to hold onto his patience, "as I've explained



to you, time is of the essence here. If your appendix bursts before the surgeons get in there, it's much more dangerous for you."

"I'll call your mom, go pick her up, whatever I need to do," Derek said, taking Gerry's hand into his own. "She'll be here when you come out of recovery." He saw the uncertainty in Gerry's eyes and wanting to assure him, Derek continued softly, "I promise."

"Use my phone. It has all her numbers in it. It's easiest to get her on her cell phone."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of everything," Derek said as hospital staff starting to fill the room to have Gerry sign authorization forms, put in an IV, and shoo Derek out. Gerry gave his hand a tight squeeze, and Derek returned it along with a reassuring smile. He wanted to say more, but with so many people in the room, it seemed wiser to keep things on a more neutral level between them.

Gerry managed to get someone to give his personal effects to Derek as he found himself in the hallway holding a plastic bag, watching as they wheeled Gerry down the hall. He waited until the elevator doors closed before he turned his attention back to the bag and fished out Gerry's cell phone. Unsure of what he was going to say, he toggled through the contacts until he found the correct number and hit send. She answered after only two rings with a friendly, "Hello."

"Hello, Mrs. Donnelly. My name is Derek Weston and I'm...."

"I know who you are," she interrupted abruptly. Her voice was harsh but there was fear and worry in it as well. "What are you doing calling me on my son's phone?"

“Gerry has appendicitis, and they had to rush him into surgery.”

“Oh dear Lord,” she whispered.

“We’re at Mercy Hospital.”

“I’m on my way,” she said before clearing her throat. “Thank you for calling me.”

There was no need for Derek to respond as she had already disconnected the call. He kept Gerry’s phone in his hand as he walked to the nurse’s station to find out where he should wait for word on the outcome of the surgery. On his way he called Brenden to fill him in on what was going on.

Derek sat in the waiting room and watched mindlessly as a news anchor talked about the day’s events. His thoughts kept him occupied enough. He made a promise to himself that he wouldn’t interfere with things. After all, Kate Donnelly had more legal rights here than he did, and he’d have to be content to see how Gerry made it through surgery. If Mrs. Donnelly decided that she didn’t want Derek around when Gerry was still out of it from the anesthesia and unable to voice his own desires, she could make it happen.

Derek had the advantage of knowing what Katherine Donnelly looked like because of the photos he’d seen strewn about Gerry’s home. As he checked his watch for what must have been the tenth time in as many minutes, he wondered how long it would be until she got there. Unbidden, the different scenarios ran through his head, running the gamut from her sitting down next to him and telling him she was pleased to meet him to her blaming him for Gerry getting sick and making Derek leave the hospital.

He was only slightly disappointed when Mrs. Donnelly came in. She checked in with the Family Liaison, who gestured toward Derek. Mrs. Donnelly only gave Derek a cold stare before she chose a seat as far away from his as possible. Since he and Gerry weren't back on firm ground yet, he was willing to let her take the lead in this particular situation.

The next two hours passed slowly as he watched families come and go, unintentionally eavesdropped on conversations around him, and more than once caught Mrs. Donnelly watching him. Each time, she diverted her gaze back to the magazine she was reading as soon as she realized he'd seen her. When she was finally called up to the desk, Derek sat up straight and moved to the edge of his chair and watched as she spoke on the phone for several minutes. Her look of relief as she replaced the receiver into the cradle had his heart slowing to where it didn't feel like it was going to fly out of his chest. She started back to her seat but paused mid-way and shot a look his way. After a moment's hesitation, she came toward him, and he immediately got to his feet, partly out of respect and partly because he didn't want her to be towering over him as if he were a little boy.

Her voice was subdued as she relayed, "He came through the surgery just fine. He's in recovery now, and the doctor said he'll be in a room of his own in about an hour or so. I...."

She looked a little lost to him, as if she couldn't decide between being angry or crying. His first instinct was to give her a reassuring hug, to let her know that she didn't have to say anything else, that he understood, and it was okay.

Gerry was going to be all right, and that's the only thing that mattered. He held back, sliding his hands into the pockets of his pants where his right hand wrapped itself around Gerry's cell phone. Telling himself once again that it was enough for now, he gave her a small smile as he said, "Thank you." A small silence stretched between them before he asked, "Is there anything I can get for you? Something to eat or drink?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine," she brushed off politely. "There's really no need for both of us to sit here waiting. I'm sure you have plenty of things you should be doing."

Derek knew he was being dismissed and every part of him wanted to rebel against it. He swallowed all his protests. "Sure." He pulled Gerry's phone from his pocket and held it out to her. "This is Gerry's. If you need anything, just give me a call. You'll find my number in there." She hesitated a moment before taking hold of the phone, but he kept his fingers wrapped tightly around it so they were in small tug of war as he implored, "Please."

"Okay," she promised uneasily. He let go of the device, and she stared down at it for a few seconds before looking back up at him. "Yes, I will," she said more decisively. "I'm sure Gerry will call you when he's ready for visitors."

He really thought about staying, but it was likely that Gerry would be out of it for most of the night anyway, and Derek wouldn't be allowed to visit. He could come tomorrow during regular visiting hours. On his way out, he checked with the information desk to find out exactly when those were and then called Brenden.

"How is he?" Brenden asked by way of greeting.

"Fine. I'll be able to see him tomorrow. Where are you?"

“On my way to Gerry’s. I’ve finished for the day, but I think I should go ahead and work tomorrow, finish up what I can for the week.”

“I’ll meet you there and we’ll come up with something for the next week. Do you know what Gerry had on the schedule?”

“He mostly keeps it in his head. There’s a notebook where he writes down some stuff, but I think that’s mostly for new customers.”

“Well,” Derek said wearily, “we’ll figure something out. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“Kay.”

Once his phone was safely in his pocket, he couldn’t help but think about how his day would go tomorrow. He couldn’t see Gerry until eleven in the morning, so that would give him and Brenden plenty of time to get things at least started. As he drove he planned and hoped.

A SEARING pain in his side woke Gerry when he tried to roll over. It only took a second before he realized where he was and that he’d just had his appendix out. He remembered being wheeled into the operating room, but after that, his memory was gone. Although he did recall seeing his mom briefly after they brought him into this room, and he’d felt a sense of relief but also wondered where Derek was. Gerry could only remember bits and pieces after that, waking up occasionally as the nurses came in to check on him.

They had already taken his catheter out, and he’d been on a couple of trips down the hallway, had some JELL-O for

breakfast, and tried to locate his cell phone. He was too reliant on speed dial and didn't remember Brenden's number. He finally broke down and called his mom, and she confirmed that Derek had given her Gerry's cell phone. Hearing that had depressed him as he took that to mean that Derek wouldn't be coming to visit him today.

Just before visiting hours started, the doctor finally came in to check on him and told Gerry he'd be released tomorrow as long as he didn't have a fever and his incision looked good. He also warned Gerry that he'd have to stay home from work for at least a week and to be careful to stay away from anything too strenuous for about five weeks, which only made Gerry worry even more. He had only himself to rely on when it came to his business. He'd been independent for a long time now and had been proud that he made a nice living for himself. Some of his customers were loyal to him, would wait for him to recover, but the others, the bigger accounts such as apartments and rentals, made up at least sixty percent of his business. They probably wouldn't, and couldn't, wait for him. If he lost those customers, he'd have a major setback. He tried to put it out of his mind and concentrate on healing.

Kate Donnelly bustled into Gerry's room promptly at eleven and reluctantly handed over his cell phone. "You need your rest," she cautioned.

"Just a few phone calls today," he promised. He relayed what the doctor told him, all the while hoping that each person that was coming down the hall would be Derek. His mom fussed around him for a bit until finally, a half an hour later, the one he had been waiting for walked through the door.

“Hi, Mrs. Donnelly,” Derek greeted her first.

“Oh, hello, Derek,” she said overly-cheerful, popping up out of her chair. “I’ll just run down to gift shop and leave you two to talk.”

As soon as she cleared the door, Gerry gave Derek a look of disbelief. “I can’t believe she left so easily. Did you two talk yesterday?”

“Not really, but she wasn’t nasty to me, either.”

“What have you been up to?”

“Helping Brenden,” he sighed as he sat in the chair vacated by Kate. “Between the two of us, I think we figured out what customers needed to be done today, and we formulated a plan for next week.”

“Plan?”

“Yeah. Brenden has the pattern down pretty well about what customers get done on what weeks. I hope you don’t mind that I looked at your calendar to find out what big jobs you had lined up to do.”

“No,” he said quietly, amazed at how Derek jumped in and figured out how to make things better for him. It was something Gerry wasn’t used to. For years he’d been the one that was always watching out for others. From taking his mom to church, to keeping her house and his own in working order, and even providing a job for several friends when they needed a helping hand.

“So, do you know when you’ll be getting out of here?” Derek asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“Doc says tomorrow if everything goes well. Have to be off work for a week.”

“Yeah, that’s what I read online last night. Did they do laparoscopic surgery?”

“No, it’s a regular incision. I have to take it easy for five weeks.” Derek nodded knowingly, causing Gerry to snort, “Guess you read about that too.”

“Yeah,” Derek answered with a sheepish grin.

Silence dominated the room for several minutes before Gerry asked, “Did they hassle you at work for leaving early?”

“No, not all. It was already after three, so I’d worked the majority of the day.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want to be the cause of you getting into trouble at work.”

Derek leaned in close before saying, “It wouldn’t have mattered if they fired me. You needed help, that’s more important than anything else.”

“But after....”

“No,” Derek interrupted him, his voice clogged with emotion. “You mean... everything to me, Gerry. I was wrong to walk out on you last weekend. I should have stayed so we could talk it out. My parents are important to me, and it was arrogant of me to think that your mom would be any less important to you, that you wouldn’t try anything in your power to prevent her from being hurt.”

Gerry picked at the blanket, smoothing out the wrinkles. “Don’t say all that just because I’m in the hospital.”

“I can’t lie. It’s made me put things in perspective even more. Spending this week without you has been hard, but it would be even worse to spend my life without you.”

“Derek,” was all he managed to choke out.



“Spending time with my parents last weekend showed me that even if the person you love does something wrong, it doesn’t mean the relationship is over or that the love dies. It means that you have to work on it. Solve the problem together, and hopefully you’ll come out of it stronger, more in love.”

Gerry felt elated and scared all at once. “What exactly are you saying, Derek?”

“I love you. I want to be with you even if it means that you go to Mass with your mom every Saturday without me. If your mom can’t accept me... us, then that’s okay. I’m done with running away from things that are scary and uncertain.”

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Gerry said lightly, “You would pick the first time to say you love me when I can’t do anything about it.”

Grinning, Derek rose from his chair and wrapped his arms around Gerry’s shoulders. “Plenty of time to do those things later,” Derek whispered.

“I love you,” Gerry sighed with relief, relieved he could finally say the words he’d wanted to for so long. That Derek was the first to say them would be something he would always treasure. He knew Derek was right, however, that they still had some work to do. He wanted to get to that stronger and more in love part more than anything now.

Someone clearing their throat at the doorway broke them apart and Gerry groaned inwardly when he realized it was his mom.

“I better get back and help Brenden,” Derek said as he backed away from the bed.

Already missing the warmth and comfort of Derek's body, he said, "Tell him I'll call him later this afternoon."

"Sure," Derek agreed as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"I'll call you when I find out when they're going to cut me loose."

"Okay," Derek said with a smile before heading to the door. "It was nice seeing you again, Mrs. Donnelly."

"Yes, you too," she said, moving out of the way so Derek could leave. She puttered around the room a bit, straightening up things that really didn't need straightening and re-filled his water pitcher before finally sitting down.

"He seems like a nice boy."

"Derek's not a boy," he said a bit harshly.

"Well... no, he just seems so much younger than you."

"That's because he is. I already told you that."

"Oh, right."

He could tell she was nervous, but he wasn't sure exactly why. Instead of trying to guess at the exact cause, he asked, "What's the matter?"

"It's all a bit much, don't you think? Him rushing over here for visiting hours."

"You did," he pointed out.

"I'm your mother," she said defensively.

"Yes, and he's my boyfriend."

"Gerry!" she scolded, craning her neck to look out the door.

He realized that was a bit unfair. This was, after all, a Catholic hospital, and although he was sure that not

everyone here was Catholic, he couldn't be sure of their stance on homosexuality. "Sorry," he said contritely.

"You know, he was the one that called me and told me you were here."

"I asked him to. Everything happened so fast that I didn't have time to call you. The nurses said they would let you know, but I wanted Derek to do it." Her mouth was pinched and she had crossed her arms over her chest and he knew she was still unhappy. "Mom, it was Derek who insisted I come to the hospital. He was the one who told Brenden to call nine-one-one. If I would've waited much longer, my appendix might have burst, and it could've been really bad."

"Well, at least he let them bring you here."

"I was too sick to care where we were going. I really don't remember how I got here other than the paramedics bringing me here."

"Oh."

"Derek's a good person. I know you'd like him if you tried."

Her face crumpled then, the tears falling as she said, "It's hard. Believing one way all my life. How do I unlearn all that?"

"Do you want to try?"

It was a few minutes before she answered, "I'm not sure."

At least she was being honest. That's all he could really ask for. "I hope you will. I want you involved in all aspects of my life, not just part of it."

She nodded as she pulled a tissue from her purse and dabbed at her eyes, and then she launched into a funny story about one of her co-workers. Gerry listened and laughed at all the appropriate places as he knew it would help make his mom feel more comfortable. It would take time for his mom to come around and get to know Derek. At least she wasn't rude to Derek outright, and that was good place to start.

THE week went by quickly for Derek. He'd worked the whole weekend with his brother. Gerry was having trouble finding anyone trustworthy to work with Brenden, and Gerry was reluctant to ask any of his friends to help. Derek assured Gerry he could help out since he was familiar with the equipment, the customers, and of course, Brenden. Once Derek finished up his regular work day, he went out and helped Brenden until dark. He'd run into Gerry's mom a couple of times throughout the week, and she'd been pleasant enough to him, even chatting with him for a few minutes on Thursday evening when he and Brenden had pulled into Gerry's driveway, dirty and tired from working all day.

Gerry's house became filled with lots of get well cards, balloons, cookies, candy, and even a couple of potted plants. Derek usually spent an hour or two with Gerry each evening before heading home. It warmed his heart to hear of the visits and calls Gerry had received that day. It was difficult saying goodnight as he knew Gerry wanted him to stay, but Gerry needed time to heal.

By the time Friday evening came around, he was pretty tired and ended up falling asleep on Gerry's couch. It worked out to his advantage because he got to sleep a little longer than if he'd been at home. He and Brenden planned to make a full day of it, trying to get as much done as possible so maybe they could have Sunday off. Gerry had wanted to come along for the day, promising to stick to supervising, but Derek thought even that might be too much. They compromised by taking two vehicles so that someone could drive Gerry home if he didn't feel well or got tired. It would be at least two more days before Gerry would be allowed to drive again.

It was a bright, hot summer day where even the breeze didn't offer any relief. Gerry didn't last too long, but Derek thought it was more because he was bored rather than there being something physically wrong. He drove Gerry home with a stop at the grocery store so he could pick up a few things Gerry needed. Thankfully, Gerry didn't give him an argument about waiting in the car while Derek ran in. As soon as he got Gerry settled at home, he went back to work.

When he and Brenden were finally finished for the day, he followed Brenden back to Gerry's house. As soon as he pulled into the driveway, he saw Mrs. Donnelly's car parked there. "Oh, great," he muttered. He got out, slamming his car door to try and release some of his frustrations.

Brenden must have sensed something was up. "What's wrong?"

"Gerry's mom is here."

"So?"

"I wanted to spend some time with Gerry tonight."

“Look, I know you’re going to think I’m some big ‘tard, but just go in there and hang out with them. The only way she’s going to get used to you is if you’re around each other.”

“That’s where Gerry and I got into trouble before. I thought that way and he didn’t. He wants to ease his mom into it, let her make the decision of when and if she wants to come around while I’m here.”

Brenden gestured toward the house as he said, “And whadda you know, here she is.”

“No shit, Sherlock! ‘Cause Gerry can’t leave.”

“See, I knew you’d think I was stupid,” Brenden sulked as he pulled one of the garbage cans off the trailer.

“I do not. I’m just pointing out....”

“Yeah, I know, you’re really good at that,” Brenden interrupted, his voice low and terse.

Derek closed his eyes and counted to ten. His temper was short because of the long hours, and he wanted to consider what his brother was saying before going on the defensive.

“I’m really worried about fucking this up again,” he confessed as they started to unload the trailer.

“All I’m saying is at least go in there and see how it goes. Maybe she’ll surprise you.”

Derek grabbed the other trash can, hauled it off the trailer, and paused by his brother’s side. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I gotta stop thinking about her as if she’s the only thing standing between me and Gerry.”

“Right,” Brenden agreed readily. “Now, stop bein’ a dipshit and get in there.”

“You *are* a ’tard,” Derek snorted, moving in to give him a smack upside the head, but Brenden must have sensed it coming and evaded it easily. Derek looked up at the house, then to his brother. “You okay here?”

“Yeah, I’ll finish up and head home. Call and let me know if you need help tomorrow.”

“Sure thing,” he said before turning toward the house. He looked back over his shoulder as he said, “Thanks.”

“No problemo, bro.”

Not for the first time Derek was thankful to have a brother like Brenden. Actually he was more like a best friend than a brother. He’d always tagged along with Derek when they were boys. He’d listen intently when Derek would ramble on about the interesting shapes of buildings and was always ready to defend Derek if he felt there was a need.

He would never forget the time in high school when Brenden thought some of the upperclassmen were making fun of Derek. Brenden immediately let his books fall to the floor and started throwing punches. It had been impressive as Brenden, a ninth-grader, held his own against three seniors. It was only later in the principal’s office that Brenden found out that Derek was friendly with the seniors from being in the marching band together. It was a big mess with many apologies and a week of detentions, but it showed Derek just how much his brother loved him. Brenden was the first person to teach him that it was okay at times to lead with your heart instead of your head. Derek knew he still had a lot of lessons to learn in that area, and Gerry was the person he wanted to learn from now.

When Derek opened the door, he could hear voices coming from the kitchen. “Hello,” he called out, leaning in

but not actually stepping through the doorway. He heard some scuffling before Gerry appeared, followed by Mrs. Donnelly.

“C’mon in,” Gerry invited with a smile.

“I just wanted to let you know we were finished and....”

“You’re not staying?” Kate asked, the smile falling from her face to be replaced by confused disappointment.

“Sure, if you want me to,” he said slowly, looking at Gerry, who was only giving him a mischievous look back.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” she said, brightening. “You just need to take it out of the oven in twenty minutes. Warm the rolls in the microwave, salad’s in the fridge... I think that’s it.”

Now Derek was the one confused. “Um... *you’re* leaving?”

“Yes,” she said distractedly. She went back into the kitchen, her voice loud so they could hear her. “I understand chocolate chip is Brenden’s favorite cookie.”

He quirked a questioning brow at Gerry, but still only received a grin in return, so he answered, “Yes, my grandma could never make enough for him.”

“In that case I better hurry and catch him before he leaves.” She hurried through the living room holding a plate covered in plastic wrap. On her way through the room, she grabbed her purse, and just before she was ready to breeze through the door, she stopped. “Thank you,” she said quietly, giving Derek a knowing look.

He could only nod, caught by surprise at the sincerity in her voice. Her voice turned light again as she said, “You two



have a good night. See you later.” She patted him on the shoulder before calling out, “Brenden!”

Derek finally stepped into the house and closed the door. It was several seconds before he hooked his thumb back at it, asking, “What was that all about?”

“She finally fell under the spell of your charms,” Gerry suggested, walking toward him.

“Yeah, right,” he said doubtfully.

“Actually, we had a long talk, and she does really want to try to get to know you better.”

“What changed her mind?”

“You.”

“No, seriously.”

“Yes. Seriously.” Gerry was finally in front of him, about as close as he could get without their bodies touching.

“How? I’ve barely said two words to her this entire week.”

“That’s because it’s not what you’ve said.”

Derek thought back over the week, but nothing stood out to him. “I don’t get it.”

Gerry chuckled as he moved the extra step so finally, blissfully, their bodies made the initial connection that he’d been missing for two weeks. The intimacy.

“Ever hear the phrase actions speak louder than words? You impressed her with how sensitive you were to her in the hospital and how you jumped in and helped me out this week. She thinks you’re a respectable young man.”

“Hmph, fooled another one,” he joked, trying to keep his mind on the conversation instead of the feel of his nether regions pressing lightly against Gerry’s.

“And... there was one other thing.”

That caught his attention. “What?”

“I’ll show you in a minute.”

“But I wanna....”

Gerry’s lips were close to his own, and he could feel Gerry’s breath on his skin. “Stop talking and kiss me.”

“I love it when you’re forceful,” Derek said against Gerry’s mouth.

Gerry let out a growl of frustration as he bumped his body against Derek’s, pushing him back against the door. What began as a soft kiss quickly turned into something more urgent and demanding with tongues and mouths seeking but not finding enough to satisfy. When Gerry began to grind against him, Derek’s body answered in kind, but all too soon he felt the coolness of the air coming between them as Gerry moved away.

“Dinner’s ready,” Gerry said over the loud buzzing noise coming from the kitchen.

He watched Gerry make his way to the kitchen to take out whatever was in the oven. Derek wasn’t ready to move yet and was a little surprised that they had spent the whole twenty minutes making out. When he heard the beeping of the microwave, he pushed himself away from the door and went into the kitchen. He was stunned when he saw the table had been set with fine china and linen, a delicious-looking lasagna cooling at the center of the table. “What the hell?” he muttered.

“Mom’s idea,” Gerry said with a grin as he set bowls of salad down at each place setting. “She hardly gets to use the good stuff anymore and thought you might like it.” Gerry looked everything over and grimaced. “Kinda corny, huh?”

“No,” he answered, still astonished. “This was all your mom’s idea?”

“Mine,” Gerry admitted sheepishly. “You know grilling is about the extent of my culinary skills, and I wanted something special for you tonight.”

“And your mom agreed to help?”

“Well, like I said, she’s been slowly coming around, but I had something extra to show her today, and now she thinks you are the next best thing since sliced bread.”

“What *are* you talking about?” Derek asked a bit impatiently.

“I was bored when you ran into the store, and I started nosing around the Escort and I found something really interesting. I didn’t even realize you’d been working on it.”

“My sketchbook!” Derek interrupted, his eyes wide with surprise. He didn’t want Gerry to see it yet as he hadn’t had time to perfect the drawings.

Gerry moved across to the fridge, pulled down the book from the top and flipped it open. Derek reached out to grab it, but Gerry was faster and jerked it away. “Derek, these drawings are fabulous. You listened to everything I’ve ever said about what I wanted to do here.”

“They’re just preliminary,” he countered, trying not to get lost in Gerry’s praise.

“Preliminary, my ass!” Gerry’s fingers traced the lines of what Derek had drawn up for the master suite. “It’s perfect.

You even added things that I didn't even think about. French doors that lead to a wraparound porch and a hot tub. That's awesome!"

"I wasn't sure you'd like that, but I thought it would help you relax after a long day at work," he said, leaning in close to study the plans.

"When did you have time to work on this?"

"Mostly at lunch. Sometimes if it was a slow day at work, I'd pull it out and work on it a bit. I did a lot of it at home last week."

"You've impressed the hell out of my mom with this. She's heard me talking about how I want to improve this place for a couple of years now, and then here it is, right in front of her."

"Really? I didn't think she'd care about that kind of stuff."

"I think she's happy that I found someone who cares about the same things I do, wants the same type of things. Someone who listens to me and will take care of me when I need it."

"My drawings showed her all that?" he asked, skeptically.

"No. You being here this week plus the drawings showed her all that," Gerry said softly.

"But she's still not totally convinced that two men loving each other is okay."

"Not yet," Gerry admitted. "She said she can handle it better just thinking of us as very good friends. At least it's a start."

He looked up into Gerry's eyes. "Yes, it is. More than I thought would be possible."

They held onto each other's gaze for several moments before Derek broke the spell. "Let me go grab a quick shower."

"No, sit down. Let's eat first."

"I'm all dirty and smelly," he said, screwing up his face as he pulled his sweaty T-shirt away from his chest.

"Who cares? We're both guys, you don't have to impress me with fancy clothes and spicy cologne. Just sit down and eat."

Derek looked doubtfully at the table and then himself. "C'mon," Gerry cajoled. "Besides, I thought we could shower together later."

"Together? What about your incision?"

"I'm allowed to shower now. The doctor said it would be fine."

"Just showering?"

"Well... maybe a little more than showering," Gerry said with waggle of his brows.

"Mmm," Derek hummed appreciatively. "Can't say I wouldn't mind that."

As they took their time eating and enjoying each other's company, Derek felt like they were truly back on track again. Things wouldn't be perfect in their relationship, and he knew he could handle that now. And if Gerry's mom could only ever think of them as just friends, then that was okay too.

It was hard to believe that he almost didn't go on that first date with Gerry. So many things in his life had changed

since he'd met him. Derek received his BA, began his professional career with a firm he really enjoyed working for, and was about to start graduate school. He understood now what it meant to be in love and be loved, to surrender to it. It was worth whatever it took to keep. Nothing could compare. Not one thing.

## Chapter 8

AS GERRY put the last of his tools away, he looked up into the darkened November sky. It was only six o'clock, and the sun had been down almost an hour already. With the shorter days came the colder weather, and that usually meant his work dried up for a while until the snow started to fly, and he would be busy once again with plowing. Thanksgiving was just around the corner, so it shouldn't be too long before the first storm hit. Fortunately this year he had plenty of handyman-type jobs to keep him busy—at least until the end of the year—and help out for the jobs he had to pass up while he was recovering from his surgery. It was a double-edged sword though now that Derek was in his life.

Derek was stretching himself pretty thin with school, the internship at Beckett & Foster, and spending time with him. He was worried that Derek was taking on too much, always insisting on coming over to Gerry's house so they could have some privacy. Tonight Gerry had hoped to finish up early so he could catch Derek before leaving work and could convince him to meet at the apartment and have dinner there.

Getting into the truck, he started the engine right away to warm it up, then pulled out his cell phone, punching in Derek's number. He rubbed his stinging eyes with his thumb and forefinger as he waited for Derek to pick up. Ever since

his doctor had released him for all work and leisure activities, he'd felt like he was always at least two steps behind. He owed a lot to both Brenden and Derek as they had kept Donnelly's Landscaping going for him. The only good thing about all that time off was that he'd been able to get his books and accounts in order and set up a more efficient system.

"Hey there," Derek said with warm affection.

Just the sound of Derek's voice, relaxed and happy, had Gerry smiling. "Hey. What're you doin'?"

"Just finishing up some homework. What about you?"

"Finally done for the day. How about I pick up something to eat and bring it over."

Derek sounded disappointed as he said, "Oh."

"You come over to the house tomorrow for the weekend?"

"Yeah, that sounds good. You have any jobs lined up for Saturday?"

"No. I thought we could use a weekend all to ourselves."

"Just the two of us? No meeting friends for dinner or a movie or out to the clubs?"

"We'll lock ourselves in," Gerry promised with a laugh. "Won't step out of the house again until Monday morning."

"Perfect," Derek sighed.

They were quiet for a moment, just listening to each other breathe until finally Gerry felt the warmth of the heater blowing on him. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Kay, see you in a few."



Gerry rushed home and took a quick shower, needing to get the sweat of the day off him. By the time he got to Derek's, he had his second wind. He was a bit disappointed when it was Shana who answered the door.

"Hi, sweetie! C'mon in. Derek's in his room studying."

"Did you bring anything for us?" Brenden called from the couch.

"As a matter of fact," Gerry said, entering the apartment and depositing a bucket of fried chicken onto the coffee table.

Brenden sat up and was already opening the bucket as he exclaimed, "Dude! You are so awesome!"

Shana smacked Brenden's hand away just before he could grab onto a drumstick. "You don't have to feed us, Gerry."

"They were having a special tonight," Gerry said with a shrug.

Shana looked skeptical as she said, "Funny, they always seem to have a special going on whenever you bring food over."

"Don't knock it," Brenden said, going in for the drumstick once again, this time succeeding. He tore off a big bite before continuing, "If he wants to contribute to our very bare cupboards, I ain't gonna argue."

"That's because your stomach is never full!" Shana said with exasperation.

Gerry left them to argue and went to Derek's room to find him hunched over his drafting table. He looked engrossed in his work, if one could actually tell that from the backside. Well, Derek did have an engrossing backside.

“Stop staring at my ass,” Derek complained without turning around.

“How’d you know I was?”

“Cause you’ve been here for five minutes and haven’t moved a muscle.”

“It hasn’t been five minutes yet. Wanna time me?”

Derek finally turned and with a smirk said, “Why look when you can grope?”

“Ohhh, that’s even better.” Gerry set the food down on the dresser as Derek stood to greet him.

They managed to get in some kissing and touching before Brenden shouted, “Dudes! Shana wants you to eat with us.”

“I didn’t say that!” Shana denied hotly, followed by a muffled noise from the living room. Gerry grinned as he could imagine what Shana was doing to Brenden at that moment. Brenden was laughing and giving out breathless grunts of “Ow!” and “Hey!” until finally, “I give, I give!”

“We should’ve gone to your house,” Derek complained.

“It won’t be so bad. I haven’t seen much of your brother since he started back to school.”

“Oh, miss him, do you? Well, feel free to take him off my hands whenever you’d like,” Derek grumbled good-naturedly.

“Giving you a hard time?”

“No more than usual. Let’s go eat, I’m starving,” Derek said, grabbing Gerry’s hand and pulling him out into the living room.

Gerry suspected there was more to it, and Derek was just trying to brush it off as if it were no big deal. Although

Gerry liked Brenden and thought he was a good worker, he didn't like the idea of Brenden giving Derek a difficult time. Derek had enough to worry about without adding his brother to the list.

It turned out they had a nice dinner, and Gerry was pleased to see that Derek finally relaxed and enjoyed the conversation and the company. Once everyone had their fill, Shana grabbed up the remnants and took them into the kitchen.

"I'm glad you came over tonight," Brenden said, sitting up from his normal slouched position. He sounded serious, and Derek's exasperated sigh of "Brenden" was followed-up with a meaningful look. Brenden, of course, ignored him as any younger brother would, and kept his eyes on Gerry.

"It's okay," Gerry said, laying his hand gently on Derek's arm to let him know that it was. "Go ahead, Brenden. What's on your mind?"

"Why hasn't Derek moved in with you yet?"

"And how is that your business?" Gerry asked nonchalantly.

"Because I think he's gonna be the next one to end up in the hospital from running from school, to his job, and then your place."

"It's between your brother and me." Gerry had halfway expected this. It echoed his own thoughts from earlier. And it wasn't news that Brenden felt he had to be Derek's voice at times. But this was a subject that Derek and Gerry had talked about at length and had come to the conclusion that the timing wasn't right. Derek was worried about Brenden finding a roommate at this time of year and how Gerry's

mom would handle the news. Gerry was worried about finances. With Derek in school and still being an intern, he wouldn't be bringing in any money, and Gerry wouldn't dare ask him to. Derek had his goals, and he was working hard to achieve them.

Gerry looked over at Derek as Brenden appealed to his brother, "Sometimes you gotta worry about yourself, man."

"I understand you're worried, but we're working toward that," Derek said. "There's a few things we have to figure out yet."

"If you're worried about me finding another roommate, then don't," Brenden said. "I already found one."

"You did?" Derek and Gerry asked together as they looked over to Shana.

"Not me," Shana said holding up her hands, as she came back into the room and sat down beside Brenden, putting her hand on his knee. "Tell them the rest, honey."

"If you'll leave your bedroom furniture here, I know a guy who can move in here the first week of December. He's been sharing a place with four other dudes, and he's tired of always falling over someone and never having any peace and quiet. He told 'em he was moving out in December."

"So... you already told him he could move in?" Derek asked.

"No, I told him that I thought there was a good chance I'd be needin' a roommate by then. I figure this way it gives you guys a couple of weeks to get your shit together and tell Mom and Dad."

"Oh, you're gonna let me tell Mom and Dad? Big of you," Derek said with mock sarcasm.

“Sure, you’re the one that’s moving out,” Brenden answered with one of his charming smiles. “I mean, I’ll help you move and stuff.”

“Gee, thanks,” Derek said with a small grin. “You’re all heart.”

“Ultimately,” Gerry said, stepping back into the conversation, “this is something that Derek and I will have to decide. We’ll have to talk about it.”

“Well go *talk*, then,” Brenden said with a lopsided grin as he made a gesture toward the bedroom, which earned him a playful smack from Shana. “All right, now you’re gonna get it,” Brenden threatened, making a grab for Shana. She was off the couch like a shot, running down the hall with Brenden hot on her heels.

“Those two are in a mood tonight,” Gerry said with a chuckle.

“Yeah,” Derek agreed softly, causing Gerry to turn his attention back to him.

There was really no sense in beating around the bush. The topic was already on the table, and Gerry was ready to carry on the momentum. “So... what do you think? It shouldn’t be too much trouble to move all your stuff over to the house.”

“What about your mom?” Derek asked with a frown. “Do you think she’s ready for it?”

Gerry sighed. “No, she won’t ever be ready for me to live with another man. She’ll probably keep pretending that we’re just friends. That we don’t actually love each other or sleep together. Can you handle that?”

Derek cocked his head to the side and looked up at the ceiling and Gerry knew that he was actually thinking about it, which was a relief. He didn't want any of this to be done on the spur of the moment or, most especially, because Brenden said they should do it.

"Your mom has been pretty good these last couple months," Derek said thoughtfully. "I mean, she's obviously willing to bend a little, so I think meeting her half-way is more than manageable."

It was true that Kate was being more respectful toward Derek. He had been at the house a few times when Kate had stopped by and they were all able to have a nice conversation together. Gerry usually went over to her house every other week to visit with her and make sure she didn't need him to do anything for her. He was a little perturbed that she never invited Derek over, but she did usually ask about Derek and seemed genuinely interested to hear how he was doing.

"And what about your folks?" Gerry asked.

"I already talked to my dad about it."

"Really?"

Derek nodded. "Way back before you went into the hospital."

Gerry was thoughtful as he gave a quiet, "Mmmm." He'd met the Westons when they had come for a visit just before Derek and Brenden started back to school. They'd invited Gerry to go out to dinner with them, and he'd been more than a little nervous. From all that Derek had told him about his parents, Gerry had been expecting something of a cross between yuppies and hippies. He wanted to make a good

impression on them. Derek had seemed surprised and even touched at Gerry's reaction.

There had been no need to be nervous at all as the Westons had completely charmed him, especially Anne. It was easy to see that Derek took after his father, who was more reserved and thoughtful, while Brenden was like his mother, carefree and open. It wasn't difficult to tell that Anne and Bob loved their children and they made Gerry feel like a welcome addition to their family. But seeing the tight knit family and how much the Westons accepted their gay son and were genuinely happy that he'd found someone had made him yearn for the same. He wanted to see his own mother at the table with them, to enjoy the companionship and the closeness that Derek and his family could bring.

"How 'bout we tell them at Thanksgiving," Derek said, breaking into his thoughts.

"Thanksgiving?"

"Well, yeah," Derek said, frowning slightly. "You're coming, aren't you? To Mom and Dad's?"

"I didn't realize I was invited."

"Of course you are," Derek said, rolling his eyes and bumping his shoulder to Gerry's. "I told Mom it would have to be a late dinner though, so you could go to your mom's first. Unless I was being too presumptuous."

"No," Gerry said, his chest tightening with emotion. His mom never made much of a fuss over holidays as she didn't care for them. Her upbringing had been harsh with an alcoholic father and a mother who was beaten both mentally and physically, unable or unwilling to take any steps to take her children away from the bleak household. The holidays

only brought painful reminders to his mother of how unhappy they could be, and although he always spent the day with his mom, there was no specialness to it. He had a feeling it would be vastly different at the Weston household.

“No,” Gerry said again, clearing his throat. “I would like to go to your parents’ for Thanksgiving.”

Relief flooded Derek’s face and a small smile played at his lips as he said, “I’ve been looking forward to having you there. Brenden’s always had some girlfriend or another over for the holidays since high school. Besides Mom’s been asking about your favorite foods so I’m sure there’ll be plenty to eat. She’s even gonna make lemon meringue pie.”

“She doesn’t have to go to any trouble.”

“Mom and Dad love the holidays, and Mom always cooks and bakes enough to feed an army. Don’t be surprised if she already has the Christmas tree up. It’s sort of a tradition of hers.”

Gerry found himself hoping for just that. His mom had stopped decorating for Christmas when he got into high school, stating since she never liked holidays, and he was so busy with school and friends, there really was no need for one. He’d gotten an artificial one for himself after he bought the house, but it had seemed strange putting it up just for himself, so he’d never even taken it out of the box. Now he was longing to decorate it with Derek and start some family traditions of their own.

They spent the rest of the evening talking about when the move would take place and what pieces of furniture Derek would need and where they would be placed in the house. Money was also brought up, and Gerry was adamant about not accepting any type of monthly rent from Derek’s



parents. Derek would be earning money as soon as he finished with the graduate program and would contribute to the household when he was able. He knew Derek was uncomfortable with Gerry carrying the full burden, so he finally acquiesced enough that they came to an agreement that Derek would help out with the utilities and groceries.

It was late into the night when they finally got too tired to talk any further and crawled into Derek's bed, curled into their favorite positions, wrapped around each other. Just before sleep claimed him, Gerry offered up his prayers, thankful that he had found someone to share his life with.

DEREK had been right about Thanksgiving. The tree had been up and decorated, and there was enough food to feed fifteen people, let alone the six of them. The conversation about the move had gone well. Both Anne and Bob had insisted that they help with the actual moving and a day was settled on that would work for everyone. Again Gerry felt a pang of regret as his mother had barely acknowledged him when he'd told her earlier that day Derek would be moving in with him. She'd taken it much as he'd expected, but still there had been a part of him that had been hoping it would've gone differently.

Now moving day was finally here, and Gerry got to the apartment bright and early with bagels, doughnuts, coffee and orange juice. Derek wasn't much of a breakfast person, so Gerry tried to sneak it in there whenever he could. All those years of hearing his mom say it was the most important meal of the day had ingrained in him that he must eat something in the morning, even if it was just a bowl of

instant oatmeal. Now that they would be living together full time, maybe he could change Derek's mind about eating in the morning.

Brenden opened the door, his eyes at half-mast and his hair looking like he'd been doing some break-dancing on his head during the night. "Dude," Brenden breathed gratefully. "Sustenance! You're my hero." He grabbed the box of doughnuts and headed for the kitchen.

"Up late last night?" Gerry asked as he followed Brenden through the maze of boxes that were stacked up in the living room. Once in the kitchen, he set everything down on the table.

"Oh, man," Brenden groaned, "are you sure you wanna live with him?"

Gerry grinned. "Yes. Why, what was he doing? And where is he, by the way?"

"He went with Mom and Dad to gas up the cars. Like your place is hours and hours away or something," Brenden said through a mouthful of cream stick. "He did all his laundry last night, cleaned out his entire bedroom, which included vacuuming at two in the morning. Who the hell does that at two a.m.?"

"Your brother," Gerry said wryly. "I thought I'd beat your parents here, at least."

"Mom's been talking about it all week. Guess she made all kinda lists and shit. She even made food for you two for the whole weekend." Brenden canted his head toward the refrigerator. "It's all in there. Dad said she's been cooking and baking up a storm all week."

"And how do you feel about it?"

Brenden's hand froze just after it dove into the box for another surgery treat. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. How are you gonna feel not seeing your brother all the time?"

"Okay. Everything'll work out just fine," Brenden said with a shrug.

"Hmmm, really? I know you're the one that gave Derek the final push he needed, but no one's asked you how you feel about all this."

"I told you, I think it's great. I don't think I've ever seen two people more meant for each other than you guys. Besides, once I graduate, I'm so outta here. Why put off the inevitable?"

Gerry studied him a moment longer before asking, "So when's the new roomie move in?"

"Tomorrow, and I told him I wasn't gonna be able to help," Brenden said, going back to his sleepy, grumpy demeanor. He pulled out another doughnut and took a big bite. "I hate movin', especially when it's not me that gets to move. I'm stuck here."

"Stuck?"

"Jesus, will ya stop analyzin' everything I say," Brenden stated, spraying a puff of powdered sugar with every word. "You're as bad as Derek." Brenden looked at his fingers for a second before wiping them on the front of his shirt, leaving behind long white trails. "Sure I'm gonna miss him, but he deserves to be happy. I think it's way cool that he got hooked up with you. So, in the end, the happiness cancels out the sadness. Know what I mean?"

"Gotcha," Gerry said with smile and a nod.

“Hey!” Derek said with a huge grin as he came through the front door. “What are you doing here already?”

“Thought we could eat a little something before we got started,” Gerry said as Derek came over for a quick hug.

“Brenden!” Anne scolded as she entered the apartment.

“What?” Brenden asked, backing away from the kitchen counter, holding his hands up in the air.

“You should have waited until we were all here before starting to eat.”

“It’s only doughnuts, Mom,” Brenden retorted with a sigh as he looked down at the shirt that had given him away.

“It would’ve been nice to sit down together and eat,” Anne said.

“Did I say I was finished?” Brenden asked, opening the bag of bagels and poking around.

“Your son, the bottomless pit,” Bob chuckled.

“My son when he costs money; your son when he does something wonderful,” Anne sniffed.

“Which is every day,” Brenden said

“That you’re wonderful or cost money?” Derek asked.

“Both,” Brenden replied, plopping down onto a chair.

“I’m gonna start moving some of this stuff downstairs,” Derek announced, looking over at the boxes.

“Sit down and eat something,” Anne insisted as she got some glasses and mugs out of the cupboard.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Derek said, his voice and manner distracted. “I’m just gonna check to make sure my car’s cleaned out.”

As the door closed softly behind him, all eyes turned to Gerry. “His car’s been cleaned out for two days,” Brenden said unnecessarily. Gerry wouldn’t have been surprised if it had been cleaned out for a week.

Gerry grabbed a couple of bagels and a glass of orange juice before he headed in Derek’s wake. He found him leaning against the Escort. Gerry handed him one of the bagels before taking a spot beside him. They munched quietly for a few minutes, passing the juice back and forth between them a time or two before Gerry finally asked, “What’s up?”

“I dunno,” Derek sighed.

“Feeling a bit overwhelmed?”

“Mmm, I guess. Just wish it was all done, and we were home in our bed.”

“Yeah, that sounds nice,” Gerry agreed with a smile. “But what is it really?”

It took a couple of minutes before Derek finally voiced his concern. “You’re taking on a lot of responsibility. I’m afraid you’re going to resent it.”

Gerry figured that what Derek was really concerned about was that Gerry might end up resenting him. “*I’m* not doing it alone. It would be different if you were sitting on your ass all day and not doing a damn thing, but for God’s sake, Derek, you’re going to school full time and working part time. And I know you’re committed to one other thing.”

“Yeah?” Derek asked, finally turning his head to look at him.

“Us. When I got sick, you started in without even being asked. You made sure all my customers were taken care of

and that Brenden kept getting his pay check. I was able to keep my business afloat because of you.”

“I didn’t....”

Gerry interrupted, “You did a lot. I’m not fooling myself here. It’s not going to be easy just ’cause we’re living together, but doesn’t every good relationship deserve the hard work?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So, do you wanna hold off?”

“No, I don’t want to wait any more,” Derek said softly.

“All right, then, let’s get this show on the road.”

They shared another tight hug before going back in, and everyone started to pitch in to get the vehicles packed up. Gerry had brought his truck and trailer that would hold the furniture. Derek wasn’t taking much, just a bookcase, a small desk, and his drafting table. The rest was just books and clothes.

When the last box had been loaded, Derek shook his head in consternation. “How the hell did I get so much stuff?”

“It creeps up on you,” Anne said. “Don’t forget you had some of this in storage. And by storage, I mean our house.”

“C’mon, let’s get goin’,” Brenden said impatiently.

“What’s the rush?” Anne asked.

“I wanna come home and catch up on the sleep I didn’t get last night,” Brenden answered, throwing a look at his brother.

“From the amount of snoring coming from your room, I’d say you only lost about five minutes,” Derek shot back.

"All right, all right," Bob intervened. "You two can fight later if you want. Right now let's concentrate on the move."

After that things went fairly smoothly, and by the evening everything had pretty much been put away or set up to Derek and Gerry's satisfaction. Brenden had been right that Anne had made plenty of food for them to last several days. She was also thoughtful enough, once the work was done, to corral her husband and youngest son into leaving so Derek and Gerry could have dinner alone. Once kisses and hugs had been dispensed, the house seemed eerily quiet.

"Are you hungry?" Gerry asked.

"Starved," Derek answered, going to the refrigerator. "Looks like Mom made us everything from chicken to meatloaf. What sounds good to you?"

Gerry walked up behind Derek, leaned his chin on Derek's shoulder as he whispered, "You."

"HMMMM," Derek hummed appreciatively as he leaned back against Gerry. "Don't know what kinda meal I'd make."

Gerry gave Derek a playful bite on his neck, one of Derek's most sensitive areas. "Tastes good to me."

"And what am I gonna have to eat?" Derek asked innocently, causing Gerry to rear back and give him a lecherous stare. Derek threw his head back and laughed, and that's when Gerry knew. This had been a house before, but now it finally felt like a home. It didn't matter who thought they shouldn't be together just because they were both men. Derek was the one for him, and Gerry was more sure of that than of anything he'd ever been in his life. Derek was his home.

## Epilogue

### *Three Years Later*

DEREK chuckled as he pulled up to the house. Gerry was up on a ladder stringing Christmas lights along the roofline of the garage.

“Hey!” Derek called as he got out of his car, depositing his purchases on the roof. “I thought we were done decorating this year.”

“It just seemed like it needed a little something,” Gerry said, turning slightly so Derek could see his small, sheepish grin.

“Be careful up there,” he said, hurrying over to hold onto the bottom of the ladder.

It was a definite change from the first Christmas they celebrated together. Derek had to dig out Gerry’s Christmas tree, which hadn’t seen the light of day since being bought years before. Gerry didn’t have many other decorations, but once Derek put the tree up, Gerry had gotten in the spirit and had gone out on a shopping spree. Now every year Gerry looked forward to Christmas and couldn’t wait to start decorating the house.

“Did you get everything you needed?” Gerry asked, thankfully keeping his eyes on his work.



Tonight was Christmas Eve, and they were having a dinner party with their families and a few close friends. Derek was happy that the guest list finally included Gerry's mom. Derek was really proud of all the work she'd done over the last couple of years to fully accept Gerry and his relationship with Derek. She had joined a support group and changed churches, her Catholic faith remaining intact, if not a little tattered from the process.

"Why is it that you always forget *one* important thing when planning a party?" Derek asked, looking up at Gerry.

"Must be an unwritten rule," Gerry grunted as he made the final electrical connection for the lights. "Although I don't think anyone will really care if there aren't any sweet potatoes."

"I thought you said your mom likes them," Derek said looking over doubtfully at the plastic bag sitting on top of his car.

"She does," Gerry chuckled as he made his descent down the ladder. "You don't have to impress her, you know. She already likes you."

"I know," he murmured as he did a mental checklist of all the food. It was all simple things, some of it he'd bought already prepared like vegetable and cheese trays, and the desserts were all pies that he only had to put in the oven to finish up. The ham was from a specialty store that had catered Beckett & Foster's Christmas party last year, and Gerry had raved about it for days.

"Stop worrying," Gerry said, giving him a quick, hard kiss. "Everything's going to be fine."

"I know, I just...."

“Want everything to be perfect,” Gerry finished for him, giving him a nuzzle on his neck.

Derek let his head fall to the side to encourage Gerry to continue with his ministrations, wanting to feel and think of nothing but Gerry.

It had been a difficult year for them. Derek had moved out for six weeks at the beginning the year, the pressure of getting his certification finally pushing him over the edge. They had been fighting constantly, hardly having the time for anything but that. Gerry was getting tired of being put last and rightly so. It took a while to work through it all. When Derek had moved back in, they had gone to couples counseling to work out all the issues.

“Let’s go inside,” Gerry said against Derek’s skin as he used his legs to gently guide Derek back to the house.

It was taking them a long time to make it to the porch as they paused to kiss and touch each other, and it was when Gerry had him pressed up against the wall by the front door that Derek noticed the bag still sitting on top of the car.

“Wait,” Derek said, pushing against Gerry’s shoulders.

“Just let me get the door,” Gerry said as he tried to get it open without moving away from Derek.

He pointed to his car as he said, “No, I need to get the sweet potatoes.”

Gerry looked at him, confusion clouding his face for a moment before he finally looked back at the driveway. With a growl he pushed himself away and started to run toward the car as he said, “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Derek admired the view for a moment before turning and grabbing the door and pushing it open. He heard Gerry’s

shouted, “Hey!” as Derek ran through the living room and into the master bedroom. He heard a clunk, which he supposed was the can of sweet potatoes hitting the floor, just before the slam of the door. He had his coat off and was already pulling off his sweater by the time Gerry made it to the bedroom.

It was frenzied at first as they shed their clothes and tried to grope each other at the same time. They slowed down a bit by the time they got onto the bed, but soon it was frantic again as they knew just the right places to touch and kiss, and which ones to linger over. When it was finally over and they were trying to catch their breath, Gerry gave a sigh of frustration. “I forgot to test the lights on the garage.”

“Oh, well, it must be that faulty memory of yours,” Derek teased. “You know, they say it’s the first to go.”

“Fuck you.”

“Again? Already? Good to know that hasn't gone yet. With your age and all.” It was a running joke between them, and for some reason it always made Derek giddy when they teased each other, perhaps because he’d never had that kind of intimate relationship with someone. The one he always saw other people have: the inside jokes, the secretive looks, the memories of past vacations and holidays. Now it was here, right beside him.

“My age,” Gerry snorted. “I’ll *show* you my age.”

They wrestled playfully for several minutes before just settling into kissing and ending in a snuggle. They lay quietly, their arms and legs entangled until Gerry said softly, “Did I ever tell you how much I love this room?”

“Yes,” Derek answered with a smile. Gerry was speaking of the new master bedroom suite that Gerry had described to Derek that first year they were together.

Derek had used the plans he’d come up with for the house as a project at school, and once they started to do the actual work, Beckett & Foster became very interested and wanted to see each phase as it was completed. They were impressed with their young protégé, and a position for Derek at the firm after he graduated had been secured. Gerry had told him over and over again how proud he was of the work Derek had done with the plans and how dedicated he was to overseeing the project.

They still had to do the addition to the other side of the house to create the other bedroom, and now that Derek was making a good salary as a fully certified architect, they would probably be able to start that sometime next year.

“Guess we better get up,” Derek said with a sigh as he looked at the digital clock on the nightstand.

“I suppose. You wanna shower?”

“You go ahead,” Derek said as he rolled out of bed to pull on his pants. “I’ll go get some stuff started in the kitchen.”

Derek lost himself in preparations as he hurried to get everything ready. It wasn’t too difficult, just time consuming, and by the time he’d taken a shower, it was almost time for their guests to arrive.

“Is Brenden bringing the new girlfriend over?” Gerry asked as he opened a bottle of wine.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Do we like her?” Gerry asked with an arch of his brow.

Derek gave out a small puff of laughter, knowing that Gerry was only joking, but he knew Gerry missed Shana as much as he did. Shana's prediction that she and Brenden wouldn't last much past graduation had been an accurate one. She had received a job offer in another state and decided to take it. Brenden never said much about the breakup and now just floated from one relationship to another, and Derek thought perhaps he regretted letting Shana go. Derek and Gerry kept in touch with Shana through e-mails and she was now engaged to who she described as a wonderful man. Derek was happy for her, but he still thought Brenden was an idiot for letting her go.

"She's fine," Derek said finally.

"Brittney?"

"No, that was two girlfriends ago," Derek said thoughtfully. "Heather?"

Gerry shook his head, frowning in concentration for a moment before shouting out, "Caitlyn!"

"That's it!" Derek agreed just as the doorbell rang.

The evening was a success with everyone enjoying the food and the company. Derek was relieved that his parents and Gerry's mom got along well, at one point swapping horror stories about raising their sons. Brenden and his girlfriend didn't stay long after dinner was over, stating they had another party to go to. Derek missed the closeness he and his brother once shared and hoped that once Brenden settled down into life, they'd get that back. At least Brenden had a job that he seemed to like, but Derek was worried about how much his brother went out to the clubs. Gerry thought it was just a phase, and it wasn't unusual for people to enjoy that lifestyle while they were young.

It was well past midnight when their last guest left. Gerry suggested leaving most of the clean-up for tomorrow as they didn't have anywhere to go first thing in the morning, and Derek readily agreed. After putting the food away, they settled on the couch in front of the television to watch the DVD of a Yule log set ablaze in a fireplace that Gerry had found a few weeks ago.

"Too hokey?" Gerry asked as they leaned against each other.

"No," Derek answered with a soft laugh. "I like it. No mess, and we don't have to worry about chopping any wood. Kinda soothing, actually."

They enjoyed listening to recorded snaps and crackling as the image of the fire flickered before them. After a while, Gerry asked, "Did you have a good time tonight?"

"Yeah," he answered with a contented sigh. "You?"

"Mmm-hmm." Another stretch of silence before Gerry broke it by asking, "I think we should always have Christmas Eve at our house."

"Always, huh?" Derek's tone was teasing, but it had felt right having their friends and family here with them. The "at our house" had sounded like the best part of that. Never once had Gerry ever made Derek feel that this wasn't his home. Even through the times when Derek wasn't able to contribute much financially.

"Yeah, my mom can have Easter, your parents Thanksgiving, and us Christmas Eve."

"Your mom is gonna cook Easter dinner?" Derek asked doubtfully.

“Well, I haven’t actually said anything to her about it yet, but I suppose if she doesn’t feel like having everyone at her house we could go out somewhere. There’s a couple of banquet halls that put on buffets for all the major holidays.”

Derek turned his head and studied Gerry a moment before saying, “You’ve really thought all this out.”

“Been thinking about a lot of things lately.”

Derek tried to sound casual as he asked, “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Gerry confirmed before growing quiet again.

Derek tried to wait Gerry out and let him tell it in his own time, but Derek’s curiosity finally won out. “What’s been on your mind?”

Gerry turned so that he was facing Derek and said, “Let’s plan a vacation somewhere nice this summer.”

“Okay,” Derek agreed readily. They had taken little weekend trips over the past few years, neither one being able to afford to take time away from their work. “Any place in mind?”

“Somewhere we can get married,” Gerry said in a rush.

“Married?” he repeated slowly, testing the word out. He’d thought about it several times, and they had talked about it a few times in general terms, vaguely stating they’d like to do it someday.

“Derek, I knew almost from the beginning that I loved you and that feeling has only grown stronger. Especially with all the shit we went through in February. I can’t imagine my life without you. I want to make my commitment to you as public as any other couple would. I want to marry you.”

“Yes,” he said simply.

Gerry looked at him for a moment as if he expected more, then a wide grin spread across his face. “Yes, you’ll marry me?”

It felt right to Derek, just as people had always said it would when you found the person you wanted to spend your life with. The relationship took work, as his dad had once warned him, and Gerry insisted they deserved it. He realized he wanted this more than anything.

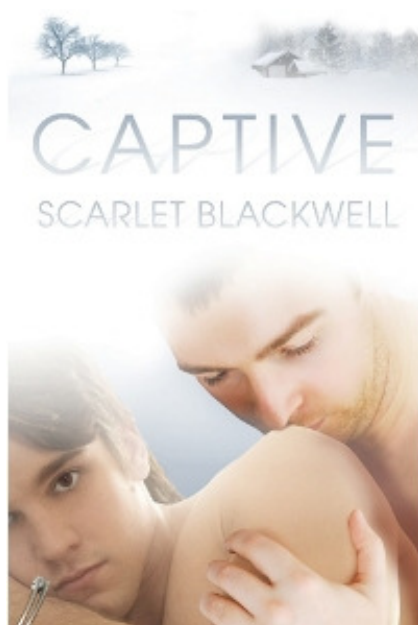
Derek couldn’t form words any longer and wrapped his arms around his man. His lover. His life. “Yes, I want us to get married,” he finally choked out. Gerry immediately captured his lips in a kiss while Derek’s mind raced with the thoughts of all that lay ahead of them. There were no thoughts of dread or what could go wrong, only that they’d face all of life’s challenges. Together.



ASHLEIGH WALTON is in her forties and lives in northeast Ohio with her husband, their dog, and two cats. Her love of writing began when she was young, wanting to fix things she thought were wrong in movies and television shows by writing her own version. As she grew older, she wanted to write original stories that didn't need any fixing. Now, with the support of her husband and friends, she's been able to fulfill her long-held dream of getting her work published.

Visit Ashleigh's blog at <http://ashwalton.livejournal.com/>.

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