



TICKET
TO RIDE
Shawn Lane

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...Jack's face was so close to Chad's he could feel his breath when he spoke. "You fainted."

Chad's mouth made an *O* and Jack's gaze fell to the lush plump lips. As though he willed it or maybe God just wanted to torture him, Chad's tongue darted out to run along his bottom lip. Jack's cock sure appreciated it, rising and pressed against his briefs. He stifled a groan with effort.

"Sorry," Chad said, very softly. "I have a tendency to have sort of panic attacks. I've hyperventilated before." He smiled then, just a slight curving of the lips. "Not in a while though."

"No doubt the stress." Jack continued to stare, fascinated by those lips. Wanting to taste them as though they were a raspberry on a fruit tart. He swallowed, trying desperately to get the lust back under control. But damn it was hard with this man on a bed and Jack's hands all over him.

Chad nodded. "Yeah, you have no idea."

Jack lowered his lips until they were only one, maybe two inches from Chad's. It still seemed too far. He could smell spearmint as though Chad had recently chewed a stick of gum. It turned him on more for some unfathomable reason.

The man's lids lowered, and his lips puckered just a bit. An invitation if ever Jack saw one. He'd been a cop long enough to know that it was the baddest of bad ideas. His gut told him Chad hadn't killed Mark Walters, but any involvement with even a potential suspect was taboo.

Still he grazed his lips over Chad's in a light touch, a mere tease. A whisper of flesh against flesh. Definitely not enough...

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TICKET TO RIDE

BY

SHAWN LANE

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TICKET TO RIDE
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CHAPTER 1

“Holy shit, do you know who that is?”

Lieutenant Jack Reeves paused his pen in the middle of a notation about the crime scene and eyed Detective Albert Ramirez who stood beside him.

He followed Al’s gaze to the man sitting in the white plastic patio chair. The man leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his head in his hands. He had short, straight blond hair done in some fancy salon fashion. Jack still visited barbers himself. Jack estimated the blond to be in his mid to late thirties, and though he admitted the guy was pretty, he was also a total stranger.

“No, should I?”

Al shot him a look that said he was a complete idiot. He supposed he was to the much younger detective. Jack, who had

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turned forty-three on his last birthday, felt positively ancient compared to thirty-three year old Al. He started jotting down his notes again.

“Chad Storm,” Al said.

A soap opera name if ever he’d heard one. He shrugged. “Actor?”

Al groaned. “No, lieutenant. *Chad Storm*.”

Like saying it again would clue him in. He shrugged again.

“The lead singer of Lightning.”

“Oh.” Jack nodded and closed his spiral notebook. “Rock music, right?”

Al tsked. “Yes.”

“I’m not really into that sort of thing.”

Al rolled his eyes. “Fifteen years ago Lightning was the hottest group out there.”

“Hmm. What about now?”

“Well, they broke up a few years ago, actually,” Al admitted. He turned to watch the body of the victim being lifted out of the bloody swimming pool. Then he turned back to Jack. “Can I question him?”

“No way. You’re too much of a fan boy. I’ll talk to Mr. Storm. You go talk to the maid.”

Al grimaced. “All right.”

Jack patted Al’s shoulder and walked past him toward the rock star. He grabbed a nearby plastic chair and brought it over next to Storm. He sat down and cleared his throat.

Storm straightened and looked at him. He had killer blue eyes, Jack quickly noted. “Hello,” he said softly.

“Chad Storm?”

“Yes.”

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“Lieutenant Reeves, Homicide.” He opened his notebook again. “Is Chad Storm your real name?”

“Yes. Well, it is my *legal* name. I officially changed it when I formed Lightning.” Storm smiled a little crookedly. “You know, it went with the band name.”

“Uh-huh. What’s your real name then?”

Storm shifted uncomfortably and stared out at the reddish pool, looking vaguely green. “Do you really need that?”

Though it wasn’t a funny situation, Jack found himself smiling just a little. “It can’t be that bad.”

“It is.” He sighed. “Lester Chadwick.”

Jack blinked, wrote it down, and cleared his throat. “Okay, Mr. Storm, how did you know the victim?”

“We were...you know, a couple.” Storm looked away from the pool and bit his bottom lip. “Not anymore. I mean even be-before this.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Years ago when he’d began his career as a police officer he practiced those words. Practiced making them sound almost casual. A police officer wasn’t supposed to have any feelings. Or at least that’s what his first partner told him. He no longer needed to practice. The words just came out, though they still sounded hollow to Jack’s ears. “How long ago did you and Walters end your relationship?”

“I didn’t,” Storm said softly. “Mark did. He wanted his freedom, I guess.”

“To see other men?”

Storm nodded.

“How long ago was this, Mr. Storm?”

He met Jack’s gaze and his baby blue eyes were filled with an almost unbearable sorrow. “A few weeks ago. I found an airline

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reservation in the desk drawer. It was for a one-way ticket to Baltimore. I asked him about it and he said he was flying there to meet someone.”

Jack made notes. “And when was his ticket for?”

“Um, tonight actually. He was supposed to leave tonight.” He studied his folded hands a moment before looking up once more. “Do I need a lawyer?”

Jack gave him a reassuring police detective smile. “Not unless you have something to hide. You aren’t under arrest. You don’t have anything to hide, do you, Chad?”

“No. I didn’t kill Mark. I found him.”

He nodded. “When was the last time you saw Walters alive?”

Storm flinched. “I...last night I guess. This house is mine. I mean, I bought it when I was with the band and Mark lived here with me, but I told him he could just stay here until he left.”

“That was nice of you considering the circumstances,” Jack said dryly.

“I’ve known Mark since we were kids.” The man looked stricken. “Knew. How do you get used to it?”

“Used to what?”

“Talking about someone in the past tense. I don’t think I ever will.” Storm closed his eyes. His Adam’s apple bopped as he swallowed heavily. He buried his face in his hands then for a moment, exhaling slowly. When he looked up at Jack, his eyes were watery. “What else do you need to know?”

Jack was torn. He needed to ask a lot more questions of Chad Storm, but the man seemed at his breaking point and something about him tugged at Jack deep inside. Still, he had a job to do and that job was to find out if Chad Storm had killed his ex-lover, Mark Walters, or if not, who did.

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“Chad, there you are!” A very tall, very thin, balding man with a goatee, probably in his mid-sixties, came rushing over to them and made a beeline for Chad. He shot Jack a look of disdain and grabbed Chad’s arms, hauling him out of the plastic chair and into his arms in a tight embrace. “I came over as soon as I got the message. Oh, God, it’s just terrible.”

Jack stood and cleared his throat. “And you are?”

“Ronald Epstein, a dear friend of Chad’s. And just who are you?”

“Lieutenant Jack Reeves, Homicide.”

“You’re questioning Chad without a lawyer?”

“He’s not under arrest.”

“It’s all right, Ron.” Chad pulled out of the man’s embrace and gave Jack a weak smile. “Is there any way we could continue this later, lieutenant? I’m feeling rather ill.”

“Very well. Tomorrow morning at ten?”

Chad nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“If you have a few minutes, Mr. Epstein, I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

Epstein raised an eyebrow, but shrugged. “All right. But how about inside? I’d rather not have to look at,” he paused with a dramatic shudder and glanced toward the bloody water, “that.”

* * *

Ronald Epstein appeared to spend a lot of time in Chad Storm’s home, for he had no trouble making himself at home. He went behind a counter, extracted a rather large bottle of some type of booze and poured himself a glass over ice. Jack blinked. It was a tall water glass.

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“Want a drink?” Epstein asked.

“No, thank you.”

Storm had disappeared farther into the dimly lit large beachside house declaring he needed to lie down.

Jack sat on an oversized leather sofa. “What’s up with Storm?”

“Up with him?”

“Well, he seems a bit out of it.” Jack opened his notebook. He cleared his throat. “Sort of delicate.”

Epstein came out from behind the counter and sat in a chair that matched the sofa. “He’s had some issues. Got some bad acid when he was much younger. Nearly died.”

“Is there good acid?”

Epstein shrugged. “Anyway, he got off the drugs years ago but he sees some professionals. How do you suppose he ought to act after finding the dead body of his lover, lieutenant?”

“Ex-lover, right?”

“Yes, but Mark only ended things a short time ago.”

Jack made a notation. “What is your relationship to Mr. Storm?”

Epstein took a long swallow of his drink. “I was the manager for Lightning.”

“And nothing more personal?”

The older man sneered. “We are not nor have we ever been lovers, lieutenant. We are both gay, but we are friends only. Our shared homosexuality has brought us closer as friends as we have faced some of the same experiences. Straight people and their assumptions.” He sniffed.

Speaking of assumptions, Jack sighed. “I’m not.”

“Not what?”

“Straight,” Jack said simply. “Now, if we can get back to the

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murder of Mark Walters.”

Epstein eyed him a little differently Jack noted. He lowered his glass of booze and surveyed Jack. “How is that in your line of work?”

“Hmm?”

“Being gay and a cop. Isn’t that still a rather macho world?”

“Mr. Epstein, was Mark in the band?”

“No. Mark was a charming man, but he had no musical talent. He had a head for numbers. He’s a...was a financial advisor.”

“How about you and Mr. Walters?”

Epstein gave him a hard look. “Are you actually asking if I slept with my dear friend, Chad’s boyfriend?”

“Yes. Did you?”

“He was more than twenty years younger than me,” Epstein said, taking another drink from his glass.

Jack wrote *evasive answers* in his notebook.

“What are you writing?”

“Just notes about the case. You did have an affair with Mark Walters, didn’t you?”

Epstein shifted, crossed one leg over the other. “It was a long time ago. Ten years ago. Mark and I both had too much to drink and lost our heads. It never happened again.”

“Does Chad know?”

“I never told him and I don’t think Mark did either.”

Jack nodded. “When did you last see Mark Walters alive?”

“Night before last,” Epstein said. “I was over here discussing Chad’s comeback that night. We had dinner. Mark was in and out of the house, getting ready to leave, I guess. To be honest, I didn’t watch him or anything, I just sort of noticed him in the background.”

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“Lightning’s making a comeback?”

“No, just Chad. He’s already been in the studio and recorded a couple of songs.” Epstein finished his drink. “How did Mark die?”

“Stabbed. And what time did you leave the house, Ron?”

He shrugged. “Must have been somewhere around one in the morning. I hadn’t seen Mark for a while before I left though.”

Al Ramirez came into the room at that time. “I’m done questioning the maid, lieutenant. The crime scene folks are done, too.”

Jack rose. “All right. One more question, Ron.”

Epstein smirked. “I spent all day at the Huntington Library admiring the artwork and gardens with Henry, my partner. It’s a favorite place of his. After that we returned home and never left again until Chad left me a message about finding Mark.”

“Do me a favor and—”

“And don’t leave town,” Epstein finished for him. He smiled. “I watch crime shows, lieutenant.”

Swell.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” he said blandly and dragged Al toward the front door. When they were outside, he said, “I’m coming back here in the morning.”

“For?”

“More questions for Chad Storm. He had some sort of breakdown and asked to lie down.”

Al raised an eyebrow as they approached his four-door sedan. He clicked the electronic clock. “Think he faked it?”

“Who knows? But if he thinks it’s going to get him out of some tough questions he’s wrong. What did you learn from the maid?”

“She thinks some maniac killed Walters.” He got into the driver side and waited until Jack got into the passenger seat and

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clicked his seat belt before he started the car. "As in some stranger. Probably a serial killer I guess."

"Well, whoever did kill him was definitely filled with a lot of rage. I lost count on the stab wounds."

"I'm scheduled to be off tomorrow, you want me to change it?"

"Nah. Who's in?"

"Teddy."

"Good. Make sure you leave notes for him and have him check with the medical examiner."

"You want him to go with you when you question Chad Storm?"

"No, he can start questioning some of the others who knew Walters. And track down whoever he was leaving Storm for."

"Oh." Al nodded. "So they were a couple?"

"Apparently. And they only broke up a short time ago when Storm found Walters's plane ticket out of here."

"Ouch."

Jack grimaced and looked out at the window. He'd had his share of broken relationships. Some were more painful than others. But was a breakup good enough to kill? And with such force? Was Storm capable of that? Could be. His stomach growled.

What the hell time is it anyway?

"I'm hungry. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat," Al said.

"Great, let's find a diner."

CHAPTER 2

Chad looked like hell and he knew it. He'd just looked at his reflection in the mirror before he'd come to the sun room to see Lieutenant Reeves. He hadn't slept well. And when he had slept there had been horrible nightmares. He was pretty sure he wouldn't soon forget them.

With dark smudges under his bloodshot eyes and his blond hair on end, he knew he looked a fright. Like some addict on a binge or something. He'd still been in bed when his maid, Magdalena, came to tell him Reeves waited for him.

Chad threw on a wrinkled pale blue shirt he'd found on the floor of his bedroom and some tattered jeans with holes in the knees and one on the butt. While he dressed he told Magdalena to take the police detective to the sun room. It was Chad's favorite

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room. Sunny and bright, it was painted a blinding white and had giant windows overlooking the ocean.

Lieutenant Reeves, who had been sitting on the yellow cushions of his white rattan couch, rose when Chad entered the room.

“I’m sorry,” Chad said, grasping the man’s offered hand. “I overslept. Have a seat. Can I offer you some coffee?”

Even as he asked, Magdalena came into the room with a tray containing a silver carafe of coffee, a couple of cups, and cream and sugar.

“Thank you, yes,” Reeves said, sitting on the couch again.

Chad sat on a matching rattan chair and waited as Magdalena poured them coffee. Really the older woman was more than a maid. She acted as a housekeeper for him. She’d been with him for years and took good care of him.

He studied Reeves and decided he liked what he saw. The man was handsome in an outdoorsy, rugged sort of way with his close cropped hair, square jaw, and five o’clock shadow. He’d dressed in an olive green button-down shirt and casual brown slacks. He’d clipped his badge to his belt. He had friendly brown eyes. Considering the circumstances, though, Chad tended to doubt he was all that friendly.

“*Gracias*, Magdalena,” he murmured to her as she set the cups of coffee in front of them on the glass coffee table. She’d already fixed his, adding the cream, but she set the cream and sugar next to the detective’s cup and then left the carafe there. She slipped out of the room without a word.

Lieutenant Reeves added cream and sugar to the coffee and then took a sip, nodding. “It’s good.”

“Thank you.” He waited. The questions would come now and

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already his stomach twisted and his heartbeat increased. He had nothing to hide. He hadn't killed Mark. He wouldn't.

Reeves took out the same notebook he'd had with him the day before. "Who was Mr. Walters's next of kin?"

"Oh, um. Well, let's see. He has...had a brother in Baton Rouge and a sister in Louisville. His mother passed away a couple of years ago, but his dad still lives in the house he grew up in over in Glendale. I called him last night."

Reeves gave him a long stare, but said nothing for a moment. Before he'd left last night, Ron had told Chad that Reeves was gay. Chad wasn't so sure he believed it. Not that you could tell by looking at someone or anything. But the man reminded him of Hollywood's idea of the rugged cop character.

"I have some other questions about your relationship with the victim, but first, why don't you tell me about the exact events of yesterday."

Chad knew he would have to relive it, but that didn't make it any easier. "Okay, well, I saw Mark yesterday morning when I first got up. He was pouring himself a cup of coffee in the kitchen."

"Yesterday? When I asked you yesterday you said you'd last seen him the night before."

Chad swallowed and twisted his hands together. "Yeah, I remembered after you left that I saw him more recently. On the day it happened. Sorry."

The lieutenant narrowed his eyes. "Did you speak?"

"Yes. We'd known each other too long for the silent treatment or anything. I asked him if he was ready for his flight and he said mostly. He asked me what I was up to and I said I was having breakfast with Parker."

"Parker?"

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“Parker Riley. He was my guitarist in Lightning. We’d planned weeks ago to meet for breakfast.” Chad chewed his lip. “I said good-bye and told him I’d probably see him before he left for the airport.”

“Did you?”

“No. I had breakfast with Parker and then he came to the studio with me. He did some guitar work on one of the songs I’m recording. I didn’t get back to the house until about three.” Chad looked away from the detective and out the window toward the sea. His stomach felt a little queasy. For a moment his vision blinded him with a sea of red and he shook his head, clearing it of the horror. “The house was quiet when I got here. Magdalena does the grocery shopping on Tuesday afternoons. Mark’s suitcases were in the front hallway so I went looking for him.”

* * *

“Hey, Mark? Where are you?” Chad called out. He went down the hallway to the room Mark had been sleeping in. The bed was made. No Mark.

He continued looking through all the usual rooms of the house Mark could be found in and when he came up empty, he went to the backdoor slider.

Chad slid the door open and stepped outside. He shielded his eyes from the bright afternoon sun. “Mark, you out here?”

Sometimes, though Chad didn’t think he would right before he was to leave, Mark went swimming alone. He never liked that he had no one watching him while he swam, because anything could happen, but Mark usually didn’t care about Chad’s opinion. But he stepped down from the steps leading into the backyard and turned

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toward the pool.

Mark lay face down in the pool surrounded by bloody water. Chad opened his mouth and screamed.

* * *

“And you didn’t try to revive him?” Reeves asked.

“No. I could tell he was dead with all that blood.” Chad looked away. “I always heard not to disturb a crime scene. And the truth is, I don’t know how to swim.”

The lieutenant stopped writing and looked at Chad as though he were stupid. Maybe he was. “You don’t know how to swim?”

“I never learned. I could probably do that dog paddle thing if I had to, but not much else.”

“Why do you have a pool?”

“I liked the house and it came with it.” Chad shrugged. “And friends and family like it.”

“So you called the police immediately?”

As soon as I stopped screaming. “Yes.”

Reeves flipped through his notebook, scanned something and then peered back at Chad. “According to Magdalena, she last saw Walters at around one o’clock. She vacuumed and then left to do the grocery shopping. And since you’ve already changed your story once, I have to ask, are you sure you didn’t see him again after you saw him in the kitchen?”

Chad flushed. “Yes, I’m sure. You can check with Parker and some techs at the studio, too.”

“Do you know anyone, besides yourself, who would have a motive to kill Walters?”

Chad’s stomach felt decidedly sour. “I didn’t, you know. I

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mean, I can see why it would seem like I had a motive because Mark was leaving me. But it wasn't the first time."

"He left you before?"

"Yeah. He always came back, but this wasn't going to be the first time. I told you we knew each other since we were kids. We cared about each other a lot, but it was really hard for us to live together." Chad exhaled. "I used to do some heavy drugs back in the day, but Mark's drug of choice was always alcohol. He was a pretty mean drunk, you know?"

"So he hit you?"

"A few times when he got drunk and we had a fight. It wasn't abuse or anything."

"Chad, even once is abuse," Reeves said. "You look pretty smart, why didn't you leave him?"

Chad bit his lip and looked away, unable to meet the lieutenant's intense gaze. "I felt obligated."

"Obligated?"

"I wondered sometimes, well, all of the time, really, if my getting involved in the music scene caused the problems Mark had. How could I just abandon him when maybe I created him?" He turned to look at Reeves again, but the man was making notes in his notebook.

"Addicts create themselves, Chad. What reasons did he give you for leaving?"

He opened his mouth to ask Reeves if he spoke from experience about addicts, but he remembered this wasn't a date where they were trying to get to know each other. This was a detective probably trying to pin a murder on him.

"Usually he said I was bringing him down or something. I was a drag, he'd say."

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“Are you that hard to live with?”

“Isn’t everyone?” Chad sighed. “I guess you’ll probably want to know how many times before he left me. This time...well, it was the fourth time. He kept insisting it was going to be the last time. He had someone else, you know?”

“The guy in Baltimore.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Had he left you for other men before?” Reeves asked.

“No. I knew when he cheated on me. That’s usually how our fights would start. It wasn’t like an everyday thing, but enough times throughout the years. The other times, like I said, he just said he couldn’t be around me. He thought I was trying to control him or change him.”

Reeves put his notebook down. “This isn’t really part of the investigation, but I have to ask. Why did you keep taking someone like that back?”

“I—”

Reeves held up his hand. “I know, you felt obligated.”

“Well, yes, I did.”

The lieutenant grimaced and shook his head. He picked up his book again. “Back to the question... Do you know who would want to harm Walters?”

Chad knew he was being judged by this man and that he was found lacking. The story of his life, he supposed.

“Mark wasn’t the most popular guy around, but murder? No. I don’t know *anyone* who would have killed him or wanted him dead. He was just a regular guy, lieutenant. He had his faults, sure, but he wasn’t involved in any international intrigue or anything.”

“You don’t have to be a spy to get murdered.” Reeves stood. “I’ll probably have other questions as the case takes shape. I trust

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you'll continue to be cooperative."

Chad stood, too, and followed him to where he stopped next to a wall with framed photos. "Of course."

Lieutenant Reeves pointed to one of his band, Lightning. It was from their first year as a band. In fact they'd taken the photo thinking to use it as the cover of their first album, but they'd gone a different direction. The band stood with their arms around each other in front of a Greyhound Bus.

"This one is clearly you." Reeves indicated a picture of Chad with long flowing blond hair. "Wow, your hair was long."

Chad smiled, remembering. "Yeah. It was down to my ass then. That was right before we came out." He chuckled. "Musically I mean. I cut it a little bit by the second album. Still long, but not quite the same."

Reeves eyed him. "So why did you cut it short now?"

"I needed an image change," Chad said seriously. "I needed to move away from what I was, what I became."

The other man turned back to the picture. "Who are the others?"

Chad stepped close to the picture, aware of the scent of spicy aftershave coming from the lieutenant. He refused to let it affect him. "The one to the left of me is Parker. Next to him was our bassist, Louis Rankin. To the right of me was Johnny Chen, keyboardist, and next to him was our drummer, Ace."

"Ace?"

Chad cleared his throat. "Corny, huh? Arthur Jones."

Reeves nodded. "Were they friends of the victim?"

"Yeah, sure. They knew Mark."

"I'll need their names and addresses."

Chad shook his head, clearing it, his heart twisting with the old

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memories. “You really don’t know anything about the band, do you?”

Reeves frowned. “What?”

“Five years ago Lightning intended to do a reunion tour. Our tour bus crashed on the way to our first venue. Parker and I were in the front of the bus and we got out with just a few scratches. Louis, Johnny, and Ace were sleeping in the back. They were all killed.”

“Why did I not know this before?” Lieutenant Reeves did not look happy. “Epstein didn’t mention it and neither did Detective Ramirez.”

Chad shrugged. “I guess it’s common knowledge.”

“Anything else you forgot to tell me, Mr. Storm?”

He flinched at the sharp tone. “No.”

“I’ll be in touch. Don’t go anywhere.”

CHAPTER 3

Chad felt better again after a shower. At least he was clean and groomed again.

He was going to have to find out about Mark's burial. He got the distinct impression from talking to Mark's father the man expected him to make the arrangements. But for now the coroner had his body.

He sat for a while on the end of his bed dressed in only a terry cloth robe trying to calm down. He'd been given relaxation exercises to do by his therapists and most of the time he thought of them as pretty useless. Seeing his lover's bloody body made him decide to try them.

The nightmares never really went away altogether. Chad suspected just mentioning the band accident might cause his

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subconscious to fuck with him that night.

He dreamed often of the accident. Chad dreamed of blood-covered Louis, Johnny, and Ace, screaming and begging for him to help them. In reality, there had been no screaming. The authorities said the three men had died instantly and likely didn't feel a thing. He couldn't help thinking that was a lie they told loved ones to make them feel better.

Now his dreams were haunted by Mark. How much could a person take before he went completely off his rocker, Chad wondered.

He exhaled, closing his eyes. Mark's eyes stared ahead. Chad opened his eyes and stood, his heart beating a hard tattoo against the wall of his chest.

Who would murder Mark? And with so much blood. Chad didn't know for sure but he'd bet his lover had been stabbed many times.

Feeling lightheaded, he sat down again. He buried his face in his hands. The problem with being off the stuff is he really needed it now. Needed the numbness, the high. The hallucinations. Maybe he could hallucinate Mark was still alive and pretend this didn't happen. But he'd been clean so long he couldn't go back.

The phone on his bedside table rang and he jumped. His hand shaking more than it should, he picked up the receiver. "This is Chad."

"Chaaadd," Mark's voice rasped on the other end.

"Jesus!" He dropped the phone as though he held a hot coal. He scooted away from it like it intended to reach out and grab him. Okay, maybe hallucinations were a bad idea after all.

Chad sank to the floor on his knees, staring at the phone. His whole body shook now. But he couldn't have heard what he

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thought he heard. He was a grown man and he was not in a horror movie.

He crawled to the phone, glad no one could see him being such a damn coward, and picked up the receiver. Just a dial tone. He blew out a breath and set it back in the cradle.

“You’re just having a bad morning, Chad, that’s all.” Sometimes when he felt particularly alone he talked to himself. He felt foolish of course. It always reminded him of soap opera people who went around talking out loud to themselves all time. His therapists didn’t seem too concerned about it though.

The phone chirped to life again and he stared at it as though it were a scarab beetle. He let it ring two times, three. He couldn’t stand it.

“This is Chad.” His voice sounded raw, strained to his own ears.

“Chad? Are you all right?”

“Parker.” Relief flowed through him so rapidly it caused near euphoria.

“Man, I can’t believe it about Mark. I just got your message this morning a short time ago. I was out last night.”

“Yeah, I can hardly believe it myself.”

“I’d come over there but I already got a call from a Lieutenant Reeves saying he was coming by to question me. You want me to come over after I’m done?”

Chad swallowed. “Could you? I don’t want to be alone.”

“Of course. I’m sorry, Chad. After everything...I just can’t believe it. How-how did it...I mean what happened?”

“Stabbed. There was b-blood everywhere. In-in the pool.” He guessed he’d have to get that cleaned. But maybe he wasn’t allowed to. God, the things going through his mind at a time like

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this.

“Oh, my God,” Parker whispered. “I’ll be over as soon as I can. In the meantime, you’re alone? No one is there?”

“Magdalena.”

“That’s good. Maybe she should stay there until I get there, you know? Not do any errands or anything.”

“Yeah.” He closed his eyes.

“Okay, it looks like the cop is here. I’ll be there soon, Chad. Bye.”

Chad stared at the phone, not sure he wanted to put it back. Afraid the next call might be Mark’s voice again. He pushed himself off the floor, tossed the receiver on the bed and went to get dressed.

* * *

Jack watched the good-looking black man in his thirties close his cell phone and turn in his direction. Parker Riley had definitely changed from the picture of the band in front of the bus. He didn’t look like a rock star at all. Or Jack’s vision of one anyway. He resembled an accountant. He was dressed neatly in pressed, tailored brown slacks and a cream colored dress shirt opened at the throat. He wore wire-rimmed glasses.

“You must be Lieutenant Reeves,” the man said, sticking out his hand for Jack to shake. “Parker Riley.”

“That wasn’t just Chad Storm coaching you on what to say was it?” Jack asked, not shaking the offered hand.

“It was Chad, but no he didn’t coach me. Are you always this suspicious?”

“My line of work, I guess.” He gestured to two folding chairs

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laid out next to a piano. There was a guitar next to one of the chairs. He assumed it belong to Riley. The studio he'd found Riley at was in Encino. "Is this the studio Chad's recording in?"

"No. That's in Burbank. I'm doing some session work here." Parker sat in the chair next to the guitar. "After we're done here I'm going to see Chad. He's not dealing well with Mark's death. Which is what we were discussing on the phone."

Jack nodded. "I'll make this pretty short. What was your relationship with Mark Walters?"

Parker Riley shrugged. "To be honest, I didn't talk to him much. If he hadn't been in Chad's life I would have nothing to do with him."

"Why is that?"

"He was an asshole, lieutenant. He wasn't good enough for Chad." Riley paused. "I don't like to speak ill of the dead."

"And your relationship with Chad?"

"We were friends. Good friends. And band mates. I met Chad about six months before Lightning launched our first album. Even though the band broke up, we remained friends. And after the accident, too."

"Lovers?" Jack asked.

Parker snorted. "No, lieutenant. Friends. Just friends."

"What about you and Walters?"

"Ick. I already told you I didn't like him. Plus, I don't do that kind of thing to my friends. God knows why, but Chad cared about Mark. I could never be that sleazy."

Jack nodded, finding himself liking this guy. He had a feeling Chad needed more rational, reasonable people in his life like this man. "But you knew about the cheating."

"Everyone knew. Mark never bothered to hide it." Riley

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grimaced as though he'd eaten something sour.

"And did you know about Walters and Epstein?"

"Yeah. Fucking bastard."

For some reason the curse words coming out of such a nice looking polished man surprised him. "To which one do you refer?"

"Both really, but Ron. He claims to care about Chad and yet he screwed Mark. I didn't like it then and I still don't. He's no friend to Chad."

"Did Chad know about the two of them?"

"I think so. I think Mark told him. Ron never would."

"Why did Lightning break up if you got along so well?"

Riley smiled. "I never said we all got along well. Chad and I did. The others...not so much. At the time, well, there was a lot of drug use going on. Things got pretty ugly." His smile faded and he studied his fingers. "It was really sad that just as we were all getting along again the accident happened."

"Where were you yesterday?"

"I met Chad for breakfast and then we spent the rest of the day in the Burbank studio. When we quit, Chad said he was going home, and I went to get ready for my date with a stockbroker."

Jack couldn't help think a rock musician and a stockbroker didn't seem to go together. "And then?"

Riley smiled again. "I went home with my date. Spent the night at his house, actually. I left my cell phone off. Man I was with didn't want any interruptions. He dropped me off here this morning after breakfast and that's when I turned my phone back on and heard from you and got Chad's message about Mark."

"Any reason your date wouldn't back up your whereabouts?" While it was true Mark Walters was probably killed while Parker Riley and Chad were in the studio, he decided to ask anyway.

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“None.”

“And what time did you guys end at the studio yesterday?”

“Somewhere around three.”

“Others there?”

“A couple of techs. I can give you the studio address if you need it.”

“Thank you. I think that’ll be it for now.” He handed Riley a card. “If you think of anything else, give me a call.”

* * *

Two days later, when Jack got back to the police station after working some angles on a few cases, he decided to do some Internet research on the band Lightning.

For one thing, every member of the band appeared to have been gay, but at least in their public life, none of them had ever admitted to mixing with their fellow band mates. Apparently, according to the band’s website—Jack hadn’t known ex-bands had websites—they’d bonded and formed Lightning because they had all been struggling for acceptance as homosexuals in the mostly heterosexual world of rock music.

Something else Chad had failed to mention was that he had been driving the bus that crashed and killed his fellow band members. It appeared it had just been a terrible accident, a tire blew out, and there had been no charges filed, but Jack could well imagine how tough it would be to live with that. No wonder Chad seemed a little out of it.

He paused on an old portrait of Chad he found on a fan site. Jack couldn’t help admiring the beauty of the man’s face. In the picture his mouth smiled, but the incredible blue eyes were sad and

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haunted even then.

The fan site claimed Chad had been born to a British father and a French mother who had immigrated to the United States while he was still in the womb. His father, who had, the site said, been an alcoholic, died of liver disease during the recording of the band's second album. His mother had left the family while Chad was still a child and returned to France. He wondered if Chad still kept in contact with her. The site claimed he had two sisters.

Jack rubbed his tired eyes and ignored the hunger pang in his stomach. He wanted to learn what he could about the other members of the band and he wasn't sure why. Johnny, Ace, and Louis had all been dead for a while and would have nothing to do with Mark Walters's murder, but Jack thought knowing more about Lightning would probably help in knowing Chad.

He wanted to know about Chad. What made him tick? What gave him those sorrowful blue eyes? Based on the photos he'd seen, it wasn't just the accident or the murder.

Jack told himself he should know all he could about a murder suspect. That was why he was so fascinated with Chad Storm and no other reason. He decided to ignore the fact he felt like he'd been sucker punched every time he looked directly into Chad's eyes.

If Walters had been killed between one, when Magdalena claimed to have last seen him, and three, when Chad returned home, then Chad could not have committed the murder. At least himself. It was always possible he hired someone to commit the murder.

Jack wondered if he could get someone else to research the others, like Teddy maybe, or if just ought to do it later at home. It wasn't like he had a guy waiting for him at home or anything. Hell, when was the last time he'd had sex? He figured just having to

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think about it meant it had been too long.

His desk phone rang and he picked it up after the second ring. "Lieutenant Reeves."

"It's Dad. Are you coming for dinner this week?"

Since his mother's death of a heart attack a couple of years ago, his father lived alone and Jack almost always came for dinner at least one night a week.

"I think so. I do have a big case right now. Murder."

"That stabbing at the rock star's house in the hills?"

He didn't miss the instant curious tone. His father was a retired vice detective. The investigative gene had been passed to Jack by several generations of police officers in his family.

"You heard about that?"

"Sure, it's all over the news. They even had a picture of the guy."

"The victim?" Jack frowned.

"No, the rock star. Chad Storm. Pretty."

Jack grimaced at the amusement in his dad's voice. Unfortunately, ever since he'd come out to his family a few years ago his dad had quickly figured out who would be Jack's type.

"He's also a suspect in the murder, Dad."

"Hmm. Anyway, make sure you let me know if you can't make it otherwise I'll expect you. Talk to you later, son."

"Bye, Dad."

Teddy, a very skinny and tall red haired detective, stuck his head into the office. "Hey, boss?"

"Yeah?"

"Just got a call from Chad Storm. He thinks someone tried to break into his house."

CHAPTER 4

The door to Chad's home was opened by Parker Riley. He stepped aside, holding the door wide.

"Hello, lieutenant. Long time no see."

"Mr. Riley."

"Come, I'll take you to Chad." Parker led him down the hall and into a living room area. Chad Storm stood at the window his back to Jack.

Another man sat on the big fluffy plaid couch in the room. He was a handsome blond, polished-looking man in his late forties.

"This is Grant Martin, my stockbroker," Parker said with a smile. "He came with me to keep Chad company. This is Lieutenant Reeves."

Grant Martin stood up and offered his hand. "Lieutenant."

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Chad turned then, looking just a little pale. He was dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, his feet bare. "Thank you, Parker, Grant. I'm all right now, so if you'd like to leave, it'll be fine."

Parker hugged him. "If you're sure. I'll give you a call later."

Chad nodded. "Thanks."

He waited for the two men to leave the living room before he turned to Jack. "I appreciate your coming. I know you must be very busy. I thought just patrolmen would come out, but then they told me you would be coming."

"It might be related to the murder. Why don't you tell me about the break-in?"

Chad swallowed. "Okay, well maybe it's better if I show you."

Jack followed Chad down a hallway leading to the bedrooms. They turned into a large room that must be Chad's master bedroom. The house had been gone over by the crime lab techs, but Jack hadn't been to this part of the house.

"Over here." Chad walked to a sliding glass window leading out to a deck that overlooked the ocean. He pointed to a bent lock and the scratches around it. "I noticed this just before I called."

Jack frowned. "Did the crime techs see this?"

Chad shook his head. He was very pale, red splotches standing out against his cheeks. "It wasn't like this yesterday."

"You didn't touch it, did you?"

The other man bit his lip. "I'm not sure. I noticed it when I went to open it, so I might have touched it. And...there's something else."

"What?"

Chad grew even paler if that were possible. He'd reached *Casper the Friendly Ghost* color.

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“Why don’t you sit down, Chad?” Even as the words left Jack’s mouth, Chad teetered. He reached out to grab him just as the man fainted.

* * *

A few minutes later, Chad’s eyes fluttered. Jack had set him on the bed after he blacked out. He still didn’t like the lack of color in Chad’s cheeks.

He sat on the bed next to the man and unable to help himself, his fingers grazed over Chad’s pale right cheek. The man was too pretty, really. Not in a feminine way exactly, but extremely attractive. To Jack. Well, judging by all the fan sites he’d discovered from many gay fans, Chad was attractive to lots of men.

He had an appeal Jack could not deny. A vulnerability, a frailty...something. It brought out the protective instinct in him.

“Shh, it’s all right, Chad,” Jack soothed, when Chad’s eyes flew open fully and he stared around in a bit of a panic. His hands gently pushed at Chad’s chest to get him to remain lying down. The hands stayed there. He willed them not to caress.

“Lieutenant?”

“Yes, it’s me. Jack.”

The man’s intense blue eyes focused on him, their color and depths reminding him of the swimming pool in his backyard. He leaned over Chad’s face, too close, he knew. This man was still a suspect, but he couldn’t make himself move away.

“How do you feel?”

“Okay. What happened?”

Jack’s face was so close to Chad’s he could feel his breath

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when he spoke. "You fainted."

Chad's mouth made an *O* and Jack's gaze fell to the lush plump lips. As though he willed it or maybe God just wanted to torture him, Chad's tongue darted out to run along his bottom lip. Jack's cock sure appreciated it, rising and pressing against his briefs. He stifled a groan with effort.

"Sorry," Chad said, very softly. "I have a tendency to have sort of panic attacks. I've hyperventilated before." He smiled then, just a slight curving of the lips. "Not in a while though."

"No doubt the stress." Jack continued to stare, fascinated by those lips. Wanting to taste them as though they were a raspberry on a fruit tart. He swallowed, trying desperately to get the lust back under control. But damn it was hard with this man on a bed and Jack's hands all over him.

Chad nodded. "Yeah, you have no idea."

Jack lowered his lips until they were only one, maybe two inches from Chad's. It still seemed too far. He could smell spearmint as though Chad had recently chewed a stick of gum. It turned him on more for some unfathomable reason.

The man's lids lowered, and his lips puckered just a bit. An invitation if ever Jack saw one. He'd been a cop long enough to know that it was the baddest of bad ideas. His gut told him Chad hadn't killed Mark Walters, but any involvement with even a potential suspect was taboo.

Still he grazed his lips over Chad's in a light touch, a mere tease. A whisper of flesh against flesh. Definitely not enough. The second kiss lasted longer, but he didn't apply much more pressure. It was like he was testing the waters. He couldn't decide if he was drowning or dying of thirst.

Chad's eyes opened, revealing the crystal blue. "Jack?"

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His mouth slid over Chad's. The man's lips were soft, warm, moist. *Incredible*. His hand cupped Chad's jaw, bringing their lips together firmly. A moan escaped Jack's lips and he slipped his tongue inside Chad's mouth. Somehow, and Jack was pretty sure it was *his* fault, his body ended up draped over Chad's, crushing the slighter man into the mattress. He also knew the hard object pressing into Chad was not Jack's gun and Jack was indeed glad to see him.

Chad barely allowed the intrusion of Jack's tongue, and he decided to take more. His thumb feathered along the man's lower lip before going in to force Chad's mouth open wider. *Success!* He sucked Chad's elusive tongue into his own mouth. If anyone's tongue had ever tasted so good, Jack hadn't found them. He could easily become addicted.

The man he crushed into the bed whimpered and for just a breathless second Jack thought Chad would push at him to dislodge Jack from his body. Of course he would acquiesce. He was not a mindless brute, after all. Well, most of the time.

But to Jack's happy delight, Chad's long, pale fingers slid under Jack's button-down shirt to caress the bare skin of his abdomen. His cock jumped so intensely Jack was surprised he hadn't come right then.

Holy shit.

He shrugged out of his sport coat, aiming it at the floor of the foot of the bed. Chad's fingers now worked on undoing Jack's shirt buttons. Seriously, he should put an end to this. It was *so* fucking stupid.

Instead he helped Chad unbutton his shirt and he disposed of his shirt, too. Now he pressed his bare torso against the blond man, his lips moving over Chad's again and again, almost bruising,

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definitely desperate. His body thrummed with animalistic lust. Had it really been this long since he'd bedded a man?

Jack tugged off Chad's shirt and couldn't even remember what he did with it. They were now skin to skin, flesh to flesh. But their damn pants were still in the way of what Jack really wanted. Without moving his lips from Chad's, he leaned up and opened the drawer of the small nightstand next to the bed. Most gay men he knew had the good sense to keep a supply of lube and condoms there. Apparently Chad was no exception. He grabbed his prizes and laid them on the bed next to the man he intended to thoroughly fuck.

He drew Chad's tongue into his mouth again, sucking hard, and Chad moaned a little in protest. He eased up some, but not much.

He broke the kiss, allowing Chad to breathe, but only so he could get to the man's nipples. He flicked his tongue at one and then the other, loving the way Chad's eyes widened with each touch on his nipple. The man's responsiveness was inspiring.

But once again his brain kicked in, trying to rule over his dumb hard cock.

Step away from the suspect, Jack.

Chad's hand closed over the bulge in Jack's pants. *Oh, fuck!* How the hell was he supposed to use common sense now? He simply had to force himself.

Jack released the nipple he'd pulled into his mouth with no little reluctance. This might kill him. He opened his mouth to say how sorry he was, this was a bad idea, maybe take a rain check after the investigation...when Chad undid Jack's pants and slipped his hot hand into Jack's briefs.

"Ah, God!" Calloused fingers wrapped around his shaft sending Frankenstein-like electric jolts through Jack's penis and

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body. Okay, who was seducing who?

He lifted a little, allowing Chad to push his pants and briefs off his ass. Chad's palm grazed the tip of his cock. Jack jumped, afraid too much more of this and he'd embarrass himself coming all over the other man's pants.

He swiped Chad's hand away and reached for the waistband of Chad's jeans. He got them open and tugged them, urging Chad to rise enough to make their removal easier. With his cock thinking way more than his brain, he didn't know exactly how he got them all the way off Chad and to the floor, he was just glad they were out of the way.

He shrugged and kicked his own pants the rest of the way off. Now there was nothing between them. Hard, naked flesh to hard naked flesh. Jack spread his hands over Chad's abdomen. Chad tensed.

"Are you...should we—"

God, now Chad was trying to be reasonable. Jack covered his questions with a scorching kiss. Then he slipped his hand down to ensnare Chad's rigid cock. The man shook beneath him, and the tension slipped away.

Though he was loathe to end the kiss, Jack wanted Chad on his stomach with his tight round ass displayed and ready. He wrenched his lips away and flipped Chad with only a tiny squeal of protest escaping Chad's mouth.

Chad's skin was creamy pale and Jack's tanned hands splayed over the peaches and cream back made the contrast all the more startling. For a few moments he just massaged the knotted muscles of Chad's broad back, eliciting groans of pure pleasure that went straight to Jack's hard cock.

As much as he suspected Chad would let him play masseuse

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for hours, Jack had a different plan. He trailed his tongue down the bare back, watching the skin prickle and jump. He wanted to bite the delicious skin, but suspected it might be too early to let Chad know he liked to bite during sex.

His tongue darted down to Chad's ass, crisscrossing the cheeks, but not venturing down the crease between just yet. Ah, hell, how could he resist taking a bite out of such perfection? He opened his mouth over the round right cheek, smooth and perfect. And closed it over a hunk of soft skin, just a nip.

"H-Hey," Chad protested, but didn't try to get away.

"Sorry." Jack chuckled. "Far too tempting."

His thumbs parted those perfect globes, allowing him a perfect view of the pink, puckered opening. Talk about too tempting. His mouth watered.

"Jack?"

"Hmm." His tongue thrust in, slipping in past the ring of muscle.

Chad fisted the quilt on the bed and buried his face in a pillow. He huffed out a breath.

Jack lapped at his lover's entrance, liberally wetting it. The more Chad whimpered, the farther his tongue slipped inside.

But as pleasurable as this was, his cock rubbing against the quilt reminded him he needed relief. He straightened up and reached for the strip of condoms. He tore open a packet and rolled it on his erection in seconds flat.

Jack exhaled, forcing himself to slow down. He didn't want to hurt the smaller man. His hand closed around the lube and he squirted a generous amount over his fingers and slicked up his cock. Chad still hid his face in the pillow he held.

Somewhere his brain still worked, and it was sending incessant

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messages to his body that he should not have sex with Chad. It would compromise the investigation. Unfortunately the urges in his cock overruled.

He parted Chad's cheeks again, slipped a lubed finger deep within his ass. Chad pushed out. Damn, he couldn't wait to be shoving it in that fine derriere. He nearly bit his own tongue off trying to control the impulse to just barge right in. Despite recent evidence to the contrary, he was not a crazed animal.

"Oh!" Chad gasped as Jack worked his one finger in and out, slicking Chad up. His cock twitched, begging to replace the too-thin finger.

Easy, Jack.

He added the middle finger to the index finger already working inside of Chad. Spreading, probing. His jaw clenched. Soon, he had to do it soon.

"Chad? Ready?" he rasped out, his voice hoarse to his own ears.

Chad quivered and nodded.

Thank God.

Withdrawing his fingers, Jack knelt behind Chad. Grabbing hold of his hips, Jack poised the head of his cock at Chad's hole. It was the last opportunity to call a halt to this. But he wasn't that strong, not with Chad's ass shaking just a bit. With a groan he pushed into the other man.

He paused, the tight entrance sending powerful jolts through his cock. *Shit.*

Chad wiggled.

"No, wait." If he came right now, at only the very beginning of the man's ass, Jack would be pissed. "Stay still."

Chad made a frustrated sound, but stopped moving. His sigh

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was muffled by the pillow.

Jack counted to ten and, when he thought he had it together, he thrust past the ring of muscle. Chad opened easily for him. Digging his fingers in, he speared all the way in.

“Ah,” Chad moaned.

“All right?”

“Uh-huh. Good, really good.”

Jack closed his eyes and started pumping the smaller man’s ass. The man was definitely good at clenching his butt muscles like a vise around his cock.

When Chad shifted a little, Jack opened his eyes. The man’s hand was beneath him, working over the length of his own shaft. *Fucking hot.*

His eyes drifted, wanting to close again, but he forced them open, wanting to watch his lover pleasure himself.

Thrusting harder and faster, he knew by whenever Chad groaned or whimpered he’d hit Chad’s prostate. He heard a low growl and realized he’d made the sound.

“Are you close?” he managed to ask.

Chad merely nodded, continuing to pump his dick.

Beginnings of a powerful orgasm tightened his balls, shot through his body from his toes to the top of his head. Shaking him, drawing from him. He pulsed within Chad’s ass. With a roar torn from his lips, he came.

The man beneath him said his name, then tensed and shot all over the quilt.

Jack collapsed on Chad, not withdrawing just yet. There was something almost too intimate about still being joined. He wrapped his arms around Chad’s belly, drawing him close, pulling him into a snug embrace.

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The sounds of his lover's soft snores lulled him to sleep.

CHAPTER 5

Chad stirred awake, blinking rapidly. He tried to remember where the hell he was and what had happened to him. His bed. And... Good Lord, he'd just let Lieutenant Reeves have sex with him!

Jack.

And Jack was plastered to him, nearly scorching him with body heat. He lay on his side and Jack's arms were draped over him, crossed. He didn't hear snoring, just soft breathing. He wondered if the man was awake or not.

"Uh." Chad struggled against the hold of the other man.

Jack yawned loudly and released him.

Chad flipped onto his back and covered his eyes with his forearm. Okay, he had *not* expected this. When was the last time

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he had such mind-blowing sex? Too long.

“Jack?”

“Hmm?”

“What was that?”

“Hot sex?”

Chad smiled and moved his arm. “Yeah. I know. I mean, what...should we have?”

Jack’s sigh could have parted his hair. “No. It was fucking stupid.” Jack sat up and stared down at Chad.

Their gazes held and the heat in Jack’s nearly made his cock hard again. He swallowed.

“Then why?”

“You’re really hot and I’m an idiot.” Jack’s sensuous lips curved. He rubbed his thumb over Chad’s lips. “I want to do it again.”

“Give me a little time to recover.”

Jack closed his eyes briefly, and then when he opened them again they were filled with regret. “We can’t. I can’t.”

“Oh.” Chad nodded, pushing aside the disappointment. What had he expected anyway?

“Chad, you’re a suspect.”

Chad sat up and searched for his clothes. He didn’t want to be talking about this nude and vulnerable. “I didn’t kill Mark.”

Jack’s hand went to his arm and gently pushed him back on the bed. “I don’t think you did. But you’re still a suspect as far as my superiors are concerned.”

“Yeah, I guess I can see that.”

“I shouldn’t have done what I did and I should excuse myself from the case.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.” He couldn’t explain it but he wanted

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Jack near. He felt safer. He didn't even know him, really. But he couldn't help how he felt.

"Me, too. Which means," Jack paused and pressed a very sweet kiss on Chad's lips, "we cannot do that again. At least until the case is over."

"So, maybe when it's over, we can see each other?"

Jack smiled. "I'd like that."

He sat up again. "Okay, well, then, let me get dressed. Are you hungry? We could have dinner. Magdalena is making tacos."

He could tell Jack was about to refuse.

"Please?"

"All right. You were about to tell me something before I ravished you."

Chad leaned over to snatch up his shirt. His face heated. "Right. I'll tell you about that."

* * *

Chad watched the pleasure appear on Jack's face as he took a bite of the taco. He couldn't help but grin. "Good huh?"

"Beyond good." He took another bite of the steak taco. "I think this is the best taco I have ever had."

Chad chuckled. "They are pretty good." He scooped up salsa with a chip. "Want some more iced tea?"

"Yeah."

Chad poured tea from the pitcher on the table into Jack's glass. It was easy to pretend for a moment they were on a date or something. That this man wasn't here because Mark was dead, *murdered*.

"So," Jack said. "What were you wanting to tell me earlier?"

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His stomach dropped and for a few silent seconds he stared at his taco. He set it down on the plate in front of him. Yeah, this was not a date, sex or not. It was an investigation.

"I don't know, maybe I'm crazy." He had begun to doubt himself. Chad thought someone had called him, but maybe it hadn't been Mark's voice. Probably his imagination.

"Well, why not just tell me," Jack prompted.

Chad nodded and blew out a long breath. "Earlier I got a call from someone. I'm not sure who."

"You didn't recognize them?"

His stomach fluttering, Chad said, "I did. But, well, that's the problem."

"I don't get it.

"Whoever it was just said one word. My name." Chad looked away, not sure what he was searching for, he just couldn't look at Jack. See his face when he realized Chad must have lost it.

"Okay."

Chad nodded. He knew Jack was getting impatient. He wanted to say it, but it was hard. "The voice...it was Mark."

Jack greeted this news with silence.

Chad risked a look, dreading what he would see, but the man's expression was blank. "Do you...do you think I'm crazy or something?"

"No."

Chad blinked. "But—"

Jack covered his hand with his own. "Look, I don't believe in ghosts and Mark Walters is dead. There's absolutely no doubt about that."

"Then how?"

"The only explanation, Chad, is someone is trying to freak you

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out. Make you think it was Mark's voice over the phone. Hell, maybe they even have a recording of his voice. I don't know. But I don't think you're crazy."

He didn't really think so either, but it was nice to hear it from Jack. "Who would do that?"

"The obvious choice is whoever killed Mark." Jack took another bite of taco, chewed, and swallowed it. "Look, I have to ask you, and don't take this the wrong way."

Chad tensed, instantly wary. His experience taught him words like that meant watch out. He nodded.

"Are you on anything?"

He frowned. "No, I stopped taking drugs several years ago."

"Right, *recreational* drugs. Epstein said you were seeing professionals, so I wondered if they'd prescribed anything."

Chad clenched his jaw. He wondered if this was something the police even had a right to ask and if he should be contacting a lawyer. He didn't have anything to hide, but it rankled. He wasn't hallucinating or anything.

"Chad?"

"As I said, I stopped taking drugs several years ago, lieutenant, and that includes psychiatric drugs. I don't even like taking aspirin."

Jack winced at the word *lieutenant* and Chad was glad. He'd done it on purpose.

"It's just something that's bound to come up, Chad."

Chad backed his chair up a little and crossed one leg over his lap. "Yeah, I guess it comes up pretty often. When the bus accident happened it came up then, too."

"You weren't charged with anything though. Looks like it was just an accident."

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He bowed his head. "Well, maybe it was just an accident to the newspapers, and the police reports, and the websites, but it changed my whole fucking life and took away the lives of three guys I cared a lot about. And the fact I wasn't high or drunk or falling asleep doesn't change any of that."

"I'm sure it was terrible," Jack said softly.

"I still have dreams about it. Nightmares. Sometimes I don't want to close my eyes because of them." Chad raised his gaze to Jack's. "I killed my friends."

Jack shook his head. "No, it was an accident, Chad. Anyone could have been driving when that tire blew, it just happened to be you."

He swallowed. "Yeah. I'm probably going to have dreams about seeing Mark in the pool. I've always had vivid dreams. When I was a kid, my dad took me to see specialists in dreams because I'd wake up screaming from them. When they couldn't help me he turned to shrinks. I've seen them on and off my whole life."

"Are you still close to your sisters?"

"How'd you know about them? Did I tell you?"

Jack turned red. "A fan site."

Chad couldn't help smiling. "You checked out fan sites on me? As for my sisters, one yes and the other one no. My little sister lives in Berkley in an old Victorian house with her husband and five kids. We mostly keep in touch through email and phone calls, but I get up to see them sometimes."

"And the other one?"

Chad shrugged. "My older sister lives in Brooklyn. She thinks the psychiatrists should have cured my affliction."

"Affliction?"

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“Homosexuality.” Chad gave him a wry smile.

“Religious?”

“I don’t really know. I don’t pay attention to her and she doesn’t pay attention to me. It’s better that way for both of us.”

Jack stuffed the final bite of his taco into his mouth. “And your mother? French, right?”

“Yes. I don’t really keep in touch with her either. Once in a while. Last time was maybe seven years ago. She wanted money.”

“Well, whoever is trying to get to you probably killed Mark Walters. We can’t take the chance you might be his next victim. At this point we don’t even know if Mark was the intended victim or in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Meaning?”

“We’ll need to get you police protection. Tap your phone. Check your computer.”

Chad frowned and shook his head. “I don’t like the sound of any of that. Why check my laptop?”

“Did Mark ever use it?”

“No, he had his own. The crime people took it with them.”

“There’s no one you’ve been chatting online with or anything?”

“I send emails to fans sometimes. But like a chat room? No.”

Jack nodded. “All right for now, but I still want the tap on your phone and someone to watch the house. And if anything suspicious shows up on your computer, call me immediately.”

Chad wanted to protest. The idea of someone watching his house creeped him out. Okay, the paparazzi had been doing it for years and even the occasional fan, but still. Unfortunately, the call with Mark’s voice unsettled him more than he really wanted to admit.

TICKET TO RIDE

“Okay. I think it’s a bit much, but yeah, all right.”

Jack stood up then. “I should go. I’ll send the crime lab in for prints on your door, just in case something comes up other than your prints.”

Chad stood and followed Jack to the front door. He was reluctant to let him go. The sex still lingered in his mind and he wouldn’t mind spending a few more hours in bed with the gorgeous cop. He wanted the closeness. But he understood where Jack was coming from and he didn’t want to get the man in trouble. So he watched silently as Jack opened the front door. He tried to school his features so he wouldn’t give away how much he really wanted Jack to stay.

“I’ll call you later,” Jack told him.

Chad swallowed. “Okay.”

Jack’s gaze dropped to Chad’s lips. “I have to go speak to Mark’s father.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you have a lot to do.” He shifted and decided it was best if stepped away out of Jack’s reach. Just as he went to step back, Jack’s hand ensnared his wrist and brought him within kissing distance.

With his other hand, Jack reached up and ran his thumb over Chad’s bottom lip. Chad leaned toward him, unable to help himself. The other man’s lips brushed cross his mouth...once, twice, three times. The third time the kiss deepened and Jack’s tongue slipped inside.

God.

Chad pressed into him, wrapping his arms around Jack’s neck. He moaned low in his throat.

Jack’s hands cover his ass and pulled them even closer still. He broke the kiss and rested his forehead on Chad’s. “I gotta go.”

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“I know.”

“I’ll call you.”

Chad nodded, figuring there was no reason to point out Jack had already said that. Jack released him and this time stepped through the door and outside.

“Bye, Jack.” He closed and locked the front door, feeling even more alone in the big house than before.

CHAPTER 6

Mark's father lived in a plain three bedroom, one bathroom house typical of Glendale suburban neighborhoods. The dark green lawn was neatly manicured and the walkway was lined with blooming rose bushes.

Jack tapped on the front door. He'd called Seymour Walters ahead of time to be sure the man would be home.

The door opened to reveal an older balding man. He could detect a vague resemblance between the man and his son.

"Lieutenant Reeves?"

Jack nodded and offered his hand, which Mr. Walters shook. "I don't want to take up too much of your time, Mr. Walters."

The man stepped aside to let him in. "It's a nice day. Mind if we sit outside on the patio?"

TICKET TO RIDE

“Wherever you’re most comfortable.”

Jack followed him through the living room and dining room to a wooden backdoor. The patio was just a cement deck with four chairs, an umbrella, and a table. It overlooked another well-cared for lawn and some flowers. Mr. Walters had already set out a pitcher of lemonade and a couple of blue plastic tumblers.

“Lemonade?”

“Sure.” Jack sat. Over the years Jack had come to expect all sorts of reactions to being questioned about a murder or a victim. Some, like Mr. Walters, made it into an almost social gathering, while others wouldn’t let him in their house and forced him to talk on the front porch.

“The funeral is Thursday,” Mr. Walters said, looking out over the yard. “My other son and daughter are arriving tomorrow.”

“That’s good. I’m glad they’ll be here.”

“It will be good to see them. Even under these circumstances.”

Jack took a sip of the lemonade. “When was the last time you saw Mark?”

Mr. Walters sighed. “I’m not sure of the exact date.”

“It’s all right. Approximately is fine.”

“We weren’t very close, lieutenant. It was somewhere around May. And he called me on Father’s Day.”

“So you were estranged?”

“No. Not estranged. I didn’t approve of his lifestyle.”

“Being gay?”

The man finished his glass of lemonade and refilled it. “I didn’t have any issues with Mark’s sexuality. I worked in the movie industry before I retired.” He waved his hand as though that explained it all. “He wouldn’t get help for his drinking. He was a bit abusive when he was drunk.”

TICKET TO RIDE

“Did he hit you?”

“Yes. We had a big fight once and he knocked me on my ass. Chad tried to interfere on my behalf and he popped him, too.”

Jack tensed. “How long ago was this?”

“A few months ago. After Christmas I think. We tried to do one of those interventions. Didn’t work. When he called me on Father’s Day, though, he did mention he’d stopped drinking. Again. I hoped it was for good this time.”

“Apparently he had a ticket to Maryland. Did he happen to mention anything about that to you or if he knew someone there?”

“Not when I last talked to him, no.” He shrugged. “If Chad didn’t know, I’m not sure who would. Chad was Mark’s best friend as well as his boyfriend. I don’t think Mark really had any other friends. None that he ever brought over here, that’s for sure.”

“Did you know about the trouble in their relationship?” Jack didn’t think he could just ask if the man knew his son was a dirty cheat.

Mr. Walters sipped his lemonade and stayed silent for a few minutes. Jack wondered if he didn’t intend to answer.

“Mr. Walters?”

“Yes, lieutenant. I knew Mark slept around on Chad. It was another one of those things he couldn’t seem to help himself.” The man grimaced. “One of the last times I talked to Mark he mentioned wanting to start over with Chad, make a renewed commitment. I guess he didn’t really mean it.”

The old man’s voice was filled with sorrow and Jack wondered if each time Mark promised something his father hoped for it to be true. He supposed so.

Jack rose and pulled out a card from his pocket. “If you think of anything else that might help.”

TICKET TO RIDE

Mr. Walters stared at the card and nodded. His eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“I’ll let myself out,” Jack said gently.

* * *

Late afternoon of the day of the service, Jack went looking for Chad. He hadn’t planned on disturbing him that day. Not in person. He had intended to call him later in the day, because he just couldn’t get the man out of his mind.

But then the officer he had watching the house mentioned that Chad came back from the service and left again on a bicycle. He’d managed to give the officer the slip, too.

Jack didn’t know where to search for the man, but when he questioned Magdalena, the housekeeper mentioned where she thought he might have gone.

Sure enough when Jack pulled up to a little known beach a few blocks from Chad’s house, he spotted a bike lying in the sand. He turned off his car, got out, and shielded his eyes, watching for signs of the man himself.

He walked out on to the sand and looked first to the left and then to the right. He finally spotted Chad several paces down the beach. He was standing in the waves washing up on the sand. Chad wore tan dress slacks, which he’d rolled up to his knees, and a turquoise button-down shirt left undone and blowing in the breeze.

Jack made sure he made enough noise as he approached him so Chad would know of his arrival. The man glanced his way and then back out to sea.

“What are you doing here?” he asked even before he reached the man.

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“Hello, lieutenant.”

“Oh, so, we’re back to formalities?”

Chad looked at him and smiled just a little. “How did you find me, Jack?”

“Magdalena mentioned you like this beach.”

“I guess I’m too much a creature of habit.” Chad crouched down and poked in the wet sand with a stick he held. “As for why I’m here, I needed the solitude. Whenever I had problems with Mark I’d come here.” He shook his head. “I guess you could say I came here a lot.”

“You need to be careful, Chad.”

“There’s no one here. Well, until you came.” He stood and fingered his shirt. “This was Mark’s favorite, so I wore it. I figured you might wonder why I wore such a bright color.”

“You didn’t have mourners over at your house after the service? Or at Mr. Walters’s house?” Jack looked at the sand where Chad had drawn a couple of stick figures.

“We sent them away. Neither of us wanted that. Mark’s brother and sister were here so they went with their dad back to his house. I think, maybe, there were some others who might have gone over there. I didn’t want to be a part of some social hour.” Chad sighed. “I wanted to be alone.”

“Is that a hint?”

Chad shook his head. “No. I don’t mind you being here. I just didn’t want a large group.”

Jack reached for Chad’s hand without even thinking about it and the man curved his fingers around Jack’s palm. “How are you handling it?”

Chad sighed. “I know it’s hard to understand but I did love Mark. Not like a boyfriend anymore. Just as a friend I’d known

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most of my life. I sometimes wondered if Mark would end up dying young, you know, but I never thought—”

Silence stretched out for several heartbeats. Finally Jack said, “Are you hungry? Want to get something to eat?”

“Okay. Is that against the rules?”

Jack shrugged, wanting to say fuck the rules, honestly, but instead he just tugged Chad’s hand to get him to start walking toward where he’d left his car. “I think your bike will fit in the trunk if I lower the backseat. What are you hungry for?”

Chad smiled. “I don’t care. Nothing fancy.”

“There’s a deli not too far from here, how about that?”

“Sounds good.”

* * *

A short time later, they were seated in a booth with faded red plastic benches with cracked and peeling cushions. The table itself was riddled with scratches and scribbles such as *Pete plus Erin*.

Chad glanced up from his stained menu. “I don’t think I’ve ever been here.”

“It’s been a while,” Jack admitted. He set his menu down and took a sip from the surprisingly good coffee. “If you like pastrami, the sandwich is good.”

Chad wrinkled his nose. “No, thanks.”

Jack laughed. “Well, that’s what I’m having.”

The other man grimaced and continued to study the menu. “How’s the chili?”

“Not bad as I recall.”

The waitress came by and they ordered.

“So,” Jack said after a minute. “Why don’t you tell me about

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your childhood?"

"My childhood? Is this part of the police interrogation?"

"No. It's about Jack Reeves wanting to get to know Chad Storm."

"Oh." Chad bit his lip and turned just a slight shade of pink. "So is this like a...like a date?"

He smiled. "Sure, why not?"

"I just...I've never really been on a date." He shrugged. "I know that sounds weird. Mark and I hooked up pretty young and it's not like we ever went out to dinner or a movie or anything."

"No?"

"Uh-uh. And then once the group took off I really couldn't go anywhere without being recognized anyway. You know, that's why I cut off my hair."

Jack took several more sips of his coffee and smiled at the waitress when she came by to refill the cup. "What do you mean?"

"No one ever really recognizes me with the short hair. I've seen a few people kind of going in their mind, 'Wow, he sort of looks like Chad Storm, but he can't be,' that sort of thing, but people rarely bother me." Chad laughed. "Maybe that's because Lightning hasn't really been that popular for a while. I don't know."

"Okay, so I know your dad was British and your mother French."

"That's right. Dad was a rotten drunk."

Jack stroked his thumb across Chad's hand. "Abusive?"

"Not like physically, no. He was mostly an absent father. He did try to get me help for my nightmares, but he stayed out most nights drinking away his paychecks. The nights he did come home he passed out drunk in his room. My sisters and I fended for ourselves mostly. I can't tell you how many times we shared a

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peanut butter sandwich for dinner 'cause there wasn't any other food in the house."

"No one ever reported him to the authorities? No neighbors or anything?"

"Not in my neighborhood. Everyone minded their own business. That kind of thing. I guess maybe Dad wasn't always like that. When my mother left and went back to France I think it hit him hard, and he got worse." The waitress came by with Jack's pastrami sandwich and cole slaw and Chad's chili with crackers. "How about you? What was your family like?"

"Good. I had great parents. I'm an only child so they doted on me. My father's a retired cop. My mother died a couple years ago so it's just us now."

"Sorry about your mother. So they accepted your being gay?"

"Yeah. I told them when I was a teen. I think they kind of already suspected even before I told them. I never did the dating the cheerleader thing. My dad did think it might be hard for me wanting to be a police officer and I've taken some shit, but mostly it's been okay."

"Like what?" Chad wondered.

"You mean what shit?" Chad nodded. "When I first became a homicide detective I went out to my car and it had been decorated in pink ribbons, feathers, and balloons." Jack shrugged. "You get used to it."

"That sucks." Chad scooped some chili onto a saltine.

"A lot of gay men put up with worse than that." He glanced around the deli. There were only a handful of customers there. It wasn't even quite five in the evening so he knew it was a bit early for the dinner crowd. He opened his mouth to say something else when Chad's cell phone sprung to life.

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“Hang on, sorry.” Chad glanced at the display and then held it to his ear. “Ron?”

Jack grimaced. He didn’t care one bit for Ron Epstein. The man was oily, creepy. If his relationship with Chad ended up going anywhere serious he intended to discuss the man’s role in Chad’s life. *If* things got that far.

“I’m having dinner,” Chad said. “No, not alone.” He sighed. “Jack. Jack Reeves. Right. No. Look, can you call me tomorrow? I’m in the middle of eating. Thanks, bye.” He flipped the phone closed. “Sorry about that.”

Jack bit his tongue to keep from commenting, instead he said, “A change of subject, Chad.”

Chad’s jaw tightened, but nodded.

“We’re having trouble locating anything about the guy Mark was flying to meet in Maryland.”

The other man lowered his gaze and stared at his bowl of chili. “I didn’t make it up.”

“I know you didn’t. He had the itinerary in his luggage. Plus we checked out his computer and he was exchanging messages with someone.”

Chad sighed. “He didn’t really tell me very much. He just said he’d met someone else. And he only told me that much because I confronted him with the itinerary. Otherwise, I’m not sure what he would have done when he left.”

“What did he say the other times he left?”

“It’s not me, it’s you.” Chad resumed eating his chili. “One thing about Mark is he never took the blame for anything. It was always someone else’s fault. Usually mine.”

Jack grimaced. “I still don’t get it. You’re beautiful, smart, talented, and pretty well off. You could probably have any guy you

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wanted. Why would you put up with it?"

"I don't really know, Jack. I'm not trying to cop out or anything on answering, I just... Mark wasn't always like that, you know. I guess I can't...couldn't forget the boy I grew up with. What about his computer? Doesn't it have the information you're looking for?"

Jack shook his head. "Most of what they've found hasn't been useful. They've not found anything involving any instant messages or emails from someone with a computer address in Maryland. They're still checking though. In spite of what you see on television, it doesn't happen in an hour. When you confronted him, he didn't mention even a first name?"

Chad closed his eyes, shaking his head. "No, I'm sure he—" His eyes opened wide. "Wait. It's on the tip of my tongue."

The waitress came by then and started to say, "Will there be anything—"

"Can you give us a minute?" Jack asked. He curled his fingers around Chad's palm. "Yeah?"

The other man frowned. "Nah, I can't think of it. I'm sorry. Really."

Jack nodded. "It's all right. Just...if you remember anything let me know right away."

"Okay."

"You want any dessert?"

"No, I'm ready to just go home."

CHAPTER 7

Chad opened his front door, wondering how he could talk Jack into staying with him. He didn't want to be alone, it was true, but more than that he wanted to be with Jack. He didn't want to get Jack in trouble though so he struggled to hold his tongue.

"Thanks for dinner."

"You're welcome." Jack's hands were shoved into the pockets of his jeans. He shifted and glanced out at the street. "Well, I should—"

"Please." The pleading coming from his own mouth surprised him. He was so certain he'd had it under control.

Jack turned back to him. "I could come inside for a little bit."

Thinking of the detective Jack had watching his house, Chad bit his lip. "Are you sure? I don't want to get you in any trouble."

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“Go inside, I’ll be right in,” Jack promised. He took out his cell phone.

Chad hesitated, but finally stepped inside. Silence and darkness greeted him in the front hall. When had his life gotten so empty? Probably even before Mark’s murder. He just let life go on without him, really.

He flipped on the light switch and let out a heavy breath. The house was too big for just him. Had been too big for just him and Mark, really. The door reopened behind him and he faced Jack.

“Everything okay?”

Chad smiled and nodded. “Yes. What about you?”

“No worries.” Jack grabbed his hand. “You want to have some coffee or something? Or a drink? Assuming you have alcohol?”

Chad shook his head. “The house is dry. We got rid of all drugs and alcohol because of our addictions. I could make us some coffee.”

“Do you want any?” Jack took a step toward him. Only a couple of inches separated them.

Chad’s gaze went to Jack’s lips. He recalled their taste from the other day. “No, no coffee. Just-just you.”

“You can definitely have me.” Jack grabbed him by the lapels of his turquoise shirt and crushed his lips over Chad’s.

He closed his eyes and pushed closer to the other man, unable to resist the moan that tore from his throat.

Jack broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against Chad’s. “The bedroom?” Jack rasped out.

He swallowed, nodded, and headed down the hall for the bedroom. He knew without turning around Jack was close on his heels. He walked over to the bedside table and flicked on the switch on the lamp and then unbuttoned his shirt.

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Chad watched Jack go to the nightstand and remove the supplies. He smiled a little.

“What?” Jack asked.

“Nothing. I just sort of like the way you just take charge.”

Jack grinned. “Sorry, I guess it’s the lieutenant in me. You don’t mind, do you?”

A thrill shot through him. “Oh, no. But could you maybe, um, take your clothes off?”

They each took care of divesting themselves of their own clothing, which suited Chad fine. He’d never been into trying to figure out who would remove what and he wasn’t into doing any kind of dancing striptease for a lover. He got out of his clothes with efficiency. Any performing had always been reserved for his onstage persona as Chad Storm in Lightning.

“What’s up? You look pretty deep in thought,” Jack said.

Chad appreciated the fine nude form in front of him, Jack’s erection pointed slightly up. Jack was already in the process of rolling a condom on. “Well, the truth is, I was sort of thinking about Lightning.”

Jack raised an eyebrow even as he pounced on Chad and knocked him onto the mattress. “The weather phenomena or the rock band?”

He chuckled. “I was thinking about the days when I strutted around on stage in tight red leather pants.”

Jack grinned. “Damn, sorry I missed that. I’ll bet you were hot.”

“Yeah, leather is uncomfortable.”

His lover rolled his eyes. “Uh-huh. But you know, you might want to maybe get your mind to think about me instead, *Lester*.”

Chad groaned. “Fuck, no one ever called me that.”

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“No? Not even when you were a kid?”

“My friends and the kids at school called me Chad even then because I insisted. You know, it was short for Chadwick. My family and most of my teachers called me Les.”

Jack’s thumb rubbed across his lips. “Les. That’s not so bad.”

“Easy for you to say. You have a cool name.” He sucked Jack’s thumb into his mouth and wiggled up against the man so he could feel his erection.

Jack drew a sharp breath and reached for the lube. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

Chad released his thumb and leaned up for a kiss. “Yeah? Since we had sex the other day?”

“No.”

“No?” Chad frowned.

“Since I first saw you sitting in that patio chair in your backyard.”

That surprised him. He didn’t think Jack had been impressed by him at all. Well, he guessed maybe as a cop it was easy, maybe even required, for Jack not to show his feelings or what he was thinking.

Jack’s lips brushed over his and then he deepened the kiss, not quite devouring, but lingering, leaving the taste of him on Chad’s mouth when he pulled away. Hands roamed over his stomach and across his hips.

“I’ve never had anyone like you,” Chad admitted. “I never even knew I wanted someone like you.” He sighed. “Mark was, you know, more like me, really. People used to joke that he was the dark haired version of me. He never had hair like mine, but otherwise, we were pretty similar. I didn’t think I was attracted to the Clint Eastwood type.”

TICKET TO RIDE

Jack grimaced. "Clint Eastwood?"

"Well, but younger." Chad grinned. "What I mean is you're rougher, more rugged. I thought I liked pretty boys."

The hands caressing his hips moved to scoot under his ass, cupping his buttocks. "Lucky me, you're changing your type. Sounds like maybe you should have changed it a long time ago."

"Yeah," Chad said softly, seeking Jack's lips on his again. Jack tasted of a mixture of mint gum, coffee, and deli food. For some reason it was incredibly appealing.

Jack's hands moved away from his ass to squirt out lube. Chad rose up on his elbows, deciding he wanted to watch what Jack would do next. His lover had sloshed the clear liquid all over his hands. He stroked his sheathed shaft, coating it liberally.

"Ah, geez." Chad's hard cock jumped watching Jack rub lube over the head of his dick. Reaching down between his legs, he grasped the tip of his own erection, swirling his finger in the drop of pre-cum. It had been too long since sex had been fun, since he'd anticipated it this much.

Chad spread his legs, angling them to give Jack a pretty good view of the entrance to his ass. Jack's gaze went straight there, though he did not stop the ministrations to his cock. He increased the strokes and added his hand to caress his balls.

Running his tongue along his bottom lip, Chad reached for the lube.

"Getting impatient?" Jack chuckled. He snatched the tube out of Chad's hands and coated his fingers with more. "Only *my* fingers go in there."

He swallowed. "How do you want me? On my stomach or the way I am now?"

"Stay where you are." Jack's slicked hand inched up Chad's

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inner thigh, causing goose bumps to appear wherever his fingers grazed.

His eyes drifted closed, even though he wanted them to stay open so he could watch. His lover's finger barely probed at his hole, teasing around the rim. A ragged moan tore from his throat, his head leaned back. "Please."

The fingertip slid in, stopping just inside. Chad's ass clenched. Lord, he was going to come just with this. His elbows shaking from the stress of holding him up, he lowered himself flat on mattress, raising his ass off the bed. The finger teasing him slipped in farther, past the tight ring, probing, prodding. Chad's hand closed around his shaft, his palm sliding over the prominent vein there. His back arched as Jack added a second finger.

"Now, Jack, please, fuck me." The begging was pathetic, he supposed, but he could no more stop himself than he could stop the tremors of lust racking his body.

"Shh, not yet. Wanna drive you crazy."

"God." Flames licked at his skin, burning, scorching across the bare flesh. Jack's fingers stroked his prostate, spreading him wider than he could have sworn was possible. "Jaaccck."

Jack's other hand grasped Chad's cock with his own hand, both of them stroking the shaft at once while Jack's fingers worked their magic inside him. His body thrummed with tension, he was so damn close.

"Jack, please, I'm gonna come."

"Isn't that the idea?"

"I know, but—"

"Don't overanalyze it, Chad. Open your eyes," his lover commanded.

Chad's eyes flew open and their gazes met, held. The intensity

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of the lust he viewed in Jack's warm brown eyes almost scared him. Was it supposed to be this...this much? He didn't know. His too heavy eyelids threatened to close again, but he couldn't look away. He forced his eyes wide.

Jack slipped a third finger inside him and he nearly came off the bed. His breaths were ragged and shallow as they mutually worked his cock.

"Come for me, Chad." Sweat beaded on Jack's forehead. Jack's hand was stroking his cock so hard Chad thought he'd pull it right off.

And then his balls tightened, as though waiting for the command. Jolts of his orgasm shot through every nerve ending in his body and he shook with the power of it. Creamy cum splurled onto their hands and onto Chad's stomach.

But before he could even catch his breath, Jack's fingers withdrew and were quickly replaced with the fat head of his cock pushing into Chad's ass. Chad let his eyes close as Jack pushed in all the way. His hands grasped Chad's legs, holding them up and spread.

"My God, you're tight," Jack moaned. He paused, breathing heavily. Sweat dripped down his forehead and on to his cheek. Finally, he began to move, with slow, deep thrusts.

If Chad hadn't just had an incredible orgasm, his cock might have perked up again, but he just clenched around Jack's erection, pushing and thrusting in sync to his lover's movements, enjoying the pleased little moans coming from Jack as he pumped Chad's ass.

One of Jack's hands was curved around Chad's thigh. He reached for it and threaded his fingers with Jack's. The man had such big hands with long almost elegant fingers. Like a musician's

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hands, Chad thought.

"What are you smiling at?" Jack ground out, speeding up his thrusts.

"Nothing. I just like your hands. Have you ever played an instrument?"

Jack's jaw clenched. "Can we talk about this later?"

Laughter bubbled out of him. "You asked!"

The man grinned. "Well, forget I did." He hiked Chad's legs up higher and slammed into him, hard and fast, almost to the point it hurt. "Sorry. I'm getting really close."

"I like it." His cheeks flamed at the admission, but it was true.

Jack's eyes closed and his grip tightened, his expression almost painful. He growled low. His whole body going rigid, Jack's cock pulsed inside him and he cried out, "Chad, yes!"

* * *

A little later, they lay side by side facing each other on the bed. Not exactly touching, but within just inches. Chad had pulled up the sheet around them and neither had gotten dressed.

"Have you been with a lot of men?" Chad asked, looking at Jack's chin.

"Define a lot."

Chad did meet his gaze then and noticed he looked distinctly mischievous. He couldn't keep from smiling. "More than two."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Yeah right. Seriously. What do you view as a lot?"

He sighed, thinking. "Hmm. Well, I don't know. More than five?"

His lover stayed silent for a moment, and then stroked his

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fingertips across Chad's jaw. "Keep in mind I'm forty-three."

"So more than five, huh?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm not a saint, Chad, but I have always practiced safe sex."

Chad nodded. "Before, you said something about addiction that made me think maybe you had experience with it. Something about addicts being responsible for themselves."

"I remember. Yeah, one of my boyfriends when I was in my twenties was a cocaine addict. It ended our relationship." Jack frowned. "I really loved him, you know. But he wouldn't or couldn't change, and I couldn't stay with him like that."

"You were smarter than me I guess." Chad lowered his gaze.

"Hey." Jack lifted his chin and kissed him. "Let's go to sleep."

"Okay. Jack?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you going to get in trouble? For being here with me? I don't want that."

"Don't worry about it."

"But I am."

Jack sighed. "I'm taking myself off the case."

"What? No."

"Chad, I can't be objective. I'm too involved with you. Anything I did now if I was still on the case would compromise it."

"Shit. I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen."

"It's not your fault. The fault is mine. Don't worry about it," Jack said again. "I won't be in trouble because I am taking myself off. There are other detectives working it. We'll find Mark's killer."

"All right."

Jack reached over and flipped the lamp off, and pulled him

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close, wrapping his arm around his waist. “Try to get some rest.”

CHAPTER 8

Chad shot up straight, wide awake. His heart pounded so hard he wondered if it was some sort of attack. He rested his hand over his racing heart, trying to calm it.

The room was still enshrouded in darkness. Jack slept next to him, softly snoring. He swallowed the lump in his throat and swung out of bed, trying to disturb Jack as little as possible.

He didn't remember a dream this time. What woke him? He crept to the sliding glass door and peered out, but he couldn't see anything. The clock near his bed said 2:30.

With just him living there now he never closed his bedroom outer door. No point. When Mark had been there still, but no longer his boyfriend, then he'd closed his door. He hadn't wanted to see the guys Mark might have brought home with him.

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Chad exhaled slowly and went out into the hall. The silence seemed heavy, ominous, like the house listened, waiting for its chance to erupt. He shook his head.

“You really need to stop reading Stephen King,” he muttered.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness enough so he no longer had to feel for the wall as he walked along the hallway leading away from the bedrooms. It occurred to him if some intruder had invaded his house he was naked and vulnerable with no weapon.

He reached the kitchen and flipped on the light. The fluorescent rods blinked on, bathing the kitchen in a soft white glow. Chad began to feel rather silly. Nothing seemed out of place. No masked character from *Scream* jumped out.

But still he found his feet taking him over to the slider leading to the backdoor. He hadn’t gone out there for days. He had trouble looking at the pool where Mark had lain, probably even taken his last breath. Resting his palms on the cool glass, Chad stared hard out at the yard. It was too dark to really make out much, but he caught a glimmer of the pool in the moonlight.

A hand curved over his biceps.

“Ahh!” Chad yelled, jumping.

“Hey, shh, it’s just me.” Jack pulled him close. He held him to him and wrapped his arms around Chad’s waist. “What are you doing? I woke up and you were gone.”

Chad tried to smile. He noticed Jack had pulled on his pants. “I just wanted to make sure the house was okay.”

Jack didn’t say anything. He released Chad and reached to turn a light in the room. “You’re very pale. Are you sure everything’s all right?”

“I think so. I’m not sure what woke me. Usually it’s a dream, but I don’t remember dreaming.” Chad thought maybe he was

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babbling. He turned away to stare out at the yard again.

Jack stepped up behind him and leaned on him, putting his arms around him once more and dragging him against him. "It's okay if you're anxious."

Chad closed his eyes. "I've been anxious for a long time."

"Was it the drugs?"

"I was this way even before that," Chad admitted. "Actually, I think that's why I turned to the drugs in the first place. To deal with the pressures of the band and the anxiety."

Jack nuzzled his neck. "And you're sure you don't need some medication now? Anti-anxiety?"

"Positive. I don't want anything, Jack. Not any drugs." Chad tensed.

"Shh." Jack's arms tightened. "All right. I don't want to force you."

Chad exhaled. He knew he was probably freaking Jack out and so he was trying to placate him. He wouldn't be surprised if Jack bolted first thing in the morning, and who could blame him? He was about to turn from the sliding glass door when Jack suddenly went alert. He pushed Chad behind him and pulled his gun out of his waistband. It was the first time he noticed Jack had brought his gun with him from the bedroom.

"What—"

"Just stay here," Jack said roughly. He unlatched the slider and slipped outside.

His heart pounding hard and loud in his own ears, Chad tried to see where Jack went, but couldn't make him out in the shadowed yard. In his nude state, he felt more vulnerable than ever. He debated whether he should return to his room and pull on his clothes. Finally not able to stand it, he hurried through the living

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room and down the hall to his bedroom.

He picked up the dress pants he'd discarded earlier on the floor and pulled them on even as he looked out the glass door of his bedroom for Jack. Had Jack seen someone or something outside? Whoever or whatever had awakened him?

Chad bit his lip and went to his walk-in closet. He thought he still had a Ninja sword in there from the days he collected them. He once displayed them on the walls of his home, but had since gotten out of the hobby. Most of them he'd sold to other collectors, but he thought he remembered one being left. Not that he could use it, really.

The overhead light in the closet illuminated the small square room and he peered around. In the corner, he thought. He brushed aside some old moccasin boots he no longer wore and, sure enough, there was the sword in its long black curved scabbard. He grasped it and turned to walk out of the closet prepared to do...what exactly, Chad didn't know.

And Jack was suddenly there in his room, staring at him coming out of the closet brandishing the Ninja sword. "What the hell?"

Chad felt and knew he looked completely foolish. "I, um. Are you all right?"

"Are you a Ninja turtle or something?"

His cheeks flaming, he tossed the sword back into the closet without even looking where he threw it. "I thought, well, I could help or something."

Jack, who had already returned his gun to the waistband of his jeans, raised an eyebrow. "Two things, Chad."

He swallowed. "Yeah?"

"I'm with the police. You aren't. Never ever decide you are

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going to help. We're not a couple of actors with our own detective show. Got it?"

He just nodded.

"Second, there was nothing to help with. I didn't find anything. I thought I saw a flash of something out there for a moment, but when I went out there I didn't find anything."

"Good." Chad blew out a breath. "That's...that's good."

Jack grabbed his hand. "This whole thing has us both jumpy, that's all. Let's try to go back to sleep."

"I don't think I can."

Jack winked. "Oh, I think I can find a way to make you sleepy."

* * *

Chad smiled at Magdalena as she set a plate of fried eggs, bacon and toast, and a steaming cup of coffee in front of him. She set the same in front of Jack.

Okay, he could get used to having Magdalena around. Jack fixed his coffee and then took a heavenly sip.

"How are you feeling this morning?" He covered Chad's hand with his. Jack knew even after he'd given Chad a blow job in the middle of the night Chad had tossed and turned in the bed next to him.

"Tired, but okay."

Magdalena walked over to Chad and started speaking to him in Spanish. Chad spoke back also in Spanish, smiling and shaking his head, then smiling again. Finally she gave him a quick hug around his shoulders and then left the kitchen.

Jack raised an eyebrow over his cup. "What was that?"

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“Magdalena had planned a week’s vacation starting this afternoon before any of this happened. She was trying to tell me she wasn’t going to take it and I told her to go ahead.” Chad smiled a little. “Don’t worry, she’s not leaving Los Angeles. She’s just going to spend some time with her kids, taking them to Disneyland and stuff like that.”

“Yeah, should be all right. We have her statement.”

The phone on the breakfast bar next to them sprung to life. Chad picked it up and spoke his greeting. He suddenly went ramrod straight and lost all color.

Jack grabbed the phone out of his hand.

“Chad, help me,” a voice rasped, then repeated it.

“Who the fuck is this?” Jack demanded. A dial tone sounded loud in his ear. He put down the phone. “Okay, is that the same call you got before?”

“Yeah.” Chad swallowed. He clung to Jack’s hand, but didn’t say anything.

Jack came to a decision. “We’re moving you.”

“What?”

“I don’t want you staying here by yourself, and even though I’m off the case, I shouldn’t really be staying here with you either. Not until we get the guy.”

Chad shook his head. “I don’t want to stay in a hotel, Jack. I had enough of that when I was touring to last me a lifetime.”

“You won’t. I’d have you just stay with me, but that’s not a good idea either.” Jack stared at the discarded phone. “I know where we’ll have you stay. It’ll be perfect.”

“Where?”

“With my dad. He’s a retired cop and he lives alone. Listen, I know you said Mark never used your computer, but I think we

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should take a look at it just in case.”

“Um, okay.”

He stroked his fingers along the palm of Chad’s hand. “There’s nothing...you don’t have anything illegal on there, do you?”

Chad straightened and scowled. “What? No. Geez, are you serious? No.”

“All right, all right. I just wanted to make sure.”

“I would never.”

“I didn’t think you would,” Jack said soothingly. “I have to make some calls. You should pack enough to get you through several days.”

“I hate this,” Chad muttered. He ran the fingers of his other hand through his blond hair.

“I know, babe. I promise, whoever this asshole is, we’ll get him and soon. You should probably finish up your breakfast.”

Chad pushed the plate of mostly uneaten food away. “Lost my appetite. I guess I’ll go pack.”

* * *

Jack had, among his other calls, contacted his father to ask him about Chad. As he knew he would, his dad had readily agreed.

He knew, however, as he opened the trunk of his car to take out the duffle bag his new lover had packed, Chad was less than thrilled with the idea. He smiled and waved his hand to indicate he should precede him up the walkway to his dad’s house.

The house, in the suburb of Thousand Oaks, was where he’d grown up as a kid. His father had commuted to his job as a Los Angeles police detective from there. It was still an unassuming house on a small, quiet cul-de-sac with only a handful of

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neighbors.

“Are you sure this isn’t a huge imposition?” Chad asked him for the fourth time since they got in the car to drive over.

“Positive. I talked to my dad and he’s thrilled.”

Chad stopped in the middle of the front yard and bit his lip. He wore dark sunglasses, but he turned his head from side to side looking around the area. He opened his mouth to say something when his cell phone rang. He pulled it out, his hand shaking. Jack was about to reach out for it, when he said, “Oh, hello, Parker.”

Jack shook his head and said very softly, “Don’t tell him where.”

“No, I’m not home. I’m...well, I got another weird call and Jack...Lieutenant Reeves thought I should stay somewhere else for a while. I’m not allowed to say. I know, but that’s what I’ve been told. Right. I should be able to make that still. Sorry, man. See you Thursday.”

“What’s Thursday?”

“Another session in the studio.”

“Should be okay. Come on, let me introduce you to my dad.” Jack closed his hand over Chad’s arm and gently prodded him to the front door. The door opened as they approached it and his dad, basically an older version of himself, rugged and muscular even in his senior years, stood in the doorway.

“Chad, the man hovering there is my dad, Joseph Reeves. Dad, this is Chad Storm.”

“Come in, come in. I’m a big fan.” His dad stepped aside to let them in with a big smile. He grasped Chad’s hand and shook it.

Jack raised an eyebrow at this father, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“I think my favorite album was *The Rainbow After the Storm*.”

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Chad blushed and then laughed. "Yeah, we really were corny with the names, huh? Thank you, Mr. Reeves. Jack didn't mention you were a fan of Lightning."

"Joe, please. My son isn't exactly up on rock music as you probably know by now. His mother's influence I'm afraid. She had him listening to Bach and Beethoven."

Chad smiled. "So, you really know my music?"

"Yeah. I even have it downloaded to my iPod." His dad picked up Chad's bag. "This way."

Jack frowned, feeling out of sorts. "Wait, Dad, *you* have an iPod?"

"Sure, for months now, son."

"I don't even have one."

"Well, maybe for Christmas." His dad stopped in the room that used to be Jack's growing up. "I thought I'd just give you Jack's old room. Has only a double bed, I'm afraid."

"That should be fine," Chad said.

"Well, I just know, with Jack being really big, he might take up most of it."

Chad made a sort of choking sound.

Now Jack felt his own cheeks burning. "Dad, I'm...I'm not going to stay here."

His dad winked. "Right. Anyway, Chad, go ahead and get settled in. When you're ready, come on out. I've already got dinner fixing. And after that maybe we can play some cards."

Jack opened his mouth to say maybe Chad wasn't into playing cards, but before he got the chance, Chad spoke up.

"That sounds great, Joe."

Jack eyed him and was surprised to see Chad looked and sounded sincere.

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“We can listen to your music while we play,” Joe said enthusiastically.

Chad laughed. “Okay, sounds cool.”

* * *

Jack had trouble concentrating on the report he was filling out on a case he'd just wrapped up. He only had an hour left on his shift and the truth was he wanted to go to his dad's house to see Chad. Or stay with him. Whatever.

He'd resisted staying there the night before. This morning he'd talked to Chad, who had told him he and Jack's dad had gotten along famously. Jack was very glad about that.

He rubbed his temples and typed a few more lines on the form.

Al tapped on his office door and stepped inside. “Hey, lieutenant, Teddy said you wanted to see me.”

“Yeah, what's new on the Walters case?”

“The lab guys say the instant messages from Maryland Boy were coming from computers at the main branch of the Los Angeles Library. Our guys went down there to ask the library people about the users there and, of course, they can't be expected to remember anyone.” Albert shrugged. “That's what they said anyway.”

“So, whoever Mark Walters was talking to about meeting them in Maryland was a fake.”

“Yeah, seems that way. I don't think Walters knew that.”

“When did the conversations start?”

“A couple months ago. It was maybe three weeks ago that Maryland Boy started suggesting they meet. Said his real name was Clint Masterson. Couldn't find anyone in Maryland by that

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name who talked to anyone here.”

“And what about the alibis of Parker Riley and Ron Epstein?”

“Both checked out. Epstein’s significant other, Henry Wiggins, told the same story as Epstein. Pretty frail guy, actually. Has AIDS. I don’t think he’s going to last much longer. Chad Storm’s alibi checked out, too.”

Jack tapped his fingers on his desk. “Was there a will?”

“Walters?” Al shook his head.

“Chad.”

“I don’t know. Don’t think anyone thought to ask. Why?”

Jack grimaced. “One of the original motives for murder is greed, Al.”

* * *

“I can’t believe you’re keeping your whereabouts from me,” Ron whined on the phone.

Chad sat in Joe Reeves’s backyard in a lawn chair drinking a cola. This was the third call from Ron he’d received that day.

“I’m sorry. Jack doesn’t think I should tell anyone.”

“Jack? Jesus, Chad, what’s with you and this cop?”

Chad shifted in his chair. “Well, I don’t know really.”

“You don’t know. Are you letting him fuck you?”

“For God’s sake, Ron, do you mind?”

Ron sighed. “You are. What do you really even know about this guy?”

“He’s a cop, Ron. A lieutenant. I’m pretty sure he can be trusted.”

“What about me, Chad? You’ve known me for years. I’m your manager. I think you can tell *me* where you are.”

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Chad closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Ron had a point. He knew Ron hadn't killed Mark. And Ron's voice wasn't the voice on the calls. "All right, but you can't tell anyone, Ron."

"Of course, I won't. Come on, Chad, you can trust me."

He nodded. "Okay. I'm staying at Jack's dad's house in Thousand Oaks."

"And you haven't even told Parker?"

"No, but I'm doing a session in a couple of days with him."

"Well, give me the address there. You might need me to bring you something."

Chad rattled it off. "How's Henry doing?"

"Not good, kid. He's practically bedridden."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Anything I can do?"

"No, just take care of yourself. How are you sleeping?"

"Not good. I've gotten some weird calls."

"Weird calls?"

Chad finished his drink. "Yeah, this voice that sounds like Mark's. And then I'm still having the dreams about the bus crash."

"I think you should consider taking the prescriptions Dr. Dryden prescribed."

"No, no way. Ron, I told you, no more drugs."

"But you need them, Chad. I'm worried about the depression and anxiety."

Joe walked outside carrying a bowl of chips and a bowl of dip.

"Look, I have to go. We'll talk about this later." Much later, Chad thought. "Bye." He smiled at Joe. "Onion dip's my favorite."

"Who was that?" Joe asked, sitting in the chair next to him and offering him the bowls.

"My manager, Ron Epstein. I think he tries to be my father or something." Chad sighed. "I know he means well. Most of the time

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anyway.”

“Most of the time?”

“Years ago he had sex with Mark when the two of us were together. Ron never admitted it to me, but Mark did. Whenever we had fights, he’d throw shit like that out at me. To hurt me. It worked, too. Anyway, I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

“Still, that’s quite the betrayal.”

Chad tried to smile. It took a huge effort. “I’m learning these days I have a tendency to let people in my life just walk right over me. It’s something I’ve struggled with all my life. I make excuses for them, but the truth is they’re all just a bunch of shits.”

“You know what they say. Cut the poison people out of your life, Chad. I think you’d be much happier.” Joe stood. “I’m going to get a beer. You want another soda?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Jack just called. He’s on his way over.”

His afternoon suddenly got a whole lot bright. “Great.”

CHAPTER 9

Jack came up behind Chad while he rinsed the spaghetti sauce from dinner plates. He wrapped his arms around him and nuzzled Chad's throat.

"Hmm. Stop, I'm trying to clean up."

"I'm helping," Jack insisted. He reached around Chad, scooped up dirty silverware, and held it under the steady stream of water.

"What if your dad comes in?"

He chuckled. "Dad knows we're gay, remember? He's the one who mentioned me hogging the bed."

Chad's cheeks pinked. "I know, but—"

"Everything okay in here?" Jack's dad walked in carrying a couple more dishes.

Chad tried to move away, but Jack blocked him. If they had

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any chance at being a couple, he wanted Chad to get used to the idea that people—family—would see them together.

“Just getting the dishes ready for the dishwasher,” Jack said.

“You boys want to watch a movie when you’re done there?”

“Sure. Sounds like a plan. Gonna make popcorn, Dad?”

His dad smiled. “Sure thing. I’ll go pick out a movie.”

Chad did move out of Jack’s arms then. “Your dad is cool.”

“Yeah, he is. The best. It’s nice to have a normal evening, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Chad sighed and started loading the dishes. “God, I’m all sweaty from sitting outside earlier in the sun with your dad. Think I’m going to have to take a shower before bed.”

Jack loved the sound of that. “Now *that* sounds like a plan.”

* * *

A couple of hours later, Chad pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it in the wicker hamper in Jack’s old room. It had been a pretty good night. They’d watched some silly, lighthearted comedy. He’d sat side by side on the couch with Jack and they’d stuffed their face with buttery popcorn.

He’d almost forgotten why he was even there. But never quite. Someone had murdered Mark and was now trying to mess with him.

“Before we hit the shower, I have a question for you.” Jack tugged on his hand and made him sit on the bed beside him.

“Okay.”

“Do you have a will?”

Chad hadn’t expected that to be the question. He wasn’t really sure what he thought Jack was going to ask him. “Yes, why?”

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Jack waved aside his question. "Who is the beneficiary?"

Chad frowned. "Well, there's a few. Most of it goes to...went to Mark, but a smaller percentage was going to my sisters. I guess I'll need to change it now."

"Did it say what would happen to the estate if Mark preceded you in death?"

"Sure. That part of the estate goes to Ron." He shrugged. "I actually made that will a long time ago. Like I said, guess I'll make some changes soon. Why? What does my will have to do with anything?"

Jack smiled and leaned over to kiss him. "Maybe nothing. Finish undressing. I'll go start the shower."

Chad watched Jack disappear into the bathroom that was off the bedroom. Jack had removed all his clothing except his briefs. He stood up and shucked his jeans and underwear.

"You coming in or what?" Jack called.

Smiling, Chad walked through the doorway. His lover already stood under the massaging water head letting water splash over his muscular bare skin. Chad's mouth watered.

He licked his lips and grabbed a foil wrapper and lube as he headed for the glass door of the shower. He reached up and left them on the top of the shower and slipped inside.

"About time." Jack grinned and pulled Chad close against his wet body. Steam from the hot water spray fogged up the glass. "I can't remember the last time I shared a shower with a guy."

Chad ducked his head. "I never have."

"Never?"

He shook his head. It occurred to him he'd missed a lot of experiences the years he'd spent with Mark. And the sad thing was, at the end he'd long since fallen out of love with Mark.

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Jack's thumb brushed his bottom lip. "We'll just have to take care of that, won't we? Hand me the shower gel."

"What?"

"Behind you. The shower gel."

Chad looked over his shoulder and noticed the bottle of orange shower gel. Since he'd used bar soap in his shower yesterday, he knew Jack had brought it in with him. He picked it up and pressed the top open. Spicy cloves wafted out.

Jack snatched it out of his hands. "First, I wash you."

Chad shook as he watched Jack squirt gel out and lather it up in his big hands. His gaze dropped to Jack's very hard cock. He swallowed. "Are you sure you don't want me to take care of that?"

"In a minute." His lather covered hands smoothed over Chad's wet chest, his fingers grazing over Chad's nipples.

"Oh, my God." Chad closed his eyes and gave himself over to his lover's ministrations. Jack's fingers moved down to soap up his abs. Jack rinsed him with the shower spray. He lifted up his arms and Jack rubbed soap all over his arms and under, then he was turned while Jack washed and rinsed his back.

"Anyone ever tell you that you have a great ass?" Jack murmured against the back of his neck. Jack's fingers slid between his ass cheeks, barely flittering across his hole.

Chad spread his legs to give Jack better access.

"Shh." Jack rubbed eucalyptus scented shampoo into Chad's scalp. "Have you ever considered growing your hair long again?"

"Long? You want my hair long?"

"Well, I just kind of like the idea of all that blond hair draped over my naked skin." Jack chuckled.

Chad's mind filled with that exact image. *Wow.* "Maybe. I'll have to give it some thought."

TICKET TO RIDE

“Hmm. Lean your head back.” Chad did and the water washed over his head. “Okay, now, brace your hands against the walls of the shower.”

Without opening his eyes, Chad did as Jack instructed. Jack’s hands gripped the back of his thighs as Chad felt him lower himself to the shower floor behind him. A raspy groan tore from his lips when Jack’s tongue entered him, probing there for several near agonizing strokes. He flattened his hands against the tile, hoping his wobbly legs would hold out.

Even as Jack’s tongue continued to lap at his entrance, he heard the sound of lube sloshing out. Jack’s hand reached between Chad’s legs, squeezing and rolling his sac.

“Fuck,” Chad breathed out.

Jack’s long finger replaced his tongue, coated in cold lube as it pressed in past the muscle. The hand rolling his balls scooted under to grasp the base of his shaft, sending tingly jolts of pleasure through his shaking body. When a second finger spread his ass wide, Chad lost his patience. He thrust out.

“Fuck me, Jack. Now.”

Jack licked a path up Chad’s spine. He nearly lost it then and wasn’t sure how he kept from coming. His lover stood and Chad heard the foil wrapper tear and then more lube being squirted out. He bowed his head, waiting, praying for Jack to hurry and take him.

Wet hands on his cheeks parted him and the tip of Jack’s cock hovered at his opening. Chad ground his teeth together, resisting the urge to again beg, knowing Jack teased him.

Jack’s hand slipped around Chad’s hip and grasped his erection, stroking up and down the length even as he finally pushed his cock into Chad. His breath stuttered and he arched his back as

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Jack slammed all the way in.

“Okay?” Jack’s lips traced over his upper back.

“Oh yeah, fantastic.”

Jack withdrew, leaving just the tip of his cock in for several heartbeats before he slid back in, continuing to pump Chad’s cock even as he slid in and out.

It was not a gentle slow fucking, but a fast and furious one, aggressive and hard. Chad liked it. Jack’s hand slipped off his cock and his fingers threaded into Chad’s wet hair. He whimpered at the loss of the hand working him.

As though he read Chad’s thoughts, Jack growled into his ear. “Stroke yourself.”

Removing one hand from the tile, Chad wrapped his hand around his shaft, sliding it over the thick vein. His balls jumped at the sensation. God, he was close. Jack’s fingers dug into his hips, even as the man’s thrusts sped up. Chad clenched his ass and was rewarded with a low moan from Jack.

He bit his lip, trying to keep from yelling. He had no idea how thin the walls were, and Jack’s dad was in the house. His whole body pulsed with the orgasm tearing through him. Cum splattered the tile in front of him.

Chad let go of his now limp dick and re-braced his hand on the shower wall. Jack jerked behind him, stiffening as he found his own release. After a moment of holding him around the middle, Jack pulled out and leaned against another wall of the shower, panting heavily.

“Holy shit, I’m too old for this.”

“Could have fooled me.” Chad quickly rinsed and then collapsed on the little shower seat, which was really more just an abutment of the shower wall. “Man, my legs feel as weak as a

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baby's."

Jack turned off the shower. "Yeah, I'm pretty exhausted myself." He reached out to help Chad up and then handed a fluffy white towel to him when they were out of the shower.

"Ack, I'm dying of thirst, too."

"There's bottled water in Dad's fridge. Hang on a second and I'll get it."

Chad grabbed his terry cloth robe off the back of the bathroom door. "I'll get them. You finish drying. You want one?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Chad put on the robe and tied it around his waist. He pressed a kiss to Jack's lips. "Be right back."

He stepped out of the bedroom, flipped on the hall light and walked through the semi-darkened house toward the kitchen. The sliding glass door to the backyard stood wide open. The broken lock was on the floor.

His heart hammering in his throat, Chad turned and ran right into Ron Epstein. He rested his hand on his chest.

Be cool, Chad.

"R-Ron. I, um, what—"

"Quiet. I don't want to call attention to your new boyfriend." Ron's hand rose to show he held a pistol. "Out through that door now and be quiet about it."

"You don't want to do this."

"Be quiet. And out now, or I swear I shoot old man Reeves first."

Chad held up his hands. "Okay, I'm going."

"Turn around."

Chad had a moment where he was certain Ron would shoot him in the back. He turned and stepped through the open door and

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out into the cool night air. He felt Ron press the gun between his shoulder blades.

"Here's what we're going to do, Chad," Ron whispered. "You're going to come with me to my house."

"Ron, why? Is it the money?" Chad turned and faced him, holding his hands in front of him.

The other man scoffed. "I wanted that, true. I needed that."

"I would have given you money if you needed it. Why didn't you ask?"

"I'm broke, Chad. Between Henry's illness and some bad investments, I have nothing. Or had nothing."

"What?"

"For the last few months I've been signing into your account on your computer and transferring money. I knew Mark was starting to notice."

"He never said anything to me," Chad whispered.

Ron laughed, it sounded barely sane. "He hadn't quite figured it out yet. So I decided to distract him."

Behind Ron, Chad noticed Jack appear in the house. He hoped his expression didn't give it away. "So *you* sent him the messages from Maryland?"

"He thought they were from Maryland. I planned to take care of his ass once he got to Baltimore. He forced me to change my plans."

"You killed Mark?"

Ron laughed. "Mark was expendable. Idiot. Do you know how many times I thought we'd finally gotten rid of him? But you always took him back. This time, I was going to make sure he wasn't a problem for us anymore. He was supposed to go to Maryland."

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“But he was.” Chad frowned.

“No, he fucking changed his mind again. Said he wanted to ask you for one more chance. I thought if I got rid of that leech you’d finally turn to me,” Ron said, his hand shaking.

“For what?” Chad asked, genuinely confused.

“*For everything.* I’ve watched you throw your life away on Mark for years. If we were partners, real *life* partners I could have you and the money.”

“The voices...the phone calls.”

“I made Mark record those pleas before I killed him.”

Chad’s stomach twisted in revulsion, bile rose in his throat. “Oh, my God.” He couldn’t begin to imagine what Mark’s last few minutes had been like at Ron’s hands.

“I fiddled with your lock in your room, too. I hoped you would turn to me in fear, but you didn’t. You never did. You never wanted me. Even after the accident you never turned to me for comfort.”

Chad shook his head. “We never had that kind of relationship.”

“I know, but I always wanted it. He cheated on you constantly and you never stopped him.”

“You slept with him, too.”

“It was a mistake. I came to your house that day to seduce you. I planned on getting you drunk and ending up in your bed, but instead I ended up with Mark.”

“Ron, I’m sorry. I’ve never felt that way about you.”

“But I could have changed your mind. Do you think I want that sick old man Henry? He disgusts me.”

“I couldn’t.” Chad took a step back, bumping into the patio chair. “You were like a second father to me.”

Ron’s lip curled. “Enough talk. We’re going to my house.”

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“What happens then? Why are you doing this now?”

“Instead of turning to me you turned to that stupid cop. You’re never going to want me. I’ve been kidding myself. I’m tired of not being good enough. I’m tired of doing without.” Ron gestured with his gun. “Out the side yard. Hurry.”

“No.”

“What?”

Chad exhaled. “I’m not going with you, Ron. You’ll have to kill me here.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “I will.”

He swallowed. “I saw what you did to Mark. I don’t doubt it. I’m still not going. I’m not going willingly as your victim.”

The pistol lifted, pointed right at the middle of Chad’s chest. He was going to die after all. A gunshot exploded. Chad’s heart stuttered, his stomach dropped. But he felt no pain.

Ron fell to the ground in front of him.

Jack rushed through the door and out to Chad. He pulled Chad into his arms even while, numbly, Chad stared down at Ron.

Joe Reeves soon followed his son outside. He bent down next to Ron. “Dead.”

“Excellent,” Jack said. “Just as I intended.” He stroked Chad’s hair. “Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

Chad thought really, Ron hurt him badly, but he said, “I’m okay, thanks to you.”

* * *

“I still have so many questions,” Chad whispered, leaning against him several hours later.

TICKET TO RIDE

"I know. Unfortunately the answers probably died with Epstein."

"So, what happens now?" The coroner and the crime lab people had all just left.

"Well, I wasn't even supposed to be here. There will be an inquiry."

Chad pulled away slightly and stared at him. "What?"

"It'll be all right. It's mostly routine."

Chad's blue eyes were filled with concern. "But-but you had to shoot him."

"Shh. I told you, babe, it's routine in officer involved shootings. I promise you, it'll be all right. Don't worry, please."

"I can't help it."

"I know." He rubbed his thumb across Chad's jaw. "I've seen worry on your face far too much. I want to see you smile. I love your smile. I want to see that smile often."

Chad did smile then, though he could see it faltered just a tiny bit. "So...um...sounds like you're thinking maybe a long-term relationship."

Jack kissed him. "No."

Chad blinked. "No?"

"Take maybe out of the equation. You use that word maybe too much. I'm definitely thinking long-term."

"Oh." Chad's smile widened. "Okay, then."

Jack grabbed his hand, feeling suddenly very good. "Have you given some thought to selling that great big house of yours and moving into a smaller place?"

"Maybe."

"There's that word again. *Maybe*."

Chad laughed. "Yeah. I'm thinking about it. Someday, maybe."

TICKET TO RIDE

Jack knew when he was subtly being told to back off. He didn't mind. Things felt great between them and Jack planned for them to get a lot better.

"So, Les."

Chad groaned.

He grinned and kissed the tip of Chad's perfect little nose.
"Want to go to dinner with me?"

"Hmm. Maybe."

SHAWN LANE

Shawn Lane believes love and passion know no boundaries. Shawn writes both erotic love stories involving men in historical or contemporary settings and interracial romances between men and women. Shawn is always looking for new stories and new characters to create while holding down life in California.

* * *

**Don't miss *At Long Last*
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When his best friend's younger brother gets a job at their law firm, Preston Reynolds begins to feel the same overwhelming attraction he felt for Scott Trask years earlier. But he couldn't be sexually attracted to the young gay man. Preston isn't gay.

Scott has been in love with Preston for years, but the man is straight, and he was married. And now that Preston is divorced, that doesn't mean he is any more available.

The more Preston tries to ignore his attraction, however, the more he thinks about it. Finding himself alone at the office one night with Scott, he finally surrenders to his urges. Afterward, Scott wants to talk about what happened, but Preston doesn't want to

analyze it, still certain he couldn't prefer men. When Preston suggests to the openly gay man that they keep things between them secret, however, the situation comes to a head.

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