

In His Arms Again

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Chapter One

FLIGHT 757 direct from Paris to New York was two hours behind schedule thanks to an unexpected rainstorm, and Ayden Judson wasn't amused.

After four weeks in Europe promoting *Radiance*, Ja'Von Cosmetics' latest fragrance, he was ready to be back in New York and at his corporate office, and more importantly, he wanted to sleep soundly in his own damn bed. He spent at least twenty-five weeks a year living out of a suitcase and calling luxury hotels home, but at heart he was a New York boy; he wanted to be close to his home base and close to Yankee Stadium. And frankly, being home allowed him to keep a very close eye on his younger brother, who was too often allowed to sniff out trouble when Ayden wasn't around to intervene.

Ian was a good guy, but he lacked discipline, and he didn't always exercise common sense.

Ian's twenty-thousand-dollar monthly allowance allowed him, a less than mature twenty-three-year-old, to view life as an endless parade of parties filled with laughter, pretty girls, and friends perfectly content to let Ian foot the often massive bill for their mishaps and misadventures. Why not? Ian never complained. Being the life of the party was some sort of thrill for him, and he didn't take anything seriously because he had no reason to. Thanks to their late father's

overly generous trust fund, Ian would never be required to work a day in his life, which left him completely free to run as wild as he liked.

Granted, he was tamer now than he had been during his teen years, when he'd played around with a rough crowd. DUIs, possession, one charge of grand theft, breaking and entering, acts of vandalism, sexual marathons.... Ian had pushed every envelope possible for the sheer thrill of it, and as a result, he had been tossed from a grand total of seven boarding schools by the time he was sixteen. He had a thirst for adventure, the more reckless and dangerous the better, and more than once Ayden had feared Ian's nonchalant nature would eventually get him or someone else killed. He continually—*habitually*—operated at an all-or-nothing, no-precautions-considered level in an obvious effort to earn crumbs of attention from his not exactly doting mother.

Rachel Judson—Ian's mother, Ayden's stepmother—was the most self-centered, selfish, self-involved woman Ayden had ever known. It was nauseating. A former beauty queen, Rachel was well versed in the usage of old-school Southern charm; nothing she did or said was sincere, and everything was carefully calculated well in advance to guarantee Rachel achieved exactly the reaction she most wanted. In Rachel's world, she always came first and foremost, leaving Ian to take a very distant second place.

With that in mind, Ayden understood why Ian had acted out during his childhood and his teenage years. The problem was, he was no longer a child or a teen; he was a grown man who refused to act like a grown-up, and there was nothing Ayden could do or say to make Ian understand he was wasting his life. It was beyond frustrating. Ian had endless

potential: he was smart as well as creative, and he could have excelled at numerous careers or ventures, but he seemed content to flounder about aimlessly, just as Rachel happily did in her carefully constructed, oh-so-pampered world. Ayden's repeated attempts to motivate Ian had all fallen on deaf ears, with Ian insisting that Ayden was merely jealous.

"You were born thirty, Ayden. Seriously. You've always been Mr. Responsibility. And it just pisses you off that I can have fun and live the way I want and you can't, and that's why you want to change me."

"You can't really believe that? Come on, Ian! I think we both know that I didn't have a lot of choice when it came to being Mr. Responsibility, as you call it. Dad died. You were eighteen, so I stepped in—"

"Don't make it sound noble. You wanted to step in. You wanted Ja'Von. Hell, you could have walked away from it all, but instead you completely sold out to hold on to Ja'Von, and now you're miserable."

The conversation usually ended on that note, with Ian realizing he had pushed too far, and Ayden walking away.

Worse, at least from Ayden's standpoint, was knowing that Ian's harsh words had hit damn close to the truth; he had indeed sold out, as Ian so callously put it, but the circumstances weren't exactly black-and-white. Not that Ian understood. How could he? Spencer had set Ian up for life on proverbial Easy Street while leaving Ayden burdened with a decision no one deserved to face. How was that anywhere near fair? Or right? Spencer had betrayed Ayden in a dozen ways, and yes, Ayden had been the one to decide to give in to

the demands that Spencer made, but he hadn't made that decision lightly, and the conclusions he had come to hadn't been motivated merely by greed.

No, he had made decisions based on several factors, and in doing so, Ayden knew he had played right into Spencer's hands.

Five years after his father's death, Ayden was still angry, still bitter, but what was done was done, and he couldn't call for some sort of redo, couldn't opt to take a different path, as too many people were depending on him. Plain and simple. *Mr. Responsibility*. He was the CEO of JaVon; he had employees that looked to him, respected him, and trusted his judgment; and Ayden couldn't disappoint them, nor could he walk away from JaVon, because the simple fact was that he loved the company. It was in his blood. It was a family legacy. Spencer had begun grooming him at an early age to take control, and Ayden had spent countless years working tirelessly to prove himself. He earned business, marketing, and accounting degrees from NYU, and he absorbed everything Spencer taught him about the ins and outs of not only JaVon Cosmetics, but the cosmetic industry as a whole, domestic and abroad.

He did everything—*everything* Spencer requested—without complaining. But while Spencer had approved of Ayden's professional accomplishments, he took vast and endless exception to Ayden's personal life.

He was twenty-one when he finally came out to his father, and Ayden hadn't expected a delighted reaction. His father wasn't overly open-minded. But Ayden was still shocked by Spencer's angry outburst, his hateful words, his

declaration that no son of his would be a fag, and his demand that Ayden reevaluate his “choices” if he wanted to be a part of Spencer’s family.

For six months, father and son didn’t speak, but Spencer had finally called an end to the cold war of silence. He made it clear that he wasn’t thrilled with Ayden’s “issues,” but as long as Ayden didn’t flaunt any of his relationships and didn’t do anything to cause the family embarrassment or shame, Spencer would keep his opinions to himself.

It wasn’t the unconditional acceptance Ayden wanted, but he told himself that it was at least a step in what might become the right direction if he allowed Spencer some more time to adjust and come to terms with who Ayden really was.

Instead, all along his father had been preparing to back Ayden into a corner, to force him into living a lie.

The day after his father was buried, when the family gathered for the reading of the will, Ayden was completely blindsided.

The document began as expected, with Spencer making generous provisions for Rachel and Ian and giving some money to various charities he had supported over the years. He also set aside various endowments for certain employees. Spencer liked to reward hard work. It was one of the things that had made those who worked at JaVon and on their household staff loyal and devoted, despite the fact most of those employees had little use for Rachel and her overly haughty, lady-of-the-manor attitude.

Impressed that his father had wanted to provide for so many, Ayden waited quietly until his name was mentioned.

As expected, Spencer praised his business sense and his devotion to JaVon, and he made it clear that Ayden was his first and foremost choice to control JaVon and all other business and real estate holdings.

“However, there are certain stipulations to Ayden’s inheritance.” The lawyer had looked up at Ayden with something resembling pity in his eyes, which had confused Ayden as much as the sudden “stipulations” clause. “As I have previously stated, I cannot find fault with Ayden’s professional accomplishments. There is no doubt in my mind that, under his control, JaVon will continue to be an industry leader and pioneer.

“That being said, as a father, I can and do find fault with how my son has chosen to conduct his personal affairs.”

“What? That the hell does that mean?” Ayden had snapped, aware that Rachel was watching with a knowing look in her eyes. “I’ve never done anything to embarrass this family.” He had never run wild and reckless as Ian did, had never been arrested or in trouble. He was a good person, and he didn’t understand—at first—what his father was referring to, but suddenly realization dawned, and Ayden felt sick.

Clearing his throat and obviously feeling uncomfortable, the lawyer continued. “In life, I must admit I took on a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy when it came to Ayden’s social life, and I give credit to Ayden for not flaunting his perversions. I know he did so out of respect for me, and I am grateful for that consideration.

“However, with my passing, Ayden no longer has any cause to continue keeping his less than desirable life choices concealed, and that is a cause of concern for me. I love my son. I want only what is best for him.” Again, the lawyer glanced at Ayden. “With Ayden’s best interest in mind, I have attached several stipulations that he must abide by if he does indeed want to maintain control of Ja’Von.”

In the same monotone voice, the lawyer had gone on to outline the stipulations: Ayden had to be married before the occasion of his thirtieth birthday, and if he wasn’t, complete control of Ja’Von would revert from him to Rachel. Period. No excuses. And added to that, once he was a married man, if it was discovered—at any point—that he had relations with anyone other than his wife, he would instantly lose Ja’Von to Rachel’s control. Again, no excuses. *None*. And no, there was no option of divorce; he couldn’t file for an annulment, nor could his wife. If either did, the company would land in Rachel’s hands.

The shock—the horror of it—was almost more than Ayden could wrap his mind fully around, but once the shock faded, anger took its place: burning, seething, anger that chewed at Ayden’s insides.

He hired half a dozen lawyers to review his father’s will, looking for any possible loophole or ground for contesting, but each one came back with the same news, informing him that there was nothing.

“It’s legal. Perfectly so. Your father hasn’t asked you to do anything illegal, which would, of course, negate the document and give you room to fight within the legal system

and most likely come away the victor, but that isn't the case."

Ayden was devastated and furious. He hated his father, and he hated Rachel, but he realized his final hope rested in Rachel. She had the power to save him. All she had to do was take control of Ja'Von, then turn around and return control to Ayden, which would easily bypass Spencer's will. But Rachel made it painfully clear she wouldn't do it or even consider it when he went to her to try to appeal to her sense of fairness. She basically laughed in his face. She reminded him that she had never forgotten the countless time he had tossed insults—veiled and otherwise—in her direction, and seeing him suffer was payback.

"Come on, Rachel! You don't want Ja'Von. You don't know how to manage a company, and you don't want to learn."

"Well, I'll give you that, dear. I don't want to manage Ja'Von. And if you decide that you can't live with the stipulations your father outlined, once the company is under my control, I fully intend to sell it."

"Rachel—"

"I'll collect one hell of a windfall, while you will be without your precious Ja'Von."

"You really are a bitch."

"And you're a fag who was a disappointment to your father. He hated you. And I think his will proves that, don't you?"

The blow was a low one, but it pushed Ayden toward a decision, one he didn't want to make, but what choice did he

actually have? He loved JaVon. He couldn't stand to see it sold to the highest bidder. But getting married, denying who he was.... The thought made him sick. Just the idea of stepping into the shadows and living a lie seemed wrong and unfair, but try as hard as he might, he couldn't find another logical option.

In the end, he decided to do what Spencer demanded, and when Rachel heard the news, she again laughed.

"And really, Ayden, what woman do you believe will marry you, when we both know you will have no interest in your husbandly duties?"

"I guess I'll just have to find someone willing to marry me for the reasons you married my father: money and social status."

"I loved your father."

"Try that lie on someone who might believe it."

"You know what, Ayden? Go ahead. Get married. But it won't work. Eventually you won't be able to control your perversion, and when you get caught with your pants down, I'll be ready and waiting to take JaVon."

Ayden knew her well enough to know it was a genuine threat, but he put it from his mind to focus in the more pressing problem, and that was finding himself a bride-to-be who could and would accept what he had to offer. He looked at the situation from a practical, logical standpoint; he didn't want to misguide or lie to anyone, and he intended to make certain the woman he married understood love and romance wasn't going to factor into their union. He wasn't Rachel. He didn't intend to act in some deceptive manner, but after

mentally reviewing the various women he knew, Ayden couldn't think of one he would feel comfortable with.

But nearly three months after Spencer's death, he received a surprise visit.

Anya Morgan was a twenty-three-year-old woman with blond hair and blue eyes who appeared at Ayden's office without an appointment, but Ayden agreed to see her when she explained that she felt they were in a position to help each other. She knew about his situation and what Spencer's will demanded of him; apparently she had overheard Rachel talking to one of her friends about the stipulations and her belief that Ayden would fail to abide by what Spencer had outlined. Anya admitted she found the stipulations unfair and more than a little disgusting, but Anya also understood complicated family situations, as she had one of her own.

"Look, I'll lay it on the line," she began as she sat across from him in his office. "I'm a lesbian. I figured that out around the time I was fifteen years old, but no one within my family knows. I know them well enough to know they simply will not react well, and though it may make me a coward, I'm not ready to face their reactions."

"So you want...?"

"I want us to get married. You get to keep Ja'Von. I get to focus on law school. My parents think I've settled down, and whenever you need me to play hostess, I'll be there. And I won't make any insane demands from you."

"What about any relationships you might have?"

“I’ve learned how to be discreet. And I will continue to be. I won’t do anything that will give anyone cause to doubt the nature of our marriage.”

She had given the situation a lot of thought, she made a good argument, and she was attractive, charming, and intelligent. Ayden realized he liked her. He could see them getting along in the rather unique circumstance that would be their marriage, and that was important, as he had no desire to be stuck with someone he couldn’t stand.

Within a month of their first meeting, he and Anya announced they were engaged—they saw no reason to waste time—and six weeks after that, they married in a small ceremony with a few friends and family in attendance. Anya’s parents were delighted. Rachel was furious. Ayden could see it in her eyes, but she didn’t make comment, mostly because she didn’t want to make a scene that would somehow reflect badly on her.

Once the fanfare of the wedding was behind them, Ayden was relieved when they easily fell into a comfortable pattern.

There was no tension between them. They got along well and maintained separate rooms. Ayden’s attention remained focused on Ja’Von, and Anya focused on school, and along the way a deep friendship developed between them. It was exactly what Ayden had hoped for. No, he and Anya didn’t share a deep passion, nor were they in love, but they had grown to love each other in a different way, and Ayden knew that was more than many married couples could actually claim. He didn’t have to lie or pretend with Anya, and true to

her word, Anya was discreet when it came to any and all relationships she engaged in.

On more than one occasion, she reminded Ayden that he had the same option, that she didn't expect—or want—him to live like some sort of monk, because personally she didn't think it was healthy.

"It's too risky for me, Anya. For all I know, Rachel has me followed. If she catches me with someone else, I'm screwed."

"Ayden, you are far smarter than Rachel, and I am sure you can stay more than one step ahead of her."

Admittedly, it was tempting to take the chance, to enjoy at least the occasional casual encounter, but Ayden always refrained from crossing the line; he didn't want to fall into a trap, didn't want to provide Rachel with possible ammunition to take Ja'Von away from him and ruin everything. After the lengths he had gone to, he couldn't slip up and fail. Period. If he had to deny himself, he would; it was all part of the sacrifice he had willingly made when he decided to do as his father demanded.

When he was alone, however, he couldn't deny that he did miss being close to someone; he missed touching, being held, missed the sensation of skin against skin and the feel of warm lips crushed against his.

He had never had a long-term relationship before Spencer's will blew his life out of the water and right to hell, but he had always hoped he would someday find someone to fall in love with. That, however, ceased to be an option when he married Anya. He tried hard not to think too much about

what wouldn't ever be; all it did was depress him, leave him anxious and annoyed, but lately.... *Fuck it all to hell.* Lately Ayden found himself so obsessed with the idea of sex that it was driving him crazy. *And he hated it.* He wasn't some horny teenager. Damn it, he was a grown man, nearly five years into a marriage that wasn't traditional, but it worked well for him and Anya. Shaking his head, disgusted with himself, Ayden raked a hand through his dark brown hair, taking a deep breath.

In another hour or so, the plane would land, he would be home, and a cold shower and a good night's sleep would help rebuild his perspective.

As he rolled that thought around in his mind, the plane suddenly lurched, hitting a batch of unexpected turbulence. Gripping the armrest, Ayden steadied himself as a few passengers behind him called out in frightened surprise.

He could hear voices whispering assurances as the plane lurched again, and Ayden couldn't hide a wince. Again the plane shook, more violently this time, but Ayden barely had time to process his fear as someone was suddenly falling across him, half landing in his lap, half landing in the empty seat beside him.

Instinctively his arms went out to help settle the weight in his lap, and Ayden blinked to find himself staring into eyes that were a deep brown, fringed with dark lashes, and filled with a fair amount of fear.

"God, I am so sorry." The man gave a faint blush, staining skin that was ivory and flawless, skin that looked smooth and almost impossibly translucent. It was insane for

Ayden to notice, considering he had a stranger half-perched in his lap.

Another bout of turbulence had the plane trembling, and a voice came over the PA system, instructing passengers to remain seated and fasten their seat belts.

“Wherever your seat is, I don’t think now is the time to try and get to it.” Ayden helped the other man right himself and shift into the empty seat. “I’m sure this is nothing serious. We’ll be out of it any minute.” He spoke mostly in an effort to calm the stranger’s obvious distress and to distract himself from the host of emotions that had bombarded him the moment the man with the unbelievably beautiful brown eyes landed in his lap without warning.

Fastening the seat belt, the man glanced at Ayden. “I was trying to get back to my seat from the restroom, and—” Another unexpected jolt shook the plane violently, and Ayden felt a jolt of another variety when a strong, long-fingered hand grabbed at his in a clear effort to find comfort and reassurance.

Without hesitating, Ayden wrapped the hand in his own, seeing the man’s fear and wanting to calm it. “Are you from New York?” It was really something of an inane question, but Ayden figured it would be distracting.

“Yeah. I’ve lived there my entire life.”

“Were you in Paris on vacation?”

“No... well, sort of.” He shook his head. “My sister lives there. She just had a baby, and I went over for a visit.”

“I was there for business.” Ayden offered. “I’m heading home after four weeks.” *And I was sitting here with sex on*

my mind, and then you fall into my lap, and now I'm thinking about sex once again. Shit! This wasn't good. What was this? Sexy men didn't just fall—literally—into his lap, but damn, this one had, and he was more than merely sexy; he was stunning, with black hair and dark brown eyes, features that appeared classically perfect, and *Christ*, if he didn't have the most delicious mouth Ayden had ever seen.

Silence fell between them for a moment, and soon the pilot announced it was safe to unfasten their seat belts. At that announcement, the brown-eyed beauty realized he was still gripping Ayden's hand, and he quickly released it.

"Sorry. I've never been very good with flying." He half smiled and unfastened the seat belt while Ayden watched. "Thank you, for letting me sit and—well, I'm really sorry I just fell on you the way I did...." He blushed again, and Ayden decided it was endearing, charming. The man was clearly somewhat shy, and Ayden realized he liked that; hell, he realized he liked everything he had seen so far, and damn it if he didn't want to see more.

"It's not a problem...."

"Simon."

"It's not a problem at all, Simon." He held out a hand. "I'm Ayden, by the way." A shiver of fear or anticipation or both ran up Ayden's back, settling in his chest as Simon took his hand, shaking it, each of them holding on for a moment longer than necessary as their gazes locked and held.

In that moment, on some subconscious level that quickly became conscious, Ayden realized he had finally

come face-to-face with a temptation he didn't have the strength to resist, and what's more, he truly didn't want to try to resist anymore. It would have been futile. He knew it in his gut, and the way Simon looked at him assured Ayden he was feeling the same sensation, the same intense, almost magnetic pull.

After five years of denying himself, resisting temptation, distracting himself with work and family concerns, Ayden was at a crossroad, but he had no control of the direction he was about to take.

Chapter Two

IT WAS nearly two o'clock in the morning by the time Ayden made it home, but he wasn't sleepy.

He let himself into the apartment quietly so as not to wake Anya, and after a few minutes in his home office, idly checking through a daunting stack of mail, he slipped into his room with a relieved sigh. It really was wonderful to be home. He hoped he would be there for a while, at least until the next product promotion required him to venture off yet again. And the holidays were around the corner, which meant any traveling would prove doubly daunting, with endless lines, countless delays, and messy weather.

Stripping out of his thoroughly wrinkled suit, Ayden stepped into a steaming shower, sighing again as nearly too-hot water rained down on his exhausted muscles. *God!* He hadn't felt like this in years, and it was magnificent. *Incredible.* He ached in the most delicious way, his flesh felt hypersensitive—*alive*—and he couldn't control the smile that pulled at his lips as he stood there allowing himself to remember in vivid and lucid detail exactly how he had come to feel what he was feeling...

AYDEN slipped from the seat first, quietly going to the bathroom and stepping into the stall that was surprisingly spacious. His heart was racing. He had never done anything remotely like this before, not even when he was a single man; it was risky and dangerous, and there was a chance someone would discover them, but Ayden realized he didn't care this time. He couldn't. He wanted this, wanted Simon too much to care about anything beyond satisfying that desire before it drove him completely insane.

While he waited for Simon, he shrugged off his jacket and did away with his tie, and he was unbuttoning his shirt when the door opened and Simon quietly stepped inside, closing and locking the door behind himself.

They were, Ayden realized, the same height at six-one, putting them eye to eye. He leaned against the wall, and without a word, Simon stepped into his arms, and instantly their lips came together. Frantic. Desperate. The kiss was demanding, needy, completely unlike anything he had ever known before, and Ayden didn't want it to end as Simon's tongue snaked around his and he tangled a hand in Simon's thick black hair that was impossibly soft. It felt like strands of silk as it wrapped around his fingers, and he felt a dozen different sensations flooding him, consuming him, and it was remarkable.

A shiver of anticipation ripped through him when Simon's hands slipped under his shirt to touch bare, heated skin.

"Simon...." He shivered again, dropping his head back against the wall as Simon's lips went to his neck and Ayden whimpered out loud. "Please... God, you have no idea... no

idea how much I want you... need you....” Lost in the sensual haze, he tugged Simon’s T-shirt free from his pants. Simon instinctively lifted his arms, and Ayden tossed the shirt aside, his hands roaming freely over Simon’s chest.

His skin was smooth and warm, the muscles beneath taut, and with a growl, Ayden’s naturally dominate nature exerted itself.

Turning them, he pressed Simon against the wall before attacking his lips with another frenzied kiss. It was intoxicating and exhilarating—a clash of teeth and lips and tongue. He could hear Simon struggling to hold back noises of appreciation, and it made Ayden wish they were alone somewhere, someplace Simon wouldn’t have to hold back. He would have so loved to hear the man begging for release, calling out his name, but for now just knowing how much Simon wanted him was enough to drive Ayden beyond control.

Whispering words of praise, Ayden kissed his way down the slim chest, sucking each nipple into his mouth, tasting and teasing relentlessly while Simon tugged at his hair and whimpered and Ayden reached for the buckle in Simon’s belt.

Hands shaking, he stood, and they whispered words of encouragement as they each quickly undressed the other.

As soon as they were naked, they came together again, pressing close, their engorged cocks rubbing together. “Ayden...” Simon gripped his shoulders. “Now... please. I need to feel you inside me... please, please....” He shivered again, and Ayden was lost. Simon was frantic and breathless. Ayden couldn’t recall the last time he had wanted

someone so badly; he was beyond caring about anything but what he and Simon were feeling in this moment. His heart felt as if it were going to explode from his chest; he was so hard it was agonizing as Simon stepped away long enough to find a condom in his wallet. With a flushed smile, he pressed it into Ayden's waiting hand.

Again, their gazes held, and Ayden realized if he wasn't careful he would fall into those eyes and never find his way out, and he couldn't help but wonder if not finding his way out would be so bad.

Pushing the thought from his mind, he kissed Simon again, long and hard, and in an instant the passion exploded.

In the cramped room, with Simon bent over the sink, Ayden fucked him hard and fast, their skin blazing; it was wild and intense and consuming. Ayden didn't want the moment to end, but the edge was there before he realized it. He didn't have the strength to hold back his release. Heat exploded from within him, and Ayden came along with Simon, who spilled into his hand, choking back a satisfied scream.

Long moments later, once they had regained their breath and balance, they cleaned themselves and dressed in silence.

Knowing the fight was close to ending, they left the room, Ayden going first, returning to his seat, and a few minutes later, Simon walked past him, going to his own seat to prepare for the plane's landing. He glanced back at Ayden before sitting down and smiled at him. Ayden couldn't help it; what had just passed between them was surreal and

crazed, but he didn't regret it, not even a little. How could he? How could he regret perfection? Nothing had ever felt as wonderful as Simon's tight ass gripping him, milking him, taking him to a height Ayden had never before achieved, and damn it, he wanted—needed—to go there again, but he had no idea if Simon would want that.

Really, what did they know about each other? They had exchanged names, but first names only, and Ayden knew what he wanted wasn't fair; the decent thing to do would be walk away without pushing for more.

He was, after all, a married man. He had a host of issues and baggage, and it wouldn't be fair to force that on Simon. Right? For all he knew, Simon might have issues with seeing a man who was married; and if he did, it wasn't as if Ayden could blame him, but he knew he had to try. He had to make his desire to see Simon again known, or he would never forgive himself. He would always feel as if he had allowed something—someone—incredible to slip through his fingers, and he couldn't do that. Christ, he had already sacrificed so much. And yes, he knew he was to blame for the state of his life; and yes, there was no denying that seeing Simon again would be a little dangerous; but if he was careful and he covered his tracks, there was no real chance that they would get caught.

Somewhere in the back of his mind—in a place where he was still somewhat capable of rational thought—Ayden knew he was acting like a man with an addiction. Simon was the drug he couldn't resist, that he didn't want to resist, despite knowing how badly it could all end if Simon did indeed agree to see him again.

By the time the plane landed, Ayden was anxious and nervous, and he wasn't a man at all accustomed to feeling nervous. But Simon did that to him. He was in knots. What if Simon had no desire to see him again? What if he did? In the span of little over an hour, his world had become a carousel of emotions, and he felt like he was spinning out of control, but he didn't want it to stop. He wanted to remain on the ride until the end.

After landing, Simon glanced back at him once, but they lost each other in the shuffle of disembarking passengers.

Ayden didn't see him again until they reached the baggage claim, and his hands were shaking and sweating.

Again, their eyes locked, and again Ayden felt the rush, the desire, the connection, and it nearly took his breath away. What the hell was happening to him? He wasn't prone to flights of fancy. He was logical Mr. Responsibility as Ian called him, but at the moment, he wasn't acting at all responsible, and frankly, he didn't care to. He only cared about what he wanted. And what he wanted was another chance to see Simon again. At least once. He didn't think that was too much to ask for, all things considered, but he wasn't certain how to ask as Simon slowly walked to him and Ayden felt himself smile, because not smiling at Simon wasn't possible.

"So, I'm not sure how this works." Simon gave him a shy smile. "I mean, do we walk away and leave things as they are, or do we maybe admit we'd like to see each other? At least, I would like it if we could.... Well, I would like to see you...." Ayden watched as he blushed and glanced away, and it was the most charming sight he had ever seen. He loved

that Simon had a shy side. It was, for lack of a better word, adorable. How could a man be adorable and sexy? It seemed that those two things shouldn't go together, but with Simon they did, which made him all the more appealing and impossible to resist.

"I'd like to see you again too, Simon." Ayden said the words softly, part of him unable to believe he was actually saying them. "It sounds cliché, but I don't normally do what we just did. It was so spur-of-the moment...." He shook his head, feeling completely out of his element as Simon handed him a business card. Ayden glanced at it, discovering that the object of his desire's last name was Gibson and he owned and operated an art gallery called Divine, a place that Ayden had heard of but never visited. And the name Simon Gibson was familiar to him. He had heard it before, but he couldn't place where, and he didn't have time to think about it as he pocketed the card and handed Simon one of his own.

Simon looked at the card Ayden handed him. "JaVon Cosmetics? My sister's a fan." He slipped the card into his pocket while Ayden watched, happy to just have a moment to look his fill, to memorize everything about the man. Just being near Simon sent his senses reeling. He was light-headed, his heart raced, and he wanted to reach out and touch him; but he knew he couldn't, not standing in the middle of a very public airport.

Shaking his head to try to regain some control of his emotions—and his libido—Ayden forced himself to take a step back. "Tomorrow. I'll call you tomorrow. I have to be at the office early, but I'll—"

"It's okay. Whenever you get a chance. If you want to."

“I want to. Believe me. I want... I want to see you again, Simon.” Hell, he didn’t want to walk away from him now, but he had to; he had to maintain some control, even if he wanted nothing more than to lose control completely with Simon. It would have been so easy. And Ayden found that realization more than a little frightening. He was a man who valued being in total and complete control, but Simon.... God, Simon stirred something inside him that Ayden hadn’t known existed before the brown-eyed beauty had fallen into his lap. How insane! It sounded impossible that so much could change so quickly, but for Ayden it had, and when Simon looked at him, he knew he wasn’t alone in feeling, as if their lives had just taken a rather drastic turn. If it was magic or fate or just ordinary psychosis, Ayden couldn’t say, and really, he supposed it didn’t matter one way or the other.

In companionable silence, they gathered their bags and stepped outside the airport, where Simon quickly hailed a cab and Ayden passed his bags to his driver, who had been awaiting his arrival. Briefly he considered offering Simon a ride, but ultimately he decided against it, fearing he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands to himself.

Instead he watched as Simon climbed into the cab, and Simon smiled.

Waving once, Ayden mouthed the word “tomorrow,” and then the cab pulled away, and Simon was gone....

STANDING there in the shower, Ayden smiled again, unable to help himself. He was happy in a way that was completely foreign to him. He felt rejuvenated. Alive. Meeting Simon Gibson was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and Ayden didn't doubt that he would see him again. And soon. Christ! He wanted Simon with him now. It was crazy. He had just met the man, but he already knew that Simon would become very important to him, and while it was all a little insane—not to mention dangerous—Ayden found himself willing and ready to take the chance, to see what could happen.

He knew, of course, that he would have to be honest with Simon; he would have to tell Simon about his marriage and Spencer's will and its stipulations, about his troubled relationship with his stepmother—Ayden didn't want to think about how his new lover might react to the complex, complicated story, so he quickly pushed thoughts of that conversation from his mind. No, lying to Simon wasn't an option. Ayden would be honest, but he didn't have to think about that now when the delicious memory of making love to Simon was still so fresh and vivid. He wanted—he needed—to concentrate on that for a while.

After returning to his bedroom, he rummaged around and found a pair of cool and comfortable silk pajama bottoms. He was relaxed from the shower, and as he settled in bed, thoughts of Simon continued to call out to him. *Simon*. He laughed at himself. Damn it, he was acting like a love-struck teenager, which went against his normal character in every possible way, but Ayden decided he could quite easily live with that. Simon brought out a side of him that felt young and energized and excited. How could that be

a bad thing? Sure, Ayden hadn't a clue what the future held or how he would work what Simon made him feel into his already overly complicated life, but that was okay. They could and would figure it out as they went along, and maybe that was part of the excitement.

Deciding it was too much to try to sort out during the middle of the night, Ayden finally relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

BY THE time his alarm clock rang, he was somewhat rested, but he still rode an emotional high that was simply thrilling. Humming to himself, he dressed and went into the kitchen, where steaming coffee was already waiting.

He poured himself a cup, added a fair amount of sugar and cream, and settled down at the table. He wasn't in a particular hurry to get to work, and that was rare for him, especially after a lengthy time away from the office; normally he was eager to get back to the grind, have a host of meetings, and find out what had happened during his time away. He trusted his employees to handle nearly any issue, but on occasion there were fires only he could put out, and odds were he would have at least a few awaiting his attention. But this time that didn't motivate him to pick up his oddly leisurely pace.

He was still sitting at the table twenty minutes later when Anya breezed in wearing a white satin robe, her long hair falling freely around her shoulders, and she smiled when she saw him lingering there.

After dropping a kiss on his cheek, she made her way to the coffee pot, and Ayden smiled, knowing how desperately Anya needed the first cup in the morning. She was truly a coffee snob; she insisted on only the best, and she enjoyed trying out a variety of flavors, which tended to leave Ayden cautious about what he was drinking.

“What time did you get in?” Anya came to the table and sat across from him, both hands wrapped around the steaming mug like it was a lifeline.

“It was close to two. Flight was delayed, thanks to rain.”

“I made it in just before one.”

“Working on a case?”

“I’m working with Katie again.”

“Katie?”

“Katelyn Rivers.” A smile curved her lips as she offered the clarification. “We’re going to be defending that trio of NYU students who were recently indicted on rape charges. Katie thinks it will end up being pretty high profile.” Most cases were, when Katelyn Rivers was involved; she was one of the premier defense attorneys in New York and one of the many reasons Anya had happily accepted a position at McKinley, Rivers, & Newton shortly after she graduated from law school with honors.

Ayden had yet to personally meet the woman that Anya so admired, but he had seen her on television more than once, and frankly nothing about the woman appeared docile enough to warrant her being called “Katie.” But what struck Ayden the most was how Anya said her name. And how she blushed whenever she did. Clearly she was nursing a crush

mixed with a case of hero worship. Ayden suspected it might actually be more, though he opted not to push; he knew Anya would confide in him when she was ready. She usually did.

Should he? Ayden wondered if it was too soon to say anything about Simon; they hadn't even talked yet, and for all he knew, Simon might want nothing to do with him once he found out just how complicated Ayden's life too often tended to be. Deciding to put a Simon-related discussion on hold, Ayden broached another subject with more than a little amount of dread.

"Did you hear from either Ian or Rachel?" When he was out of town, sometimes they called Anya if they were in a bind, and usually one or the other or both did.

"I didn't hear from Ian, but I did have a phone call from the Dragon Lady."

"Shit. What now?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Anya's reply was sarcastic and dry.

"Seriously? She's out of money? Already? It's only the eighteenth, for crying out loud."

"You know Dragon Lady."

"I know it makes no sense that she can't live more than comfortably on twenty grand a month." Hell, the penthouse was paid for, as were the car services she used, which left Ayden to wonder exactly where Rachel's money went. "Did you transfer money into her account?" He had long ago given Anya the access to do so in case he was out of the loop; she was his wife, and she wasn't intimidated by Rachel. More

than once, Anya had told Rachel to go to hell. She didn't have any use for Rachel's spoiled rants and rages, and she took it personally anytime Rachel dared to insult Ayden.

"I transferred five grand. She wanted ten, so you'll likely hear from her again."

"Wonderful. How did my father ever put up with her?" It was a rhetorical question; no one could possibly provide an answer that Ayden would consider logical. "Strange that neither of us has heard from Ian. Shit. Do you think he's in trouble?"

"Well, not legally, because I would have certainly been the one he called."

"True."

"Maybe he's just lying low."

"Have you met Ian?"

"Yes." Anya laughed easily. "I don't know. Maybe he went away with a friend." He did that from time to time without bothering to tell anyone, which annoyed Ayden, but there really wasn't much he could do.

"He knew you were getting back in town last night, so I'm sure he'll be in touch."

"Maybe." Ayden sighed. "I'm sure he's fine. And I need to get to the office." *A few hours of work, and I'll give Simon a call and see if we can get together.* "There's a chance I might be a little late tonight."

"Same here."

"Working with Katie?" His tone was teasing, and she blushed.

“Maybe.”

“Have a good time.” He winked at her, but she only rolled her eyes. “I guess I’ll see ya later, love.” He kissed her cheek, and five minutes later, he left the apartment, briefcase in hand, already thinking about Simon. Was he up yet? Was he thinking about their meeting? Did he want Ayden with the same desperation Ayden wanted him? He wanted to know everything about the man who had captured his attention—and his affections—but the reality that he had to play this safe never left Ayden’s mind.

It was close to eight by the time he reached the office, and his personal assistant was there with at least a dozen calls, and e-mails he needed to return. The requests for meetings and the usual bombardment of business issues consumed him. He spent five hours on the phone with his executives and heard promotions for two new products. It was hectic as usual, and Ayden was diligent in handling each task, but by one o’clock, he was anxious for a chance to at least hear Simon’s voice.

He told Maryann to secure him at least half an hour, and once he was alone, he dialed Simon’s number.

Simon answered on the third ring, and Ayden smiled. “Told you I’d call.” He supposed as an opening, it was fairly lame, but he didn’t want to bother with clever; he just wanted Simon to know how eager he had been to talk to him.

“Ayden....”

“I would have called this morning, but I didn’t want to—”

“Look, I’m glad you called. I just... I can’t do this.”

“What do you...?” The emotional high he had been on began crashing at those words, and Ayden could hear his heart beat, but not from excitement. This time it was a feeling of dark dread that slowly began consuming him.

“I take responsibility for what happened last night. It was wild. Intense. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before.”

“And it was incredible.”

“I can’t deny that.” Something sad seemed to echo in Simon’s voice. “But I.... Look, the fact is, I didn’t realize I was sleeping with a married man until I read an article about you on the Internet and I.... Shit. Ayden, I feel like *shit*, knowing you have a wife at home—”

“Simon, it’s not what you think!”

“Right. It *never* is.”

“Please listen to me and let me explain.”

“There isn’t anything to explain. *You’re married*. God! I lost any trace of common sense last night, and I... well, I can’t blame you for what happened, because I did want you, but now I know the facts.”

“I know what it looks like. Believe me. But trust me, Simon; you don’t know the facts.”

“Spare me, Ayden. I don’t want to hear the usual song and dance.”

“Simon—”

“Just forget about me. I’m sure there are other men—”

“Christ, Simon, I don’t want other men! *Please* listen to me. I don’t expect anything from you, and if you never want to see me again, that’s understandable, but I need to tell you the entire story.” Ayden realized he was begging, but he didn’t care. “Things aren’t nearly as black-and-white as they seem. I need you to know that what happened between us meant something to me and I.... Please just meet me somewhere so I can explain.” *God!* This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be. He just found Simon; he couldn’t already be losing him, not without Simon at least knowing the truth.

“Ayden, please—”

“Give me fifteen minutes. I need you to know the truth.”

“And what is the truth?” Simon snapped. “Your wife doesn’t understand you? You’re not really gay? You’re just feeling curious? I’ve been played for a fool once. I fell for a man, and he was married, and I let myself buy into all his lies because I wanted to believe me loved me, but he didn’t. I wasted two years of my life. I won’t fall into that trap again. I just.... Understand that I can’t set myself up for another fall.”

Not allowing Ayden a chance to respond, he hung up the phone, leaving Ayden feeling cold, alone, and completely rejected. It was a nightmare. *Right?* This was a dream? He hadn’t just lost the most amazing man he had ever known—a person couldn’t go from heaven to hell so quickly and thoroughly. He actually had tears in his eyes. He hadn’t cried since his father’s funeral. Christ, he had never experienced heartbreak before, but this.... Damn it, this hurt was unlike anything he had ever known, but what was worse than Simon’s rejection was knowing Simon thought he was

some sort of asshole who randomly went around cheating on his wife with any gullible man he could find.

Numbly he hung up the phone and sat there for a moment replaying the conversation, cursing himself.

He had to fix this. He had to. Maybe Simon would still hate him—*understandably*—but at the very least, he had to tell Simon the truth. All of it. He owed Simon that much, at least, but Ayden knew it wouldn't be easy. He didn't blame Simon for hating him or for thinking he was a lowlife, but whatever else happened, somehow he needed Simon to realize that what had happened between them was special and not something Ayden would ever be able to forget.

I have to see him. One more time. Long enough to get him to listen, and then I'll walk away and leave him alone.

Leaving Simon alone was the last thing he *wanted* to do, but he would, as soon as Simon knew the truth.

Chapter Three

AYDEN left the office two agonizing hours after his conversation with Simon, and the chilled, overcast weather seemed to fit Ayden's mood.

He wasn't certain how he would convince Simon to talk to him, but he was going to try, and he hoped Simon might be willing to at least listen to his explanation. It likely wouldn't do much to change the way Simon felt, but Ayden needed him to understand that he hadn't been on the make for some cheap and meaningless fling. He wanted *more*. Insane or not, Ayden had worked himself into believing that maybe, just maybe, something lasting could indeed be built between him and Simon, but now that wasn't an option.

During the ride across town to Divine, the gallery Simon owned and operated, Ayden mentally prepared a speech.

No doubt he would have only limited time to convince Simon to hear him out, and he wanted—somewhat desperately—to say the right thing, something that would soften Simon's obvious resolve to hate him.

He had done a little research before leaving the office. Simon wasn't just the gallery owner; some of the work displayed there was his, and he was fairly popular within certain art circles. Ayden found that impressive. Some photographs of Simon's work were featured on the website. He was clearly quite talented—that much even Ayden could

decipher, despite his lack of actual knowledge when it came to art.

The site didn't offer much personal information. It just listed Simon's professional accomplishments and his degree in art history from NYU. But Ayden wanted to know more. He wanted to know everything about Simon, but that clearly wasn't going to happen. At this point, all he could do was damage control. He could explain his situation to Simon and hope Simon would at least not completely hate him.

When the car pulled to a stop, Ayden told the driver to go, that he would call a cab when he was ready to leave. Standing on the sidewalk, he stood looking at the redbrick, turn-of-the-century building, admiring the structure. Gathering his courage, which was more of a challenge than he cared to admit, he stepped inside.

The main lobby was warm and spacious with hardwood floors and large windows that filtered in light. "Hello? Simon?" He glanced around the empty room, feeling suddenly self-conscious as he waited for an answer.

When it came, it wasn't from Simon; instead, a young woman with short, spiked pink hair stepped easily into the room, dressed in some funky spandex green dress and black combat boots, with a red scarf wrapped around her neck.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for Simon."

"He's in the office." She shrugged. "Can I help you? We have some new pieces in. Some aren't yet on display. We're having a huge showing next week, so we're holding some pieces for that, but you're kinda cute, so I might be willing to

give you a little peep.” She flashed a smile, one that was obviously flirtatious, but Ayden shook his head, not certain what to make of the young woman.

“Actually, I’m just here to see Simon. It’s personal.”

“Really? Personal? Like, personal, or *personal, personal* kinda of personal?”

“I’m not really sure I understand the question, so can we just go with personal and leave it at that, Miss...?”

“Miss? Please, don’t go there. *So condescending.* My name is Gigi.”

“Okay, Gigi—”

“Have you ever done any nude modeling?”

“What?”

“Nude modeling? I’m working on capturing the human form and all that jazz. And let me tell you, the models my art teacher commissions are nowhere near attractive as you, so what do you say, sexy?”

“I... I’m not really... no. No, I’ve never nude modeled, and I don’t think—”

“What are you doing here?”

Glancing past Gigi, Ayden found himself faced with an angry Simon, who stood glaring, and Ayden instantly forget the young woman with her insane hair and questions that were hardly appropriate.

“Simon—”

“Damn it, Ayden, I made myself clear on the phone.”

“You did, but I.... Look, I just want to talk to you, Simon. Please.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“Please—”

“You can leave the same way you came in.” All the warmth that had darkened Simon’s eyes the night before was gone now, and Ayden was afraid he would never see that warmth again. That made him feel all the more frantic to reach Simon. “Look, whatever you have to say, I don’t want to listen. Okay? I acted like a fool last night, and that’s my fault....” He glanced at Gigi, who stood in between their standoff, looking from one to the other and back again, making no effort to hide the fact she was hanging on to every single word.

He wasn’t eager to air dirty laundry or make soul-deep confessions in front of Gigi, but it appeared he didn’t have much choice.

“I’m married.”

“Oh shit....” Gigi whispered, wide-eyed.

“Yeah, I’ve become aware of that fact, but thanks for confirming it,” Simon snapped in sarcastic irritation.

“I’m also gay.”

“Ayden—”

“My marriage isn’t what you think it is.” Ayden implored, wanting desperately to cross the distances that separated him from Simon. He wanted to be close enough to reach out and touch him, but he forced himself to stay put.

“I don’t want to hear this.”

"I kinda do." Gigi spoke up, earning a glare from Simon. "What? I don't know what the deal is here, but look at the guy for a second, Si. He's almost begging you to listen. And he's sort of cute. A little on the stuffy side, I'm guessing, and maybe too serious. But he seems sincere, and what harm is there in just hearing what he has to say?"

"Gigi...."

"I think you should listen to her," Ayden said. "She seems like a bright girl."

"She's a pain in the ass."

"But I'm family, and you have to love me." She glanced at Ayden. "I'm his cousin. He lets me work here part-time when I'm in college. Which, of course, isn't something you actually care about, because you're here to see Simon, and he's being all stubborn."

"Gigi, please—"

"If you don't listen, I'll tell Gigi everything, and I have a feeling somehow she'll make you listen to her."

"I can get behind that idea." Gigi grinned. "Why don't we go in Simon's office, sexy, and you can tell me all about it."

"Not a chance in bloody hell." Simon cursed under his breath. "Gigi, hold down the fort while I have this needless conversation with Mr. Judson." It was clear he wasn't happy, but the fact that he was willing to listen was a victory, at least from Ayden's standpoint, and he gave Gigi a grateful smile.

Simon waved at Ayden to follow him, and Ayden did without hesitation, praying rather feverishly as he went that

he wouldn't blow this chance to explain everything to Simon, because he knew he wouldn't receive a second opportunity.

They ended up in a small office with a cluttered desk, and Simon closed the door, then leaned against it.

"You've got five minutes."

"Simon—"

"Five minutes, Ayden. Not a second more." He folded his arms over his chest, and Ayden sighed and nodded.

Taking a breath, he tried to figure out where to start, how to condense it all into a five-minute story. "When I came out when I was twenty-one, I told my dad that I was gay, and he had a pretty negative reaction. He didn't say a single word to me for six months. And when he did finally decide to let me back into his life, he made it clear that he wasn't happy about the 'gay thing' as he called it, but he wouldn't completely cut me off, as long as I didn't 'flaunt my social life in front of him'.

"It was disappointing, but I figured that maybe, with time, he would become more accepting or understanding." Ayden paused, drawing in a breath. "Five years ago, my dad died from a heart attack. It was sudden. Unexpected. He never made peace with my being gay, and I was upset about that, but despite his disappointment with me in that regard, he devoted years training me to someday take over JaVon. He knew I loved the company. I love the people I work with, and frankly I'm damn good at what I do. I know the cosmetic industry inside and out, and I've been damn successful."

Shrugging off his coat, Ayden tossed it onto the overstuffed leather sofa before sitting down. "Anyway, when

my dad's will was read, he left me Ja'Von as everyone expected, but he added stipulations."

"Stipulations?"

"He said that if I wanted to keep Ja'Von, I had to get married before I turned thirty, and the marriage can't end in divorce or annulment; and added to that, if at any point someone can prove I've been unfaithful, Ja'Von will be stripped from me and handed over to Rachel."

"Who is Rachel?"

"Rachel would be my stepmother." A bitter laugh escaped him. "She and I aren't what you would call close. Actually she hates me, and truth be told, the feeling is mutual. We've been at odds since day one, when my father brought her home and announced that she was his sweet and wonderful fiancée.

"My mother died when I was six months old in a car accident, and I was ten when Rachel came into the picture. My dad figured I didn't like her because I saw her as some sort of competition for his affections." That hadn't been the case, but Spencer Judson refused to open his eyes to what Rachel really was and always would be. "Rachel is flighty and selfish., She cares only about herself and getting exactly what she thinks she deserves. She was never any kind of a real mother figure to me, and she did one hell of a number on my half brother, so the idea of her taking Ja'Von.... Well, it made me sick, just as my dad knew it would. He knew my weakness, and it was something that provided him with ammunition.... I had lawyers look at the will to try and find a loophole, but there wasn't one, and I panicked."

“You got married.” Simon whispered, but there was still confusion in his eyes when he looked at Ayden.

“It wasn’t what I wanted, but I couldn’t let Rachel take Ja’Von. She would have sold it to whoever threw the most money at her. I couldn’t see Ja’Von become part of some heartless conglomeration. I couldn’t give Rachel that kind of satisfaction.” It sounded somewhat insane, he knew it, and hearing himself tell the story, Ayden felt more than a little ashamed. “I decided that I would get married, and I admit I had no idea how I would actually find a wife, but someone ended up coming to me.”

Resting his arms on his knees, he stared down at the floor, unable to look at Simon, too afraid of what emotions he would see in those beautiful brown eyes. “My wife’s name is Anya, and she is my best friend. She’s a lawyer. Brilliant. Kind. And I love her dearly, but I am not in love with her, and she isn’t in love with me, because, quite frankly, I’m not her type.”

“Are you saying...?”

“That my wife is a lesbian. Yeah. She’s not ‘out’ to her family. Her dad would react even worse than mine, so what we have is a marriage based solely on convenience. She sees people on the side, and she’s discreet about it, and I....” He closed his eyes. “You likely won’t believe it, but I’ve been with only one person since Anya and I married, and that person was you. I’ve been far too cautious in the past. I was afraid someone might discover it if I... if I let myself get involved in a relationship, and that could cost me Ja’Von.... I can’t explain it, Simon, but last night when I met you, something inside of me just reacted, and I had to be with you.”

“Ayden—”

“That’s most of my story.” Finally he forced himself to face Simon. “I’ll spare you the tale of my reckless brother and how I’m still saddled with Rachel, because that really isn’t what’s important now.”

Simon shook his head. “I don’t even know what to say. It’s.... God, Ayden! I can’t even imagine what you felt like when your dad’s will was read. I’m sure it was shocking, and I think I can understand your reasoning behind the decisions you made, but... hell, you agreed to live a lie, and I... I don’t get it!”

“I know. Sometimes I can’t believe I made the choices I did. I just focused on Ja’Von, and I acted out of desperation.”

Pushing away from the door, Simon moved to lean against the front of his desk, and he was so close, it would have been easy for Ayden to reach out, to touch him, but he didn’t dare, because he sensed Simon didn’t want that.

“I’m not really sure exactly what you want me to say to all of this, Ayden.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“If I hadn’t found out myself that you were married, would you have told me any of this, or would I have been left in the dark?”

“I intended to tell you. It wasn’t a conversation I looked forward to. And I wish that you could have found out from me that I’m married.”

“Ayden—”

“Would it have made a difference? If I had been the one to tell you?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“I see.”

“This situation is complicated.”

“I know.” Ayden allowed himself a smile. “But if nothing else, Simon, please believe me when I tell you that last night was a first for me, and despite the fact you must hate me now, I am not sorry I met you.”

“I don’t know why, but I do believe you.”

“I’m glad. I...” He shook his head. “I spent all night and most of the day thinking about you and what you make me feel. I’ve never been much of a risk taker. I always act cautiously—it’s just part of who I am—but last night when you just landed in my lap, something happened, and I knew I had to throw caution to the wind.”

“I felt the same.” Simon whispered, looking at him. “Christ, Ayden, I felt connected to you in an instant, and what happened between us was beyond amazing; but regardless of what I felt then or what I might feel now, you are a married man.”

“In name only.”

“I believe that’s true, but even if you and Anya don’t have a traditional marriage, the fact is, you are married.”

“Simon—”

“And you said yourself, if you get caught having an affair, you will lose control of Ja’Von, and I know what that means.”

“Please....”

“I’ve been down this road, Ayden.” Quietly he sat down on the sofa. “We can never be a real couple—no going out, no doing something as simple as taking a walk, no being seen together in public. No holidays together. No days spent lazing around in bed. No staying all night, no introducing each other to our friends. I’ve lived that life. And for two damn years, I somehow convinced myself it was enough, but it’s been three years since Adam and I finally split, and I’ve done a lot of growing up.

“The point is, I can’t fall into that trap again.” Simon touched his hand, but only for a brief moment before he broke the contact. “I’m glad you told me everything, and I wish... well, I wish things were different. I wish we could explore this. I’ve never felt an attraction like this. It’s insane and terrifying and... please understand why I can’t put myself in position to end up falling hard for you.” Ayden could hear the raw emotion in his voice, and the desperation ripped at Ayden. He nodded, unable to speak for a moment, as his emotions were on edge and close to the surface.

Taking a breath, Ayden stood, picking up his jacket. “I do understand. And I... thank you for listening. I know you didn’t want to.”

“Ayden....”

“I think I’ve gone over my five minutes.” He didn’t risk a look at Simon as he crossed to the door, needing to make his escape. “I promise you, I won’t bother you again. I just needed you to know the truth.”

“Thank you. For telling me.”

“Take care of yourself, Simon.” Hand on the doorknob, he looked over his shoulder to see Simon standing there, his dark eyes reflecting sorrow, remorse, longing, all the emotions that Ayden was feeling. It all stared back at him, and Ayden wanted to cross the room again and take the man into his arms.

“I don’t regret last night. I need you to know that, Ayden. And if... if circumstances were different, I’d want to see where this thing between us could go, because I have a feeling it could be something amazing.”

Unable to respond to that, Ayden nodded once, and then he was out the door, focused only on escape. He needed distance between him and Simon. He was afraid he might fall apart for the first time in his life, and he didn’t want Simon to witness that. He didn’t want to make Simon feel worse for taking the stand he had, and he certainly didn’t want Simon to feel sorry for him, because pity wasn’t what he wanted. *Far from it.* But what he did want, he couldn’t have. It wasn’t possible, and despite the pain, the sense of loss he felt, Ayden understood why Simon felt the way he did, and he respected him for it.

Once outside the building, he stopped for a moment, drinking in several deep breaths of chilled, damp air.

It was over. *Whatever it was, whatever it could have been, it was over.* What else could he have expected once the truth came out? His life was a mess. He had chosen a company over his freedom, and finally, after years repeatedly telling himself that yes, he had done the right thing, Ayden was no longer so sure. Maybe he never would be sure again. Maybe that was his price to pay for placing professional

success over personal happiness. Maybe he truly deserved to feel as alone and miserable as he did in that moment.

With that thought in mind, he finally turned and started walking, not certain where he was going and not caring; where exactly he ended up didn't matter. What mattered was what he was walking away from, and the regret that consumed him.

Chapter Four

AS WAS his usually habit when he desperately needed a distraction, Ayden threw himself into work completely.

He spent eighteen hours a day at the office and at least two hours at the gym, and when he was home, he didn't sleep. At least, he didn't sleep well. He was tormented by dreams that were really memories of the too-short amount of time he'd spent with Simon, and those dreams left him aching for more, for what he couldn't have. Period. As much as he wanted—ached—to call Simon, it wasn't an option. Simon had made his thoughts perfectly clear, and Ayden was bound and determined to respect him.

Still he was restless, on edge for the first time. He wasn't just discontent, damn it. He was completely unhappy.

He felt a renewed disgust for his father, for himself. Yes, his father had made demands that were insane, but he had opted to do what his father wanted rather than take a stand and walk away. Losing Ja'Von would have been a bitter pill to swallow, but Ayden realized now that it wouldn't have been the end of the world. Far from it. Hell, he could have started a company of his own. It would have been a lot of hard and tiresome work, but that had never bothered him, and Ayden suspected he could have become successful. And he would have done so on his own terms, played by his own rules. There would have been no living a complicated and

often too complex lie that kept both him and Anya from being with someone they truly loved and wanted to be with.

One night—not even a full night—with Simon had him questioning every decision he had ever made, and Ayden hated it. He hated self-doubt; it was unproductive. *Annoying*. Losing a chance to really get to know Simon was disappointing, but Ayden assured himself there was no reason for him to focus on regrets. *He needed to move on and let go*. Ja’Von was his; he had made the necessary sacrifices to maintain control, and having made those sacrifices, those specific choices, there was no going back.

He did what he could to keep his sour mood in check, but Anya realized right off that something wasn’t right. After two weeks of waiting for him to open up on his own, she sat him down and demanded to know what exactly was wrong. She had never seen him so despondent. Sure, he was often a workaholic, but this was something altogether different, and frankly, she didn’t like it, and she had no problem telling him so.

“I know you, Ayden,” she snapped, clearly annoyed. “Whatever’s happening, tell me, and I can help you deal with it before you work yourself into an early grave.” Likely, Ayden realized, she figured whatever was troubling him was related to Ian or Rachel, but for once that wasn’t the case, and he decided she deserved to know what exactly had him out of sorts. He knew Anya was sincerely worried. No matter what, they were indeed friends, and that meant a lot to Ayden; and despite his usual inclination to suffer in silence, he told Anya everything.

From start to bitter finish, he told her about how he met Simon, how something had instantly sparked between them the moment their eyes met, and how they had acted on that attraction. It maybe should have been at least a little awkward, but surprisingly, it wasn't. Anya was his best friend, and really, who better to confide in? She wouldn't judge him; that much Ayden knew. Anya was much too kind for that, and she listened as he rattled on, explaining how he had honestly hoped he would get a chance to spend more time with Simon and get to know the man better, but now that would never happen. And he was completely miserable. Wasn't that insane? How could he be so upset, so worked up over a man he had shared one encounter with? He had never felt like this before, and it had him tied up in knots, which he hated, and Anya smiled when his tirade finally came to a breathless, agitated end.

Reaching across the table, she covered his hand with hers. "You really don't realize what has happened, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Ayden, honey, you have fallen head-over-heels in love."

"What? Are you insane? Anya, I can't... I don't.... You don't just fall in love with someone in a matter of minutes. Love takes time to build and grow."

"Well, sometimes that is the case. Sometimes people know one another for years before they realize that something really special exists between them, but sometimes love hits you like a freight train."

“You mean like love at first sight?” Ayden frowned. “That’s bullshit. It happens in movies and books, but not in real life and certainly not to someone like me. *Mr. Responsibility*. I’m really not the type to fancy myself in love after one encounter.”

“You are *Mr. Responsibility*. But even *Mr. Responsibility* isn’t immune to love, and you’ve got no say in when or how love finds you, and like it or not, *my dear husband*, love isn’t something you can control.”

“Anya—”

“You’re completely out of sorts over this guy.”

“Maybe.”

“You never had a serious relationship before Spencer’s will demanded you marry to keep Ja’Von, and in all the time we’ve been married, you never seen anyone else.” If he had, he would have told her. “But one look at Simon, and you weren’t able to stop yourself from acting on what he made you feel. I think that might say something. He’s obviously special, and I can tell you are miserable thinking you’ll never see him again.”

“What happened with Simon, it was intense and out of control, and I.... Hell, Anya, even if what you say is true, even if there are some serious feelings involved, none of it matters.”

“How can you say that?”

“I can say that because Simon has made it clear that he won’t let himself become involved with a married man.”

“So?”

“So....”

“So, change his mind.” Anya gave an exasperated sigh. “You are Ayden Judson, and you and I both know that when you set your sights on something you want, you don’t give up until you can claim victory.”

“This isn’t some business account.”

“No, this is personal, and that means the stakes are much higher.”

“I have to respect his wishes.” How could he not? “Look, I know you mean well, and I am so grateful that you listened to me spill my guts like some sort of hormonal teenage girl with her very first crush, but the fact is, Simon made his feelings clear. He’s been burned before. And if I push him to give me—give *us*—a chance and he does give in, odds are in the end he will get hurt again, and I don’t want that.”

“Why are you so sure he’ll get hurt?”

“Come on, Anya. Regardless what I feel, of what he feels, I can’t give him anything. I can’t promise him a future.”

“Ayden—”

“If you and I split or if I get caught with Simon, you know what happens.”

“You’ll lose Ja’Von.”

“Exactly.”

“And if you did?” Her voice was quiet and thoughtful as she handed him the question while watching him with a calm, steady gaze. “Hypothetically, mind you, if you did somehow end up losing control of Ja’Von, would that be the end of the world? I know you love Ja’Von, and I know you

care about the people who work there, but if push came to shove and Rachel ended up in control, would you fall apart?"

It felt as if she had been reading his mind, seeing the secret thoughts he had harbored since waking away from Simon, and hearing those questions presented to him out loud unnerved Ayden. He didn't like putting his life under a microscope. It made him feel off balance and out of sorts, and it confused him, made him wonder if he had always been completely wrong about what was and what wasn't important.

Shaking his head, he forced himself to consider the question, however unpleasant, and answer honestly. "I guess it wouldn't be the end of the world, which is kind of shocking after all I've gone through to hold on to JaVon."

"After Spencer's will was read, you were in shock, and rightfully so. But a lot of time has passed now, and maybe that shock has faded, and you're seeing things differently."

"Maybe. Maybe I'm just reeling from meeting Simon. Maybe things will calm down for me with some time."

"Really? Is this all about Simon? Or is it more? Hasn't some part of you always felt just a little restless?"

"Anya—"

"We're both living a lie for various reasons, reasons that our are own, but I know there are times when I feel the pressure, and I know you do as well."

"I guess I sometimes feel like I betrayed myself."

"I know. I feel the same. Not that I regret marrying you." She squeezed his hand and smiled gently. "But I... I don't

know. I guess that I sometimes wish I would have just faced down my parents and lived with their reaction, however unpleasant it might have been.” They hadn’t talked about their decisions, the choices they had made over the years, but doing so felt right, and Ayden was relieved to know he wasn’t alone in what he was struggling with. But he didn’t like the idea of Anya being unhappy. She deserved the best, and it made Ayden wonder what exactly was going on with her. When he asked, she smiled, blushing slightly, and it was easy for him to put two and two together.

Still he listened as she told him about Katelyn Rivers—*Katie*—and it was obvious she was more than smitten.

“So all those late nights haven’t been at the office?”

“Some of them have been. Not all. It really did start of as just a working relationship, but it changed into more.”

“And it’s serious?” Ayden asked, curious, and she nodded shyly.

“It could be. She wants it to be.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Actually, I think you might be sure.” He could see it in her eyes. “Come on, Anya. Tell me the truth.”

“Ayden—”

“I can handle it.”

“I know. I just.... Look, I made a commitment to you. One that benefited both of us. And I will stand by that.”

“But....”

“But I’m in love with her. And she says she loves me.”

“I should hope so.” Ayden grinned. “You’re a wonderful woman.” He grew serious then as they sat there in the kitchen. “I’m assuming that Katie knows the truth about our marriage, so I have to wonder what she thinks about the situation.”

“She does know. I told her. And she... well, she wants to look at your father’s will, but I told her that was up to you.”

In answer, Ayden shrugged. “Let her. Hell, I’ve lost count of how many lawyers have already looked at the damn thing, so one more won’t hurt.” He doubted she would actually find anything the others hadn’t found. “What I really want to know is what Katie wants, and if our arrangement is standing between you and a chance at real happiness.” He already felt he knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it out loud. They had both always known this day might come, and Ayden wanted to face it head-on.

“It’s complicated.”

“Anya....”

“Katie wants us to be together openly. She’s not thrilled that I’m not out.”

“I think I can understand what she must be feeling.”

“I do too. Really. But I... shit, Ayden, I’m scared, for one. I know my parents will have a breakdown.”

“Let them.” Ayden advised simply, surprising himself. “Anya, you are a wonderful, kind, good person, and your parents should be proud of you. And if the fact that you’re a lesbian is too much for them to handle, that’s their issue.”

“Maybe. But even if I can face my parents, we are still married.”

“We don’t have to be.”

“God, Ayden, you realize... you don’t know what you’re saying!”

“I know exactly what I’m saying.”

“Do you? If we divorce, you’re screwed.” Tugging her hand from his, she stood, shaking her head, looking almost panicked.

“We were just talking about how me losing Ja’Von wouldn’t be the end of the world as we know and love it.”

“Yeah, but I won’t be the reason you lose Ja’Von.”

“What if it’s a mutual decision we come to?” He stood and went to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. “Look, you know change isn’t something I’m good at, and not counting what happened with me and Simon, I’m not the kind of guy who does anything on the spur of the moment. *Mr. Responsibility*. Remember? I’m not saying we run out right now and file for divorce or anything that drastic, but maybe we should take some time to reevaluate this arrangement and see if this is still what we want.”

“And what if it isn’t what we still want?”

“Then we sit down and make a decision like the mature adults we are.”

“Ayden....”

“Just give this some thought.” He pulled her into a tight hug. “I love you, Anya, and I want you to be happy.”

“What about you? Shouldn’t you be happy?”

“I guess that’s something I’ll have to think about.” And he would, he assured himself, but he wouldn’t base any decisions solely on his encounter with Simon and the regrets he had that he and Simon couldn’t have more.

Whatever he decided, he had to decide for himself. Simple as that. He needed to decide if he wanted to keep living a lie, and he needed to try to focus on himself rather than Ja’Von and exactly what would happen to the company should he walk away. It was a lot to consider, but maybe the time had indeed come for him and Anya both to take some chances. And Anya promised him she would think over all their options and get with him again when she had a better idea of what exactly she wanted.

They decided to leave things as there were for a while, but having spoken with Anya about what had happened with Simon helped Ayden get a better handle on his tangled and far too complicated emotions.

By the time he returned to work the morning after their conversation, he was feeling somewhat better, but the feeling didn’t last.

Rachel was waiting for him in his office, and the moment he saw her, he felt himself instantly tense. “I have a meeting with the PR department in fifteen minutes, so make it quick.”

“What is this? No hello? No ‘how are you’? Really, Ayden, you need to do some work on your manners and people skills.”

Ayden dropped his briefcase on his desk and turned to face Rachel, where she sat smiling at him smugly. Her red hair was coiled into a perfect twist, and her makeup was flawless. The zebra-print mini-dress displayed curves Ayden had no desire to see, while diamonds glittered in her ears, around her neck, and on her wrist.

“Rachel, I’m not in the mood to deal with your bullshit, so just tell me what you want and get out.”

“Meow! You’re more cranky than usual.”

“Seeing you puts me in a bad mood.”

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes. “I need money. I’m running low—”

“Anya already transferred five grand into your account.”

“And I need more.”

“You need more than twenty-five thousand dollars to make it through the month?”

“Ayden—”

“Don’t tell me Botox is *that* expensive.”

“Fuck you.” It always amused Ayden when she allowed her true colors to show. “I need the money, so get off your high horse and transfer another five grand into my account, and let me get on with my day.”

Sitting down, he regarded her for a moment. “Where does the money go? How do you manage to blow through that much cash?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Actually, when I’m the one who has to transfer the money, it becomes my business.”

“Well, I’m not telling you a damn thing! I don’t have to.”

“Are we going to throw a tantrum?” Ayden raised an amused eyebrow.

“Why do you have to be such an asshole?” Rachel snapped. “God, I wish your father would have just cut you off completely! How much easier life would be if you simply weren’t in the damn picture.”

It wasn’t the first time she had said such a thing, and the comments certainly didn’t cause Ayden pain. “You’ve thought that all along, haven’t you, *Mom?*” Sarcasm dripped from the last word, and Rachel’s eyes narrowed.

“What does that mean? And don’t call me Mom.”

“It means you’ve always wished I wasn’t around; you couldn’t stand me from the word go, but when you married my dad, you ended up stuck with me.”

“Fine. I admit it. I would have preferred Spencer hadn’t had a child when married me, but there was nothing that I could do about you.”

“Expect try and drive a wedge between me and my father.”

“Oh give me a break!” She waved a dismissive hand. “*You* drove a wedge between you and Spencer when you expected the poor man to accept the fact that you are some sort of fag, so don’t blame that on me.”

“Maybe.” Sadly, there was some truth to what she said. “Look, just get the hell out of my office, and I’ll have the money placed in your account before lunch.”

With a chilled, utterly phony smile, she stood. “Thank you.” He expected her to turn, to flounce away, but instead she stared at him for a long moment, which made him feel more than a little uncomfortable.

“What?”

“You just seem a little on edge.”

“Rachel—”

“Oh relax, Ayden. I don’t really care if anything is wrong. But I can see that something is a little off the mark.”

“You’ve gotten what you want, so you can leave now.”

With a huff she turned and went to the door, but a thought occurred to Ayden, and he sighed, annoyed with himself. “Wait. Before you hop on your broom and fly off to torture some innocent village of children, have you heard from Ian lately?” He had left several messages, but Ian had yet to call him back, and Ayden was concerned; he was afraid his brother had fallen into a mess so troublesome he was afraid to ask for help. But Rachel didn’t look concerned, which was nothing new. Rachel never looked concerned; that would have been a motherly instinct, and Rachel didn’t possess those.

“No.” She shrugged casually, unconcerned. “He’s likely off with friends. I think there was some girl he was hanging out with.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Unlike you, your brother is normal.”

“Goodbye, Rachel.”

“Besides, why would Ian call you? You’re a buzzkill.”

“So why doesn’t he call you?” Ayden asked. “Oh wait, it’s because he knows you don’t give a damn about him.”

Her eyes narrowed at that. “You know, Ayden, you sit in this office like some high-and-mighty lord of the manor, enjoying the power you think you have, but we both know you’re nothing more than an elaborate lie. And yeah, you conceal it well; I have to give you credit. But I know the truth, and you should never forget that.” It was another threat—she was rather good at them—but for the first time, Ayden wasn’t concerned by them; he didn’t feel any fear. Mostly he was just annoyed, and as she turned again, finally leaving, Ayden was happy to see her go, for the time being at least. No doubt she would be back. Once she needed money, she would turn up, filled with insults and threats and demands. That was her way, and Ayden sighed, wishing, not for the first time, that he could cut Rachel out of his life completely, but there was only one way that could happen.

Walk away from Ja’Von; walk away from Rachel.... He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes, feeling the beginnings of a tension headache, but there was little he could do about it at the moment. For now, at least, Ja’Von was his, and business needed attention, so his personal drama would have to wait.

Chapter Five

KATIE asked Anya to go out of town with her for Thanksgiving to an exclusive resort in Mexico, and despite her initial reluctance at leaving Ayden alone for the holiday, she agreed to go because Ayden insisted.

He felt it was good for her and Katie to be alone together in a place where they could be more open with their relationship, without having to hide. And it wasn't like they had a long-standing holiday tradition; there were no family dinners, no times spent with their in-laws. They usually went out for a quiet dinner, and after they worked from home. Nothing exciting. Ayden assured Anya he would be fine on his own, and eventually she agreed to go. Ayden knew she was excited.

Since their conversation in which they agreed to take another look at their marriage that might not be so very convenient anymore, Ayden had been introduced to Katelyn Rivers, and he liked the woman. She was a smart, very no-nonsense person, and she was clearly crazy about Anya, which was the most important thing.

Aside from that, Katelyn was determined to find a loophole in Spencer's will. She didn't care that no one else ever had; it had become a personal challenge. She was disgusted by the demands Spencer made, and she wanted to see them nullified. She was convinced there was a piece of the puzzle they were missing, that maybe it wasn't obvious,

but Katelyn insisted it was there, and Ayden wished her luck. If she could find something, many problems would be resolved. But there was something inside Ayden that wouldn't let him hope for some miracle after five years of living a lie.

Although he hadn't made any decisions, he had been giving their options a lot of thought, and despite his efforts to the contrary, those thoughts often resulted in him thinking about Simon and their "what might have been" fiasco. He couldn't help himself. He was haunted by memories and desire. He ached for Simon as he had never ached for anyone, and it annoyed him. Yes, they had shared amazing sex and a deep connection, but Simon didn't want to see him, and after a full month, Ayden wanted to feel normal or close to normal again; but he didn't, damn it, and it was eating at his nerves.

More than he wanted to admit even to himself, he wanted to call Simon, but he always stopped himself before he could pick up the phone. Simon didn't want to hear from him or see him, and Ayden wouldn't force the issue. It wouldn't be fair. Simon had a right to get on with his life, even if Ayden was struggling to move on with his, and with Anya out of town and Ian out of pocket, he found himself at wit's end. Alone. It was more depressing than he had expected to be alone on the holiday. He had left several messages suggesting that he and Ian have Thanksgiving dinner together, but Ian sent a text saying he was with friends and wouldn't be back in New York until after the holiday weekend.

In the end, he spent Thanksgiving Day alone, eating a frozen pizza and drinking beer while watching football.

Eventually he dozed off, only to be awakened by the sound of someone knocking on the front door.

Rubbing his eyes, he crossed the room and opened the door without looking to see who was there, and to his utter shock, he found himself face-to-face with Simon. *No way!* He rubbed at his eyes once again, certain he was imagining the sight before him, but when he looked again, Simon was still there, and he looked like a vision. *Incredible.* Dressed in faded jeans and a leather jacket over a simple T-shirt, he took Ayden's breath away, just like he had the moment they first met. Ayden unconsciously licked his lips, recalling the feel—the *taste*—of Simon's kiss and the feel of his hands.

Shaking his head to try to pull from his shocked stupor, Ayden opened the door farther, and Simon stepped inside wordlessly. Aware of his shaking hands and pounding heart, Ayden closed the door and turned to look at the other man.

He had left the television playing in the living room, and he could distantly hear sounds of the long-forgotten football game. "Simon...." A dozen questions filtered wildly through his mind, but he couldn't bring himself to ask them when all he wanted to do was stare and drink in his fill, to build another memory he could cling desperately to.

Simon reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a piece of paper he quietly extended to Ayden. "Someone left that for me."

Frowning, Ayden accepted the paper and read what was written there, groaning as he easily recognized the handwriting: *Ayden will be alone for the holiday, but maybe you can do something to change that. He's a good man. If you*

don't take a chance with him, you're missing out on what might be the best thing that could ever happen to you. Anya.

Suspended somewhere between mortified and annoyed, Ayden looked up at Simon, into those amazing eyes. “Simon, I... God, I’m sorry. I didn’t know she had done this, and I... I know she meant well, but I am really sorry she left this for you.”

“Ayden—”

“I’ll talk to her. I promise. Nothing like this will happen—”

“You told her? About me? About what happened between us?” He sounded surprised by that, and Ayden nodded.

“There was no reason not to. I told you. Anya and I don’t have a typical marriage.”

“And where is she now?”

“With a friend in Mexico. She’s seeing someone.” Actually, she was in love with Katelyn, but Ayden didn’t want to get into that. “I told her everything. She’s always been honest with me when there’s someone, and I... well, after we spoke that last time, I needed someone to talk to, and Anya listened.” He knew how strange it must have seemed to someone on the outside of their unique little arrangement. The relationship he and Anya shared mattered a great deal to each of them, and no matter what the future held, Ayden knew their friendship would remain strong and true.

Waving the paper, he smiled sadly. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry. You made it clear you can’t be involved with me, and I want you to know I respect that.”

“It’s okay. It was just a surprise.”

“I’m sure.”

“Ayden....” He looked away, and Ayden could sense he was in a struggle. “Christ, do you have any idea how much I have tried to get you out of my mind? You’ve been driving me crazy, and I’ve wanted to call you, but I... damn it, I can’t even count the number of reasons why this is a bad idea....”

Ayden swallowed hard as he listened to him, almost afraid to move, afraid to take a breath. It killed him to know Simon struggled with emotions, but he couldn’t deny it thrilled him to know Simon had been thinking about him. Missing him. Wanting him. He could feel the tension between them. Desire seemed to simmer in the air like an electric charge, and Ayden took a step closer as Simon looked at him again, a dozen emotions evident in his beautiful brown eyes that Ayden wanted to fall into.

He wasn’t certain what to say or do; he didn’t want to make things worse. “I’ve thought about you too.” It seemed a safe admission, one that likely wouldn’t surprise Simon, all things considered.

“Ayden....”

“Tell me what you want, Simon. I need to know.”

“I want what I *shouldn’t* want, because I know it will end badly.”

“Maybe it won’t end badly. Maybe—”

“Don’t. Please. *Whatever* you do, *don’t* offer me hope or make promises.”

“What about right now? Forget everything else. Forget the future or tomorrow. Just tell me, right now, in this moment, what do you want from me, Simon?”

“Ayden—”

“Tell me, and I swear I will find some way to give you whatever you want.”

“I want....” He closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath as he did, and when he looked at Ayden again, it seemed he was less conflicted and suddenly more accepting of whatever it was he was feeling. “I want you, Ayden. God help me, but I want you....” Making the obviously hated admission seemed to drain the fight from him, and Ayden moved just as Simon did, and somehow he found himself in Simon’s arms again. It was surreal. *Thrilling*. His heart was kicking against his chest, and God help him, his legs actually felt weak. But it didn’t matter, because Simon was holding him as their lips clashed in a kiss that was desperate, *hungry*, brimming with need that went beyond the mere physical.

Pressed against Simon, Ayden tangled one hand in the thick, dark hair while the fingers of his other hand anxiously gripped Simon’s shoulder. His mind was spinning. He couldn’t think; he didn’t want to think. He only wanted to feel. He didn’t want to miss a single sensation as his body eagerly, *wantonly* responded to Simon’s nearness. His passion. He kissed like a man truly possessed by need and desire; they were clinging to each other as if afraid to let go, and Ayden was indeed afraid. He was afraid the moment—the kiss—would end, and when it did, he feared Simon would come to his senses and reject him again. And that was

the last thing Ayden wanted as the kiss finally did end, with each of the trembling breathlessly.

They sagged against each other, with Simon resting his forehead against Ayden's as he struggled for control. "We need to slow this down. Okay? No rushing. Not this time. I want this to last...." He lifted his head just far enough to look into Ayden's eyes, smiling slightly. Much of the fear Ayden had been feeling simply faded away when he saw just how much desire and need was reflected in Simon's eyes.

Ayden smiled, unable to speak around the emotions that lumped together in his throat, at the tenderness in Simon's words. Taking Simon's hand, Ayden guided them to the bedroom, savoring how natural, how very right it felt.

He turned on the light as Simon closed the bedroom door, and they turned to face each other again. "Simon...."

"No promises, remember? I don't need them. I just want this, whatever this is, for as long as we can have it."

Ayden bit his lip but finally nodded. "Okay. No promises." *For now*. But that would all change one day, maybe someday soon. He would be able to make Simon promises, but more than that, he would be able to keep those promises. Simon deserved that. And Ayden wanted to be completely free from the complications that prevented him from making those promises in this moment as Simon stepped back into his arms.

They kissed again, less frantically this time; it was a slow, teasing, arousing kiss, gentle and simple and loving. It was perfect. Ayden allowed himself to become completely lost in the kiss. It was unlike any he had ever experienced. It was a kiss that made him feel cherished—*loved*—and he had

never known that, had never felt a soul-deep connection to a lover the way he did with Simon, and it was wondrous.

They undressed each other slowly, despite the urgency building inside each of them with each piece of clothing that fell away, landing around them. No other sound could be heard beyond their hearts and their breathing. It was exhilarating, almost magical. In the past, with lovers he had known before his marriage came about, Ayden had never taken time to notice the little things, but with Simon it was different. He didn't want to miss a single detail; he wanted every moment he shared with Simon to be imprinted to memory. What he had with this man was rare and incredible, and Ayden considered every touch precious.

Simon's skin was warm against his, even softer than Ayden remembered, and he ran eager hands over Simon's chest and stomach and down his back, smiling when Simon arched into his touches and moaned. "Ayden...." His voice was breathless and needy, filled with longing, and it was fuel to the fire threatening to consume Ayden. He had to draw in a breath to try to calm himself. *No rushing*. He intended to keep that promise, regardless of how desperately he wanted Simon; this time they had all the time in the world, and Ayden wanted to make the most of it.

Again taking Simon's hand, Ayden backed them to the bed, and Simon smiled with something mischievous in his eyes that caught Ayden's attention. "You know, it occurred to me that you told me I was the first person you've been with in nearly five years, and I've got to say, that's *pretty* flattering."

"Simon...."

“I’ve already figured out that you are accustomed to being in control, but for right now, I’m calling the shots.”

“Is that so?” Ayden grinned.

“That’s very much so.” Simon kissed him briefly, teasingly. “I intend to have my wicked, wicked way with you, and you’re going to love every minute of it, and I can assure you I won’t be rushed.” His lips went to Ayden’s neck, and Ayden’s hands went to Simon’s shoulder, holding to him tightly as Simon’s persistent mouth worked magic, nipping and kissing. Ayden’s neck had always been sensitive to touch, and somehow Simon seemed to instinctively know that, and much to Aden’s delight, he clearly intended to exploit that information.

Simon’s ministrations were rendering him nearly incoherent, and Ayden didn’t protest when he found himself falling backward into the waiting bed with Simon stretching out beside him, still in firm control. *Christ!* Normally not being in control left him feeling anxious and on edge, but giving up control to Simon somehow felt right and natural; he trusted Simon wholeheartedly. *Completely.* And without hesitation. It was unusual for him, but it seemed “unusual” was the name of the game when it came to what he shared with Simon, what Ayden knew that could indeed have when—not if, but when—he managed to finally do away with the various issues complicating his life.

Warm, strong hands moved down Ayden’s body, over his chest and stomach, and he shivered in anticipation as Simon’s mouth slowly, impishly followed the same path, intent on driving Ayden out of his mind.

A needy sound escaped him, and Ayden blushed, but Simon smiled against his skin, and Ayden shivered.

“Just relax, baby.” Simon teased. “I’ve got ya. I know exactly what you need. And I can’t wait to give it to you.”

“Simon....”

“Like the sound of you breathless.”

“You’re a sadist,” Ayden choked out, and Simon laughed. “Admit it. You’re just trying to drive me....” His words ended on a strangled whimper when Simon’s hand wrapped around his cock, and Ayden’s hips nearly jumped off the bed. He heard another laugh, but he simply didn’t have the will or the strength to respond. Simon’s fingers wrapped around him was a sensation that went beyond merely incredible. He had no words to describe it. He couldn’t even think as his hands tangled in the sheets, while Simon’s grip tightened ever so slightly and he shifted his body until he was kneeling between Ayden’s spread legs.

One hand went to Ayden’s stomach, rubbing in soothing circles. “You should see yourself right now, Ayden. It’s freakin’ beautiful. So damn sexy.” No one had ever said such things to him before, and if they had, Ayden likely wouldn’t have believed them, but the words coming from Simon echoed a sincerity that couldn’t be ignored. *Christ!* He felt tears burn his eyes, but he was quick to blink them away as Simon smiled, and something seemed to pass between them even without words being spoken.

Leaning over him, Simon kissed him again, long and hard, and Ayden tangled a hand in Simon’s hair.

The hand wrapped around him continued stroking him slowly, teasingly. Simon was an expert on driving him out of

his mind, and Ayden didn't try to tamper down his reactions as the kiss ended and Simon's lips once again moved lazily over his neck and chest and finally down his stomach.

"Simon, please," he whimpered, thrusting his hips into Simon's touch. "Please, I need to be inside you." He wanted to come, wanted it so badly he hurt, but he wanted Simon with him, wanted to share the experience. *Again and again.* He knew now beyond any doubt that this was something he needed, something he had to have. There would be no walking away from Simon again. Whatever the consequences, Ayden was willing to accept them. If keeping Simon in his life meant giving up Ja'Von, Ayden would pay that price happily. It was past time for him to take his life back.

With a possessive growl, Simon kissed him again, and Ayden took the opportunity to roll them over, pinning Simon beneath him.

"Christ, Simon, I just realized I don't have any condoms here."

"Are you serious?"

"It's been nearly five years," Ayden reminded him with a pained smile.

"Right." Simon brushed a hand through Ayden's disheveled hair. "Okay... I suppose we could stop and go out and buy condoms, but... well, you're the only person I've been with since I was last tested, and I was the picture of health then. And it's been so long for you. I think we'd be safe if we didn't use anything."

"Are you sure?"

“With anyone else I would never consider it, but you’re not anyone else.”

“Simon... God, you have no idea what you do to me.” *I’m falling in love with you.* “You are the most amazing man....” Ayden kissed him, afraid what he was thinking, of what he felt, of what he was on the verge of saying; and while Ayden wanted to say the words, he wasn’t certain if Simon was ready yet to hear them. He didn’t want promises. But Ayden intended to change that, and when he did, he would make every promise Simon deserved. He would prove again and again that Simon was everything he wanted. Everything he needed. Insane or not, it seemed that Anya had been right; he had fallen in love with Simon from the first moment they met, and they were meant to be together.

Keeping his lips glued to Simon’s, he groped for the nightstand, fumbling around until his hand closed around a bottle of lotion.

“No lube, so this will have to do,” he whispered against Simon’s lips.

“What is it?”

“Some sort of lotion.” Ayden managed to twist off the top, and the scent of sandalwood filled the air.

“Not too bad.”

“You already smell good enough without it.”

“Flattery? Really? No need for compliments. You’ve already got me *exactly* where you want me, sweetheart.”

Grinning, Ayden slipped a hand between them, brushing his lotion-covered fingers over Simon’s tight opening. “I guess I do indeed have you exactly where I want

you. But I don't think you're gonna be complaining about that." Desire darkened Simon's eyes afresh as Ayden slowly slipped one greased finger inside him, moving in and out slowly. *Teasingly*. He could see the host of emotions playing over Simon's face, and in that moment, Ayden he wasn't alone in all that he was feeling. Not even close. Simon loved him. He was sure of it. And the knowledge made him want Simon even more; it was more fuel to an already raging fire. He wanted nothing more than to bring Simon pleasure and show him how much he did indeed love him, because that love was lasting and real.

Carefully, watching Simon's every reaction, he pushed in a second finger and then a third as Simon's hips flexed against his hand, encouraging, begging for more. "Ayden...." His voice hitched, and Ayden smiled, savoring the sight of Simon flushed and breathless and fucking himself against Ayden's fingers.

"What do you want, Simon? Tell me. Let me hear you say it." He flexed his fingers again, and Simon gasped.

"You... damn it, Ayden... *please*, I need... I need *you* now! Please!" The needy desperation in his voice was impossible to ignore, and it was more than enough to shatter what little control Ayden struggled to maintain.

Removing his fingers, he leaned down and kissed Simon hard and fast, and Simon gripped his shoulders, pulling him closer.

Lifting Simon's left leg, Ayden draped it over his shoulder, and then carefully he guided their bodies together.

With great restraint, he slowly, gently inched himself into Simon, bombarded by dozens of emotions as Simon's

body accepted him, *welcoming*, so amazingly tight and warm that Ayden worried that this wouldn't last long. *Sweet God!* Nothing had ever felt so right. It was so perfect and natural. His eyes locked with Simon's, and again, he knew this was it. He was where he was meant to be, and no one—nothing—could matter more than what he and Simon could and would have together.

Unexpectedly, Simon's free leg snaked around him, urging him deeper, and Ayden moaned, pushing all the way inside, drawing a contented sigh from Simon, who looked up at him with brown eyes burning with desire. *Love*. Ayden could see the emotions as clear as day, and he held to that as he moved once, slowly, watching the pleasure dance across Simon's face, which elevated his own pleasure to know he was pleasing Simon. *His Simon*. He felt possessive and hungry as Simon reached for him and pulled him down until they were chest to chest, their mouths fused in a scorching kiss.

Simon tangled a hand in his hair, and Ayden slipped a free hand between their bodies, wrapping strong fingers around Simon's heated cock. "Ayden...." Simon's hips arched up, eager to meet and match every carefully aimed thrust Ayden made into his body, stretching him, filling him; it seemed to Ayden they had melted into one. And he loved it. Arms and legs tangled, they moved together in perfect tempo, panting, skin flushed, damp with sweat. They were locked in a timeless dance that neither wanted to end.

Words, pleas were whispered between them, between heated, openmouthed kisses and Simon's hands gripping his shoulders, fingers digging in hard enough Ayden knew he would have bruises, but he didn't care.

Finally, with a cry, he felt his body tense, and then he came just as Simon did, and the world fell off its axis.

Trembling, exhausted, Ayden sagged against Simon's chest, and Simon wrapped strong arms around him tightly, heedless of the mess. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered in that moment, and Ayden pressed his face into Simon's shoulder, wanting to stay as they were forever—alone, connected, and content.

Long minutes later, when his heart returned to a normal rate, Ayden lifted his head to look down at his lover. "Simon...." There was so much he wanted to say, but Simon shook his head and touched a finger to Ayden's lips.

"No promises. Remember?"

"I do remember. But there is a lot I have to tell you."

"Ayden—"

"There are things you need to know." Ayden didn't want to ruin their time or upset the warm balance between them, but he had come to some serious decisions, and he needed Simon to listen.

"Okay. But how about a shower first?"

"I can agree to that." He leaned up and kissed Simon. "Come on. I'll wash your back if you wash mine." With a wink, Ayden slipped from the bed, taking Simon's hand, not waning to break physical contact for a single moment. He needed reassurance that Simon was there. Really, it still felt like a dream, a wonderful, warm, magical dream, and he was afraid it would end and he would find himself once again alone.

He didn't try to explain what he was feeling to Simon, but the other man seemed to understand.

Few words passed between them as they showered, spending a lot of time touching and stroking each other.

Afterward Ayden managed to find them both pajama bottoms to wear, and together they went into the kitchen, where Ayden made coffee and Simon rummaged around the sparse contents of the refrigerator. Ayden knew it was something of a sad sight. He didn't eat at home often, and neither did Anya, but Simon somehow managed to find enough ingredients to happily prepare cheese omelets. He was a better than decent cook, and Ayden was starved. His lunch of a frozen pizza hadn't left much impression, and while they enjoyed the meal, Ayden asked why Simon wasn't with family.

"Well, my sister is Paris with her husband and his family, and Gigi is with her mom, but I'm not exactly welcome there."

"Why not?"

"Gigi's mother hasn't spoken to me since I came out when I was eighteen, and she hates that Gigi works with me."

"Shit. What about your parents?"

"My mom died when I was seventeen. Cancer. And my dad took off when I was five, so I don't know where he is."

"God, Simon, I'm sorry." He reached across the table to touch Simon's arm.

"It's okay. I mean, I miss her of course, but she was a wonderful woman, and I was really lucky to have her."

“Have you ever tried to find your father?”

“No. Why bother? He didn’t want me, and now I have no use for him.”

“I can understand that.”

“What about you? You told me about Anya and Rachel, but didn’t you said something about a brother?”

“That would be Ian.” Ayden smiled ruefully, pushing away his empty plate. “Rachel had Ian when I was ten, and... well, let’s just say that being a mother isn’t what Rachel does best, and Ian tends to be difficult.”

“Difficult?”

“Reckless. Wild. He has a knack for finding trouble. He was a nightmare during his teen years, and now he’s somewhat better, but he lives off a trust fund, and he doesn’t take anything in life seriously.”

“Sounds like he keeps you on your toes.”

“More like he keeps me up nights worrying about him, but I’m starting to realize there isn’t a lot I can do.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing to realize,” Simon suggested. “I understand wanting to help and be connected to family, but sometimes you have no choice but to let go and allow someone to find their own path.” It was certainly wise advice. Ayden looked at Simon and saw concern reflected vividly in his brown eyes. He really cared. Knowing that gave Ayden even more courage; it assured him that he was on the right track with the decisions he was making, and he was eager to make Simon a part of those decisions. More importantly he wanted to make Simon part of his future.

Taking a breath, Ayden decided the best thing to do was lay everything on the line and face Simon's reaction head-on. "After we saw each other last, I was a mess. I mean it. I felt like I had lost part of myself, and I didn't know how to get it back, and that confused the hell out of me, Simon. I had just met you. I barely knew you, but I couldn't get you out of my mind. I couldn't stay feeling like I was completely lost."

"Ayden—"

"I finally talked to Anya and told her everything, and she and I ended up having a really important discussion."

"About what?"

"About this arrangement we have." Their marriage. "At one time it made sense, and it's been a wonderful way for both of us to hide; we both got what we wanted when we first got married, you see. I got JaVon, and Anya got to go to law school. She didn't have to deal with her parents pushing her to settle down."

"You said at one time it made sense. What does that mean?"

"It means that Anya and I admitted that we aren't exactly happy."

"How so?"

"She's in love with a woman she works with. It seems to be serious."

"Oh. So Anya wants out of the marriage?"

"Well, she didn't ask for a divorce, but she wouldn't, because she knows what happens if we get divorced."

“You’ll lose Ja’Von.” Simon looked away from him. “And Ja’Von’s the reason you had to get married in the first place and... I guess it’s the reason you’ll stay married.” He kept his voice as even as possible, but Ayden could hear the echo of disappointment. He didn’t intend for that disappointment to last long.

“Funny thing about that? I don’t care anymore.”

“What?” The brown eyes returned to his, and Ayden smiled and shrugged. “I’ve done a lot of thinking lately, and I’ve decided that being in control of Ja’Von isn’t worth it if it means I can’t be with someone I love.”

“Ayden—”

“Meeting you, Simon, makes me feel like I’ve been walking around in a fog for the last five years, and I can finally see clearly again.”

“I think you’re giving me a little too much credit.”

“Hardly.” Ayden reached across the table again, this time taking Simon’s hand in his, his heart racing as he considered all he wanted—*needed*—to say. “I don’t do spontaneous. I tend to be cautious and very careful, and I follow the rules. *Mr. Responsibility*. I’ve never really placed a lot of stock in things like fate or love at first sight, but out of the freakin’ blue, you landed right in my lap, and you somehow turned my entire world upside down. It freaked me out. I thought at first that I had lost my mind, but it was Anya who made me realize that I still had my mind, that it was my heart I had lost.

“I know it might be too soon or too much too quick, but all I know, Simon, is what I feel, and I know I love you.”

“Damn it, Ayden, do you....” Simon shook his head. “I don’t want to be the reason you throw away Ja’Von—”

“I don’t care if I lose Ja’Von—”

“But I love you too.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I do.” Laughing, Simon squeezed the hand that held his. “God, things like this—I had no idea they actually happened. I thought my life was great. I was happy with work and with my friends, and then I *landed in your lap*, and damn it, I realized right away that something had been missing from my life for a very long time, and you were that something.”

“Simon....”

“But I meant what I said. I don’t want you to lose Ja’Von—”

“Fuck it. I’ll start another company. If I had been thinking clearly five years ago, I might have realize that then, and now... look, I don’t care if this is insane. I don’t care if everyone in the world thinks we are insane. I just know I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“So we have a chance?” Ayden whispered. “A real chance? I mean, it make time a little time to get everything sorted out, and I need to talk to Anya, but—”

“Ayden, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Really?”

“I love you. I can’t run away from that. I’m not gonna let what happened with Adam cloud my judgment now.”

Standing as Simon stood, Ayden stepped into his arms, holding to him tightly. “I won’t hurt you the way he did. I swear that to you. I love you, and I’ll do right by you.”

“I love you too. I don’t care how crazy it seems, Ayden. I just know I love you, and I want to be with you.”

Ayden pulled back and kissed him long and hard, and Simon kissed him back with equal fire and desperation.

“I know we have a lot more to talk about and some decisions to make, but for now I think we should head back to bed.” Simon smiled, sliding his hands down Ayden’s back to slip his fingers beneath the waistband of his pajama bottoms. “Let the rest of the world wait. I want as much time alone with you as possible.” Before Ayden could answer, Simon kissed him again, and Ayden melted into the kiss, into Simon’s arms, perfectly content to do as his lover wanted and leave the world waiting.

Chapter Six

AYDEN and Simon spent the rest of the long weekend together, but Simon insisted on leaving a few hours before Anya came home. Simon wanted to meet her, but he had said he felt it best that she and Ayden talk alone first. They faced a lot of big decisions, and Simon didn't want to distract from that or overly influence Ayden's actions.

Not that Ayden expected Anya to object to a divorce; he felt she was ready to stop hiding who she really was from her family, even if admitting she was gay created discord.

Ayden understood Simon's concerns, but it was still hard to watch Simon leave, even knowing he would see him again soon.

"I can't wait until we don't have to hide this," Ayden whispered, and Simon smiled. "I mean it, Simon. I've been living a lie for so long. I never liked it. I've resented it all along, but now I just want to finally free myself from everything, and if that means JaVon has to be lost, so be it."

"I know it won't be easy, Ayden. You love JaVon. I don't expect you to be thrilled that it will end up with Rachel."

"Well, it won't be with Rachel for long. She'll sell it as quickly as she can. And I think maybe I can influence someone trustworthy into buying the company. I know a lot of people within the industry, and many of them would jump

at the chance to acquire a company as reputable and well established as JaVon. If I can get someone equally reputable to take buy the company as soon as Rachel puts it up, at least I can know the employees will be in good hands.” It would be at least one weight off his mind, but it was a big concern for him. “Whatever happens, I’m not going to obsess over it, because I’m ready to live my life on my terms; and maybe I should be a little afraid at the prospect of starting over, but I’m not.” Truthfully, he felt more confident than he had in a long time; he was finally on the right path, and he had someone he loved in his life, someone he could count on to stand by his side. He loved Simon completely. *Unconditionally*. It was a love that Rachel couldn’t fathom and his father hadn’t been capable of feeling, or he wouldn’t have made such demands from Ayden in his blasted will. But that was in the past. And Ayden was ready to put it behind him; he wanted to move on, forge a new path, and forget about the pain and anger he had harbored for so long, and he knew that being with Simon, loving Simon as he did, would certainly help heal the old wounds.

After Simon left, he checked his e-mail and messages, and an hour later, Anya came in, looking relaxed and tan and happy.

One look at her, and Ayden knew she was as in love as he was, and he was happy for her. They sat down together on the living room sofa. “First if all, I should strangle you for the stunt you pulled, leaving that letter for Simon. But since that note brought Simon here, and since he only just left, I suppose I can forgive you.”

“Are you serious? Oh my God! Ayden, that’s wonderful. Right? I mean, you will see him again, right?”

“Oh, I will see him again. Soon in fact. And I... well, Anya, we need to talk.”

“Do we?” But she was smiling as if she knew what was coming, and Ayden nodded.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and I think we’ve both reached a point where this little marriage of ours isn’t what either of us wants.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

“I didn’t think you would, after your weekend with Katie.”

“She wants me to move in with her.” Anya admitted, looking excited and terrified all at once, which made sense, all things taken into consideration.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes. Very much. But that means—”

“Facing your parents.”

“It’s not gonna be pretty, Ayden.”

“Maybe not. And if they reject you, it will hurt. A lot. I won’t lie to you about that, but you also know—as I do—that living a lie gets tiresome, and if we keep this lie up, it might cost us both the people we love.”

“I know. And I am ready to tell them. I’m just scared.”

“Do you want me with you?”

“Thank you for offering, but I think I need to face them on my own.”

“I’m here if you need me.”

“What about you?” she asked thoughtfully. “You’re really okay with what will happen as soon as we announce we’re divorcing?”

“I’ve thought about it, and I’m making peace with it.”

“Keeping Ja’Von was so important to you once.”

“It was.” He couldn’t deny that. “I love Ja’Von, and I love what I’ve been able to do with the company, but after my father died and then his will was read, I somehow ended up with some sort of tunnel vision.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I wanted Ja’Von, I can’t deny that, but even more than I wanted Ja’Von, I didn’t want Rachel to have Ja’Von. Not just because I knew she would sell the company.” He shook his head sadly. “As insane as it sounds, I wanted to keep Ja’Von away from Rachel because I saw it as mine, and she had already taken my father away from me, so I couldn’t let her take Ja’Von away too.”

“But now....”

“Now I’m getting over my issues and realizing that I can’t change the past, that I can’t earn my father’s respect or love, but what I can do is move on with my life and be happy and learn to worry less about everyone else.”

“Wow. You’ve come a long way in a short time.”

“I guess I had an eye-opening experience.”

“I really need to meet Simon.” She grinned. “Maybe we can have a double date.”

“That should be an interesting experience.”

“I mean it. We might be getting divorced, but I don’t want to lose you.”

“No chance that will happen,” Ayden assured her. “Of course, I want to talk to Ian. For some reason I feel like I owe it to him to tell him what going to happen, even if he likely won’t give a damn.” Ian had never taken any interest in the family business, and that wasn’t ever going to change. Ayden accepted that, but he still wanted Ian in the loop. It would certainly be an interesting conversation. Most conversations with Ian were, after all. Hopefully Ian would make contact with him soon, but until then Ayden decided to do what he could to secure Ja’Von before the takeover.

He couldn’t talk to his employees yet, but the Monday after Thanksgiving, he was in the office early, making various calls to contacts within the industry, hinting that Ja’Von might soon be on the market. Just before eleven he was contemplating calling Simon to see if they could have lunch when Maryann came into the office.

“I just got a phone call from Mercy West, and... Ayden, Ian’s been hurt, and he’s in the hospital now.”

Instantly Ayden jumped into action, terrified and frantic but forcing himself to focus, to concentrate on getting to his brother. He had no idea what was wrong, had no idea what happened to Ian. Maryann hadn’t been able to decipher many details, and on the way to the hospital, knowing that Maryann had already placed a call to Anya, Ayden called Simon. He didn’t care if anyone saw them together, he wanted—*needed*—to have the man he loved with him, and there was no hesitation in Simon’s voice when he promised to meet Ayden at the hospital. He knew the fear he was

feeling echoed in his voice, but he couldn't help it; he had feared for years that something horrible would someday befall Ian, and it seemed now that it indeed had, and Ayden feared the worst.

A half hour after leaving his office, he reached the hospital and rushed inside, finding a nurse, who quickly located a doctor, who pulled Ayden into a quiet corner and explained to him that someone had beaten Ian badly.

"He was found in the parking garage near his building." The doctor filled in the details, and Ayden struggled to follow. "His left arm is broken. He has five broken ribs and three that are cracked. He also has a concussion, which we are monitoring closely. His spleen was ruptured, so he's currently in surgery, but we don't anticipate any complications, and we didn't detect any other internal bleeding."

"So how long will he be in surgery? When can I see him?"

"It should be another hour or so, and then we will place him in recovery, at which point I can allow you to see him for a few minutes."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"You should also know the police are investigating, and I'm certain they will want to talk to you to see if you can shed any light on this."

Ayden nodded and thanked the man before turning to the waiting room, walking into it on emotional autopilot.

It sounded as if Ian would be okay, that he had actually gotten lucky someone came across him, but Ayden was still

frightened and worried. He wanted whoever had hurt Ian found and thrown in jail. *God!* His brother didn't deserve this; even if Ian could be somewhat reckless, it didn't give anyone the right to beat him. He could have died had someone not gotten him to the hospital in time.

Unable to sit, he paced the room for a few minutes, and then, suddenly, Simon was there. Not caring who might see or what they might think, Ayden went to him, stepping right into his outstretched arms.

Surrounded by Simon's warmth, his strength, Ayden allowed a few tears to fall as he shared with Simon what the doctor had told him.

"The police will find whoever did this and make them pay," Simon whispered in reassurance. "In the meantime, I'm here if you need me. Just tell me what you need." He eased back, just enough to find Ayden's eyes with his own, and Ayden smiled despite his tears, because he already had what he needed. He had Simon standing there with him, holding him, providing warmth and comfort. Being close to Simon reassured him, and Ayden melted back into his arms, where he stayed until Anya swept into the room with Katelyn Rivers not far behind. Both of them looked very serious and worried.

Katelyn and Simon were left to introduce themselves while Ayden explained to Anya what had happened.

Afterward the four sat down, and surprisingly it wasn't awkward. Simon sat next to Ayden, holding his hand, while Anya leaned against Katelyn, silently giving support. It was the reassurance they both needed while waiting for news. Even after hearing the doctor's assurance that Ian should

survive surgery easily, Ayden was still worried, but he did what he could to sound as calm as possible when he called to leave a message for Rachel, telling her she really needed to get to the hospital. Ian needed her. But Rachel didn't call him, and after an hour, she still hadn't made an appearance at the hospital; so he called again, sounding a little more urgent and thoroughly pissed off.

Just as he ended the second call, the doctor he had spoken to came into the room to tell them Ian had pulled through his surgery and that he was in recovery, where Ayden could visit for a few minutes.

Leaving Simon with Anya and Katie, he followed the doctor, who quietly warned him Ian actually looked worse than he was.

"There's a lot of bruising. His left eye is swollen shut, and he has some cuts on his face, but those are mostly superficial and should completely heal. The main concern now is the concussion and making certain there is no infection following surgery." But despite the warnings, Ayden was still shocked when he saw his brother battered, bruised, and unconscious in his hospital bed.

He looked like a stranger. There was no sign of Ian, and Ayden felt physically ill as he sat in the chair beside the bed, carefully touching Ian's hand, fearful that even a gentle touch might cause him pain. "Christ, Ian, what happened to you?" Whoever had done this, Ayden wanted to see them suffer the consequences; it was obvious to him that whoever responsible had intended to cause as much damage possible, and they could have easily killed Ian. *But why?* That was the question, but regardless the answer, there wasn't any

possible excuse or explanation for such brutality and viciousness.

Biting back tears, Ayden sat there for a moment before Ian stirred and moaned, struggling to open his swollen eyes.

“Take it easy, kid.” Ayden spoke softly. “It’s okay, Ian. Just relax.” He had no idea what Ian did or didn’t remember, but now wasn’t the time to get into it, Ayden decided, as Ian took a deep breath, which caused him to wince.

“Ayden....”

“Yeah, I’m right here.”

“I... warned her....” He winced again. When he spoke, his words were sluggish. “Mom... careful....” Whatever he was trying to say faded away as he drifted back to sleep. Ayden frowned, confused but also curious, wondering what Ian meant about Rachel. He wasn’t asking for her, because there was no reason for him to; she had never been of any comfort to anyone in the past, and Ayden doubted Rachel would come through for her son now. She couldn’t even be bothered to return a phone call. Just thinking about her apparent lack of concern made Ayden furious. He knew it wouldn’t do any actual good, but Ayden fully intended to once again call Rachel out as a complete and utter failure as a mother.

A nurse came in and ushered Ayden from the room, and when he stepped into the hall, Simon was waiting there.

Again, not caring who saw them, he went into Simon’s arms. “He looks horrible. God, it doesn’t even look like Ian in there.” He allowed a few tears to fall as he pressed his face tightly against Simon’s shoulder. He felt completely useless.

His brother was hurt. *Badly*. And there wasn't much he could do but wait and be there for Ian and pressure someone to find out who had beaten his brother and left him in some parking garage.

"I'm sorry. So sorry, baby. I wish there was something I could do."

"You are doing something. You're here. And I need you more than I can say."

"I'll always be here." Simon whispered. "Come on. Let's go check in with Anya and Katie and tell them what's going on." It would be a while before he could see Ian again, and Ayden nodded, holding Simon's hand as they walked back to the waiting room where Anya stood and came right to him, hugging him tightly.

Ayden told her what condition Ian was in, and she cried. She was as shocked as Ayden that something so horrible had happened to Ian. "Did he say anything?" Anya asked, and Ayden recalled his mentioning Rachel, which prompted him to call Rachel again and tell her, in clear terms, that she needed to get to the hospital. Now. If she didn't, Ayden threatened to cut off all her accounts. *Take that!* He knew such a threat would get her attention. Money was a language Rachel spoke fluently, and Anya smiled slightly as soon as he finished ending the message, and again they found themselves waiting.

An hour later Ayden was told he could see Ian again, and he tried to tell Anya, Katie, and even Simon that they could go home, but they refused.

“We’re staying,” Simon promised, and it was a relief for Ayden, knowing he wasn’t alone. He was still afraid for his brother. He looked so frail and weak it broke Ayden’s heart, and he tried to prepare himself for facing the sight again before stepping into the private room the doctors had secured for Ian. He didn’t want Ian to see or sense his upset, but as Ayden started to push open the door, he paused, hearing Rachel whispering in frantic tones.

“You just don’t say a word, Ian!” Her back was to the door, and Ayden peered inside to see her leaning over Ian’s bed. “I will handle this, so don’t you say a word, especially to Ayden, because you know he will overreact.”

“Mom....”

“Don’t try to argue with me. Just do as I say. I’m your mother.”

“About time you remembered that.” Ayden pushed open the door and stepped into the room, causing Rachel to spin round and face him, a stricken look on her face. “Nice of you to finally show up here, Rachel.” He knew his eyes reflected his disgust, but he didn’t care. Every gut instinct he possessed was screaming loudly, telling him that something serious was going on and that Rachel was somehow right in the middle of whatever had happened to Ian. And if that was the case, there would be hell to pay. Ayden would see to it. Rachel was obviously nervous, casting a glance at Ian, who wouldn’t look directly at her. He was looking around her at Ayden, aware of the tension between his mother and brother.

“Get out,” Rachel finally said, recovering herself. “I want some time alone with my son.” She tried to appear calm and in control, but Ayden knew better, and he shook his head.

“I don’t think so.”

“Ayden—”

“How are you, Ian?” Ayden moved farther into the room, pausing at the foot of Ian’s hospital bed.

“I’m not in a lot of pain. Doc has me on some strong stuff.” But he still looked like hell, and it broke Ayden’s heart.

“The doctors seem to think you’ll make a full recovery, but I’m guessing that you’ll be here for a few days.”

“Can’t say that sounds appealing.” Ian tried to smile but winced instead. “Tell me the truth. Do I look like I went a few rounds with Tyson or something?”

“Well, I’ll admit I’ve seen you look better.”

“No charming the ladies?”

“I think you’ll work the sympathy vote just fine.” Ayden smiled briefly. “The cops will be here to see you, kid.” He glanced at Rachel then, watching what appeared to be panic flare in her eyes, and he decided to push ahead a little. “I don’t want you to upset yourself, Ian, but they really want your help in finding whoever did this to you.” As he said it, Ian glanced at his mother and back to Ayden, looking uncertain—*afraid*—and reminding Ayden of a child, unsure and more than a little anxious.

“I think that’s enough, Ayden,” Rachel snapped. “Ian’s tired. I think he should rest, and you need to leave.”

“No.”

“Ayden—”

“No, Rachel. Not a chance. Not unless Ian tells me to, and I don’t think Ian wants me to leave him alone with you.”

“Don’t be absurd! I am his mother. He’s not afraid of me.”

“Maybe he’s not afraid of you, but I know my brother well enough to know he’s afraid of something, and I won’t stand for that.”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed, and Ayden knew the gloves were about to come off and any and all fake civility would go right out the window. “Fuck off, Ayden. Ian doesn’t need you. I know how to take care of him.”

“Since when?”

“You are such an arrogant bastard! God, you think you know everything. But you’re not as smart as you think.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Rachel sneered, and it wasn’t an attractive look for her. “You might think I’m stupid, but I know all about your wife and her ‘friend’ Katelyn Rivers.” It did surprise Ayden to hear that, but he didn’t let that surprise show, because that wasn’t the issue now, and he knew he had Rachel on edge.

“You don’t know anything, Rachel.”

“I know your father hated you, you twisted fag!”

“Mom!” Ian tried to sit up but sucked in a pained breath and sagged back against his stack of pillows.

“Don’t worry about it, Ian. It’s nothing she hasn’t said before.”

“And it’s true! Your father hated you! He hated—”

“Stop it, Mom.” Despite his injuries, there was real anger in Ian’s voice. “Enough. Ayden hasn’t done anything wrong, and I... damn it, leave him alone! He’s a better person than either of us, and I’m tired of you insulting him.”

“Don’t defend him, Ian.”

“Someone needs to.”

“Ian—”

“Just stop, Mom. Or else.”

“Or else what?” Rachel seemed to forget Ayden, turning to face her son.

“You know what.”

“Don’t you dare threaten me, you ungrateful little pissant.”

“Rachel.” Ayden’s voice held a warning.

“Stay out of this.” Rachel threw a glare at him. “This is between me and Ian.”

“Not anymore, it isn’t. *Understand?* Whatever is going on here, I’m a part of it now, and I want to know what happened to Ian and exactly how you factor into it.” He pinned her with a hard stare. “I heard you before I came in. Something isn’t right here. I can sense it, and I can see it when I look at Ian, so maybe one of you needs to tell me what’s happening.” He turned to his brother, a more understanding look settling on his face. “You know you can trust me, Ian; if you are in trouble, if Rachel has done something, whatever it is, you know you can tell me, and I will do whatever possible to make it right.”

“Ian, don’t you say a word. I am your mother!” Rachel seemed to think that mattered, as if that meant Ian should automatically side with her, but Ayden wasn’t so certain Ian saw things in the same light.

Drawing in a breath, carefully so as not to hurt himself, Ian looked from Ayden to Rachel and back again, clearly coming to a decision. “There are things you need to know, Ayden, and I need to tell you now. I just can’t keep this to myself. Please get my mother out of here, and then I will explain everything.”

Chapter Seven

IN THE end it took security to have a nearly hysterical Rachel removed from the room and thrown out of the hospital.

The commotion, of course, attracted attention, including Anya, Katie, and Simon, who all watched as Rachel was pulled away, ranting, cursing, and calling Ayden every name imaginable, and none of them flattering. It was not a pretty sight to see, but nothing she said upset Ayden. Rachel had said it all before, but Anya looked furious, and clearly Simon was beyond shocked when he came to Ayden's side.

"That's your stepmother?" He sounded disbelieving, and Ayden smiled ruefully.

"That's her."

"What a bitch," Katie observed without humor. "What the hell set her off?"

"This time? Ian wanted her thrown out so he can talk to me."

"What's going on, Ayden?" Anya looked worried. "Is he okay? Did Rachel do something to upset him?"

"Honestly I'm not sure what's going on, but there is certainly some sort of problem, and Rachel's at the heart of it."

Simon reached for his hand after Rachel was out of sight. “Are you okay?” His eyes were dark with concern, but Ayden nodded.

“I’m fine. It’s Ian I’m worried about. I can tell something has him tied up in knots.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I hate to ask—”

“Ayden....”

“Will you wait for me? While I talk to Ian?”

“I told you before, and I’ll tell you again; I’m not going anywhere. *Ever*. I’m afraid you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Thank God.”

Simon squeezed his hand, and Ayden took a breath before stepping back into Ian’s room to find his brother sitting up more in the bed.

“Listen, kid, if you’re tired or in pain, we can do this later—”

“No. Please, Ayden. It has to be now. I’m afraid I’ll lose my nerve.” He toyed with the edge of the sheet, glancing away from Ayden.

Hating that his brother was in distress, Ayden sat down in the chair beside his bed and waited, wondering what could possibly be coming. It had to be bad. Rachel’s reaction told him it was something serious, something that would create major problems for Rachel. And obviously it was difficult for Ian to throw Rachel under the proverbial bus. But maybe that was what needed to happen, especially if

Rachel was in some way connected to what had happened to Ian, and Ayden suspected that was the case.

“I know I screw up a lot, Ayden, and I... well, I know that as a brother I pretty much suck, and I want you to know I’m sorry.”

“Ian—”

“I mean it. I think about myself all the time. I know you’ve done a lot for me, and all I do is act like a brat.”

Ayden wasn’t certain what to say to that. He had never heard Ian talk like this before, and it was a little unnerving to say the least. “You’re my brother, and no matter what, I love you, so whatever is going on, I’m here.”

“It’s just... I’ve said some horrible things to you over the years. I accused you of selling out and being greedy because you wanted Ja’Von, but I want you to know I really don’t see you that way.

“And I’m not blind. I know what my mother is like.” He laughed bitterly. “Hell, everyone knows what my mother is really about. I know she never wanted me. And I know she was nasty to you, but I... I guess I always hoped she would change.”

“I’m sorry, kid. Really. You deserve better in a mother.”

“Maybe. I’m not a great person myself.”

“Come on—”

“But this time, this....” He waved a hand at himself. “I do a lot of stupid shit, but I didn’t bring this on myself.”

“I would never think you did anything to deserve someone beating the shit out of you, little brother.”

“I know. What I mean is... Christ, Ayden, I should have told you this a long time ago, but Mom begged me not to.”

“What is it? Come on, kid. Tell me.” Ayden encouraged him, resting a hand on his arm to try to comfort and reassure him as best he could. “I know Rachel is your mother, and I try to respect that, but if she’s done something that ended in you getting hurt, I need to know so I can try and make things right.”

Ian shook his head slowly. “I don’t know if you can. It’s a mess. I tried to tell her to go to you before now. I told her you would help. But she didn’t want you to know. Mostly because of her pride, I think.”

Curious, Ayden waited, sensing Ian needed to open up at his own pace, and Ayden intended to respect that.

“I know you’ve always wondered by how Mom blows so much money, and the fact is, the situation is worse than you think.”

“What does that mean?”

“Mom has a problem with gambling.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m afraid so.” Ian sighed. “I think it started small. Internet gambling. You know, those websites where you use your credit card to play? I think it was just sort of a hobby at first, but in time she ended up maxing out most of her credit cards, so she started to play real games. She goes to Vegas a lot. Atlantic City. A few times a month. And there are backroom games around town. I told her not to get tangled up with anything that seemed shady. I tried to warn her. But she didn’t listen, and things are really out of control now.

“She started borrowing money from some guys that are dangerous, and she keeps playing, thinking she’ll make a big win, but all she’s doing is digging herself in deeper with these guys, and I can’t make her understand that.”

“How much does she owe? How bad is it?”

“Last I heard, she’s in the hole about two hundred and fifty thousand.”

“Shit!”

“She pays some here and there, but....” He looked down at his hands. “She also keeps on playing, and really it just makes matters worse and worse, and one guy she owes has gotten kinda pissed off at her.”

The reality of what his brother was saying filled Ayden with a fury he had trouble controlling. “You’re telling me what happened to you.... You were beat up because Rachel has gotten herself into trouble, and someone beat you up to send her a message? Is that what this was about? Someone hurt you because of *her*? And she didn’t want you to tell me?” My God, it seemed there was no end to Rachel’s selfishness. She didn’t care that her son was in the hospital, as long as he didn’t somehow expose her secret problems. It disgusted Ayden. If he hadn’t hated the woman already, he certainly would have hated her now for dragging Ian into the mess she had made of her life, and there was no possible excuse Rachel could offer that would temper the anger Ayden was feeling.

“I was headed to my apartment after parking my car in the garage when these two guys came up to me.” Ian looked pale at the memory. “I knew the second I saw them I was in

trouble, and one of them said they were there because they had a message they needed me to give to my mother. Something about Mr. Owens wanting his money. Now. He didn't want excuses, just the cash, and after that.... Well, I don't recall much after that. I must have been knocked out quickly. I don't really remember anything until I woke up here in the hospital, right before some doctor told me they had to take out my spleen."

"God, Ian, you could have...." Ayden drew in a breath. "I'm sorry this happened to you, but I'm relieved that you've told me everything, and let me assure you I will make certain you're not targeted again."

"Ayden—"

"I'll fix this, kid. I don't know how yet. I need to dig up some more details and find out just how badly Rachel has fucked up, but whatever happens, you won't get hurt again."

"What about Mom?"

"Ian—"

"Look, I don't have any blinders on when it comes to her; I know she's selfish, and I know she isn't the greatest mother in the world or anything, but the fact is she's the mother I have, and I don't want her to get hurt."

"I understand that. I really do. And no, I have no use for Rachel, but I can respect that she is your mother. I know you love her, despite everything. And because you do, I will do what I can to keep her safe."

"Thank you. I mean it. I know she's a monster—"

“But she’s your mother.” Ayden sighed. “I want you to relax, to do whatever the doctors tell you to do, and concentrate on getting well while I handle everything. Okay? Somehow I’ll find a way that works out for everyone involved.” Not that it would be easy. It sounded like his stepmother was in a royal mess. It would certainly require some creative maneuvering, but there was nothing Ayden wouldn’t do for Ian’s sake. He needed protecting. As for Rachel, Ayden had to do what he could for her, because that’s what Ian wanted, and he didn’t want his brother to deal with guilt over Rachel’s current predicament.

Assuring Ian again that everything would be fine, Ayden left him to get some rest while he returned to the waiting room.

Alone with Simon, Katie, and Anya, Ayden told them everything Ian had shared with him regarding the mess his stepmother had created for herself and how Ian was pulled into it. Naturally, Anya was furious.

“So what are you going to do?” Simon asked, clearly amazed that Rachel was actually more troublesome than Ayden had believed.

“I’m not sure yet. I guess I should find out how bad the situation is. After that I’ll figure out how to clean this mess up.”

“Obviously you aren’t trying to fix this for Rachel’s sake,” Katie asked.

“No. I’m worried about Ian. I don’t give a damn about Rachel, but I can’t let anything happen to her, because he would blame himself.”

“Did Ian give you the name of the guy that Rachel’s in deep with?” Anya asked, sounding curious, and Ayden nodded.

“He just said the goons that beat him referred to the man as Mr. Owens.”

“Albert Owens.” That came from Katie. “He’s well known in certain circles, and he’s got a nasty reputation. He doesn’t react well when someone doesn’t pay him back. I hate to say this, but going after Ian just to send his mother a message is only the beginning of what Owens will do to get what he’s owed.”

“So I guess the best thing to do is give Rachel the money necessary to pay Owens off once and for all.” It wasn’t an idea Ayden liked, but he would do whatever he could to prevent Ian from being hurt again. “But the odds are she’ll just keep gambling. How can I protect Ian if Rachel doesn’t stop? God knows she’ll never listen to me. After the way she acted when she was tossed out of here, she hates me more than ever. Anything I say won’t make a difference. Rachel will ignore me for the sheer hell of it.”

“Maybe paying off Rachel’s debt outright isn’t the way to go.” Simon suggested.

“I agree. I think maybe you can work this situation to your advantage.” Katie sat down in the chair directly across from him. “I’ve looked over your father’s will, but the fact is, I can’t find a loophole. I wish I could. From what Anya’s told me, if anyone deserves Ja’Von, it’s you. But if you’re willing to maybe be just a little underhanded in dealing with Rachel, there’s a chance you can keep Ja’Von without having to stay married.” Despite himself and his decision to just walk away

from Ja'Von outright, Ayden found himself curious to at least hear what Katie might have in mind. Why not? He didn't have anything to lose. Regardless of the final outcome with Ja'Von, Ayden would do whatever necessary to be free to be with Simon, and he would do whatever he had to do to protect Ian from facing repercussions for his mother's actions.

He listened to what Katie had in mind, and he had to admit her ideas had some merit, so much so that Ayden found himself considering what she suggested. It was a plan that could free him from Rachel—finally—and hopefully provide Rachel with motivation to keep her personal problems safely away from Ian. And it was a little underhanded. But what did that matter? There was no denying that Rachel acted in an underhanded manner when she felt it was in her best interest, so maybe she deserved to have the tables turned on her for a change.

Still, Ayden was uncertain as he turned to Simon. "What do you think?" He wanted very much to know Simon's thoughts, and more importantly, he didn't want Simon to think he would put anything above their being together and Ian's safety, because he wouldn't. He knew exactly what he wanted: a life with Simon. But if he could keep Ja'Von, that would certainly be a major plus, but Ayden had come to understand that he could live without the company. What he had no desire to live without was Simon.

"I think you were actually a little too *kind* when you first described Rachel to me, and I think you and Ian are both lucky you survived having that woman in your life, because she is just about as bad as they come." He clasped Ayden's hand in his. "That being said, I know you are ready to do

whatever it takes to be with me, and I love you so much for that, but if there is any possible way you can keep Ja'Von, I think you should try. And what Katie has in mind seems like it might be plausible. And having seen Rachel and heard what she's capable of doing, I really do not want to see that woman win."

"In that case...." Ayden looked to Katie. "Can you draw up the paperwork?" It wasn't her field, but she seemed eager to help.

"I'll have it to you by tomorrow afternoon," Katie promised with a smile that Ayden could only call predatory.

"In the meantime"—Anya looked at Ayden with concern—"maybe you should go home for a while and get some rest. I can stay here with Ian. He's asleep now, and my guess is he will be for a while."

"What if Rachel comes back?"

"I don't think Rachel will get past security after her last performance." Simon assured him with a smile. "And I think Anya's right. You need to get away from here for a while. It's been a long day, and you've had a lot thrown at you."

"I don't know...."

"Well, I do know. I want to get you out of here for a few hours. You need to rest, maybe get something to eat. Ian will be fine."

"I guess. But if we wakes up—"

"I'll tell him you'll be back soon," Anya promised. "Now get out of here. I'll stand guard, and if Rachel does try to see Ian, I'll make sure she's tossed out again so fast her freakin'

head will spin.” It was a promise Ayden knew she would keep, and a few minutes later, he and Simon left the hospital together hand in hand. He didn’t care if anyone saw; he was emotionally drained, and physical contact with Simon eased the anxiety and fear. It amazed him that they had known each other only such a short time; their connection seemed much deeper. Ayden didn’t want to think about what he would do if he didn’t have Simon with him as he faced the situation with Rachel and Ian and the mess Rachel had created.

Once they reached Ayden’s apartment, he went to take a shower while Simon ordered Chinese that arrived minutes before Ayden reappeared in the living room, suddenly starved and utterly exhausted.

“Sit and eat,” Simon ordered with a smile, and Ayden didn’t protest, because he didn’t have strength or the will. “After you eat, we’ll get you some rest, and after that we can go back to the hospital.”

“I had no idea you could be so bossy. It’s kinda a turn-on.”

“Well, I’m starting to get the impression, *Mr. Responsibility*, that you tend to take such care of everyone else that you forget you need to take care of yourself along the way, so I guess that I will have to appoint myself your official caretaker.”

“Think you’re up for such a demanding challenge?”

“I’m pretty sure I can handle whatever you throw at me.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Ayden grinned. “Of course, it goes both ways; if you take care of me, I get to take care of you in

return.” He had never had a relationship like that before; he had never been with anyone who made him laugh and smile the way Simon did, and Ayden loved it. There was a natural balance between them; Simon brought out a different side of him, one that wasn’t overly intense and serious. How could that ever be a bad thing? He liked the person he was with Simon in his life, which made keeping Simon in his life a priority. Whatever happened with Ja’Von wasn’t nearly as important or precious as what he shared with Simon. No way would Ayden sacrifice that; his eyes were open now, thanks mostly to Simon, and he was grateful that fate had thrown someone so wonderful into his life to teach him about the things that truly mattered.

They ate mostly in silence, and when they were finished, Simon insisted on cleaning while Ayden lay down.

A few minutes later, Simon came into the bedroom, and Ayden sighed happily when the man he loved stretched out beside him.

“Thank you, by the way,” Ayden whispered softly into Simon’s hair.

“For what?”

“For being there today. I was out of my mind with worry. Having you there is the one thing that kept me sane.”

“I wanted to be there, baby. I always will be. Caretaker, remember? I just wish there was more I could do.” Simon lifted his head to look down at him. “When I heard the horrible things Rachel was saying about you, it made me furious. She’s even worse than I expected. I just want to see that woman completely out of your life, because no one has

any right to call you names and say such awful things.” He sounded truly offended, which touched Ayden deeply, and he smiled, brushing his fingers through Simon’s dark hair, losing himself in the brilliant brown eyes that offered warmth and compassion and an endless supply of love.

“Rachel is Rachel. She’ll never change. And what she said today isn’t anything she hasn’t said to me before.”

“She has no right.”

“Maybe not, but that’s never stopped her. And I’m tired of dealing with her. It seems like she and I have had this pissing contest going on from the moment we met, and I was so focused on outwitting her when it came to keeping Ja’Von....” He released a bitter laugh, shaking his head at his own foolishness. “I’ve spent enough time concerning myself with Rachel, but that’s over with, because what matters to be now is you.” Sliding a hand to the back of Simon’s neck, Ayden pulled him into a kiss, and Simon responded by melting closer, opening his mouth to Ayden’s probing tongue. He ran a hand down Ayden’s bare chest, over his stomach. Ayden arched into the touch, pulling Simon even closer as the kiss grew more heated, filled with a mutual hungry longing that demanded satisfaction.

Quickly, quietly, they undressed each other, and then Simon pushed Ayden flat on his back and straddled his hips. Eyes locked, Simon lowered himself into Ayden’s cock slowly, *teasingly*, and Ayden allowed his worries and fears to fall away.

In that moment the only thing that mattered, the only thing that had any real meaning was the man above him and the love that bonded them.

Chapter Eight

AS KATIE promised, she had the paperwork Ayden needed ready by noon the next day, which left him faced with the unpleasant ordeal of confronting his stepmother and backing her into a corner.

He had discussed what he was about to do with Simon and Anya, and he had included Ian in the loop. It wouldn't have been fair leaving him unprepared for Rachel's reaction. But Ian didn't seem worried; he just wished Ayden the best, admitting that he hoped Ayden would work everything out for the best interest of everyone involved. *Including Rachel.* No, she wasn't going to win Mother Of The Year anytime soon, and yes, she could be truly unpleasant, but at the end of the day, she was his mother, and Ian didn't want to see her suffer. And while Ayden couldn't by any means say the same, for his brother's sake, he was willing to do what he could to make certain Rachel managed to land on her feet.

With any luck, Rachel would see the logic of what he was suggesting without too much of a fight, but Ayden wasn't holding his breath.

Once the papers were delivered to him, he called Rachel and told her he needed to see her right away. "It has to do with what Ian told me yesterday." He didn't go into detail beyond that; he knew Rachel was already on edge. She would show up just to hear exactly what Ian had told him

and to do her version of damage control. Rachel was predictable. Ayden had no doubt she already had two dozen excuses lined up to try to make the situation she was in seem a lot less dire than it actually was. But he knew better. Katie had done a little digging for him, and the reality was Rachel was in way over her head, something she likely knew but wouldn't want to admit, especially to Ayden.

Still, despite the endless animosity between them, Rachel arrived at Ja'Von an hour after Ayden called her.

She came into the office looking angry, minus the usual flair of makeup and diamonds, her hair pulled back.

It was somewhat startling to see her looking frail, almost vulnerable, but Ayden wasn't fooled by her appearance; he knew what Rachel was deep down, and he knew she wouldn't just accept what he had in mind.

"Let's skip the part where you try to deny what Ian told me and give me all the usual insults, and let's get down to business."

Rachel looked a little surprised by his direct attitude as she came into the room, pausing in front of his desk. "What did Ian tell you?"

"I think you know the answer to that, Rachel."

"Ayden—"

"Everything. He told me everything. Well, at least he told me everything he knew, but I've discovered that you're in more trouble than even Ian realizes, which says something, since he is now in the hospital because of you." Ayden glared at her openly. "Do you realize he could have been killed? Do you care? He's your son! And you allowed someone to target

him as a way to get to you, and there is no excuse for that, Rachel. None! And I know you don't care what I think, but I'm disgusted. Ian is in the hospital because you did something stupid. Something that is dangerous and foolish, but despite everything, Ian is still worried about you, and he doesn't want to see you hurt.

"Me? I don't give a damn about you. I think you know that. And I know the feeling is more than mutual. But that's not the point now. My personal opinion doesn't matter." He took a breath, trying to calm his temper; he didn't want to lose sight of what was at stake and what he wanted very much to accomplish. "That being said, I'll tell you exactly what I know—I know you have a gambling problem. I know you are in over your head. I guess things snowballed out of control. And stupidly you turned to some very dangerous men for money. Albert Owens, for example, the bastard who had Ian beaten up to send you a message, but he isn't the only one you owe money to, is he?"

She glanced at him, her eyes hard. "You already know the answer to that, don't you, Ayden? You seem to think you know everything. But to answer your question, yes, I happen to be in something of a bind—"

"A bind? Really? Rachel, altogether, you are in debt nearly three hundred thousand, and these aren't men who tend to take kindly to people who can't pay."

"It's not as bad as it seems!"

"How so? I guess I know now where your money goes. It's to try to pay these guys and to finance more games."

"You have no right to judge me!"

“When your actions result in my brother getting beating so bad he ends up in the damn hospital, yes, I have the right to judge you!”

“I didn’t believe he would target Ian!”

“But after he did, after Owens had two men beat Ian so badly he needed surgery, you didn’t want Ian to tell me what was going on.”

“Of course I didn’t want you to know, you arrogant prick,” Rachel snapped. “I knew you would lord this over me. And that’s what you’re doing! You called me here so you could rub this in my face, and I won’t stand for it.”

“Actually I called you here to tell you I can help you get yourself out of this mess.”

“And why would you do that?”

“Two reasons—one, Ian doesn’t want you to get hurt; and two, because I fully intend to get something I want in return for saving your sorry ass.” Ayden allowed himself a smile. “What I am about to do is underhanded, and it’s certainly more than a little manipulative, but I figure that you will certainly be able to see the wonderful irony.” He sat down behind his desk while Rachel stared, her eyes filled with fury, but beyond the fury, it was obvious she was curious to at least hear what Ayden wanted to say to her. And that was a start. He had her attention, and even more than she realized, he held the winning hand, because he could sense that she was on edge and rightfully afraid.

After a moment Rachel sat down. “I admit I might have a problem. I hate saying that to you, of all people. And maybe getting involved with Owens wasn’t smart, but I thought I

would be able to easily pay him back. But I couldn't. So I borrowed from others to cover what I owed Owens, and I... well, maybe things did get a little beyond my control, but I never believed Ian was in danger. I know you don't believe that. In your eyes I'm the worst mother ever. And in a lot of ways, maybe I am. But the fact is, I never wanted children. I knew I didn't have it in me to care for them, but your father wanted another child, and I gave him one because it seemed like the best way to tie him to me, and I thought if Spencer and I shared a child, it would distract him from you.

"You have no idea what it was like for me." Her voice was soft, stripped of all hate and bitter sarcasm. "I know you don't believe it, but I did love your father. In my own way. But the love of your father's life was your mother, and I was... well, I guess I was a replacement or just a placeholder, and no one allowed me to forget it."

"That's why you hated me so much?"

"In the beginning. I hate you now because you're an arrogant bastard. I hate you because you were Spencer's favorite child. I hate you because you're Ian's believed brother. I hate you for a dozen different reasons."

"And I'm a fag. Let's not forget that."

"Ayden, please." She rolled her eyes. "I don't care who you fuck. Seriously! I have no issue with you being gay."

"The names you call me—"

"Piss you off." Rachel finished drily. "Frankly, I never understood why Spencer was upset about you being gay, and I never tried to understand it, because... because you being gay drove a wedge between the two of you."

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m tired. Maybe I’m afraid. I just don’t know.”

“Rachel—”

“This isn’t some heart-to-heart, after-school special, warm-and-fuzzy moment, Ayden, because I still hate you.”

“I hate you too, Rachel.”

“As long as we’re clear on that, what do you have to say?”

“It’s pretty simple.” Ayden reached for the paperwork Katie had prepared for him. “First of all, I will give you the money to pay off everyone you owe outright, so you will be free and clear of all your debt.”

“That’s too generous not to come with strings attached.”

“Oh, there are strings.” Ayden smiled coolly. “One string—and this is for Ian’s sake—is you get help for your problem, and you get it as soon as possible. Ian cares about you. He took a beating because of your gambling problems, and that can’t happen again, but on the same note, it would shatter Ian if someone you owed attacked and hurt you.”

“This help? How does that work?”

“There are various programs, and I am sure we can find you one.”

“What else?”

“Since you have nothing in savings, in addition to the twenty thousand you get each month from Dad’s trust, I’ll

give you a one-time lump sum of fifteen million dollars, but there is a catch to that too.”

“Of course.” The sarcasm was returning.

“The money will be monitored to make certain you aren’t gambling it away.”

“I’m not a child!”

“No, but you are a woman with a problem.” Ayden reminded her. “I’m not trying to be a controlling asshole—”

“Yet somehow you manage to be one.”

“I just want to make certain you don’t fall into old habits.” He went on as if he hadn’t heard her insult. “It’s a generous offer. Add that to what you get each month, and you are set for life, and you can do whatever you want, aside from gambling.”

“There’s more. I know it.” Rachel glared at him. “There’s something in all of this for you, so just get to the point.”

Ayden rested his arms on his desk casually. “There is something in it for me. You see, I’m in love with someone.”

“Excuse me?”

“His name is Simon. He’s a wonderful man.”

“So... what? Are you... are you telling me you want....” Her eyes widened, and then they were dark with bitter anger. “You son of a bitch! I get it! All of this makes sense now. You want to divorce Anya to be with this man you say you’re in love with, but if you get a divorce, you’ll lose Ja’Von! And you don’t want that! Naturally. Oh my God! You expect me to what? Just turn around and hand Ja’Von over to you

without any kind of a rightful fight? Are you that out of your mind?

“Fifteen million? You think fifteen million is generous?” She laughed. “Do you have any idea how much I can get for Ja’Von? It will make fifteen million look like pocket change! You’re not stupid enough to think I will settle for fifteen million, are you?” She was working herself up to her usual state of haughty arrogance, and Ayden allowed her a moment to enjoy thinking she had regained her footing.

“Actually, yeah, I expect you to take the fifteen million, sign Ja’Von over to me, and be very happy about it.”

“Really? And why would I do that?”

“Several reasons.”

“Do share.”

“Well, since you asked.... For one, if you don’t, I will make certain everyone knows all about your little misdeeds.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh, just think how it will make such wonderful gossip; everyone will be talking about your gambling and how it resulted in your son getting beaten senseless.” Ayden shrugged casually. “I know you hate it when people talk about you. It will damage your image. I doubt it will be a stain that will easily go away. I’m sure some of your so-called friends will turn from you and not look back.

“Also, I won’t give you the money you need right now to pay off your debts, and I will do everything within my power to delay any sale of Ja’Von, which will leave you in your current bind for who knows how long.”

“You can’t—”

“I have connections within the industry that you can’t imagine, and I will call in every favor anyone owes me.”

“You bastard!”

“So you’ve said many times.” He pushed a stack of papers across the desk. “Here’s what you need to do: sign control of Ja’Von over to me, and once the papers are filed—before the end of business today, if you’re quick—I will transfer the fifteen million into your account, and I will have the money you owe Owens and his friends delivered to them. Hate me all you like, Rachel, but this is a good deal, and it will save your ass, so sign the papers now.”

“This is blackmail.”

“Is it? I suppose you can all it that. But you can walk away. No one’s stopping you.”

“You damn well know....” Cursing, she drew in a breath and released it slowly, clearly in a struggle for control. “I hate you for this! You’re not a noble person, Ayden. You are using all of this to get what you want.”

“Something you have done many times, Rachel.”

“I could walk away. Take my chances. You can’t delay my selling Ja’Von forever.”

“No. But I can tie it up for six months or more, and I am sure Owens and his friends will not be willing to wait until your legal woes clear up before getting what they are owed, so just sign the damn papers.” He was tired now; he had laid everything on the line, and Rachel knew she was over a barrel, but she didn’t want to admit it. “Look at it this way,

Rachel—thanks to my father’s will, you got to watch me struggle for five years to live a lie, and I am sure you found a great deal of enjoyment in that. But it’s over. Anya and I are divorcing. I will be with the man I love, and I can spend my free time making life hell for you, or you can sign the contract and walk away from your current problems clear and free.”

Confident that he had made his point, he sat back and waited, allowing the silence to stretch between them.

Finally Rachel reached for the papers and a pen, and Ayden smiled as she went carefully through the document, signing in the proper places.

“I think you made the wise decision.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Classy.”

“Well, I guess you win.” She threw the papers on the desk and stood. “I suppose you’re expecting me to say thank you, but that won’t happen. I still hate you. More so now than ever, I want you to know that.”

“Your hatred is noted and returned, but you and your hate are no longer my concern, Rachel, so hate away.”

“The money—”

“It will be transferred before the end of the day, and I will have someone pay a visit to Owens and the others and pay them off.”

She nodded at that, clearly still pissed as she turned and stalked to the door, and Ayden sighed in relief, unable to believe it had actually worked. It was over. Ja’Von was his,

and soon he would be free to be with Simon. And Ian would be safe from Rachel's mistakes. It had taken five years to reach this point, but finally being there was beyond thrilling, and Ayden felt like he had finally gained full control of his life.

At the door, Rachel paused and looked back at him. "If it wasn't for keeping Ian safe, I wouldn't have taken the deal." Before Ayden could respond, she was out the door, and Ayden shook his head. She almost sounded sincere. Ayden wanted to believe she was. For Ian's sake, he wanted to believe there was more to Rachel than met the eye, but it was a little late in the game for him to buy into her act. Either way, it didn't matter. If Rachel wanted to try to mend her relationship with her son, that was up to her, but Ayden doubted it would be easy for her after so many years of neglect.

Shaking Rachel-related thoughts aside, he gathered the papers, deciding he would deliver them to Katie personally. After that, he would head to Simon's place for a surprise visit and a chance to celebrate their newfound freedom.

Epilogue

Two years later

NERVOUSLY, Ayden paced the length of the waiting room while Simon, Ian, and Gigi watched him.

“Bro, you’re making me dizzy. Sit! You pacing isn’t gonna make this go by any faster, and Katie promised to come and get us as soon as the baby makes her appearance.”

“Ian’s right, love.” Simon held out a hand to him. “Sit down. I’m nervous too, but all we can do now is wait.” Reluctantly Ayden reached for the outstretched hand, allowing Simon to tug him into the seat beside him.

Ayden sat down dutifully. *Damn it!* He knew they had a point; pacing wasn’t doing anyone any good, but he had never been very good at just waiting, and this was a unique situation in more ways than one. Anya was currently in labor with Katie at her side, which made sense, as Katie was her wife, but the baby Anya was delivering was his and Simon’s as much as Katie’s and Anya’s.

When Anya announced that she and Katie wanted a child, Ayden wasn’t surprised, but she followed up that little announcement by explaining that she and Katie wanted him to be the biological father.

“Of course, you will be in his or her life; we figure this kid can have two mothers and two fathers and be ahead of the game, parent-wise.”

Ayden discussed the possibility with Simon first, and naturally Simon supported the idea completely. He thought it was brilliant. He loved kids. He loved the idea of raising a kid. Sure, it wasn't a typical situation, but what did that matter? Their child would be showered with love and affection and attention.

Once Anya was pregnant, all four began making baby plans. Anya and Katie had moved into an apartment in the same building as Simon and Ayden, and Ian was thrilled at the prospect of being an uncle.

In the last two years, Ian had matured a great deal. He was in college and working part-time at JaVon. And he and Gigi—what an unexpected couple that was—were talking about moving in together in a few months. Ayden couldn't believe it. Ian had turned his back on his friends who partied all the time, he was learning to take certain things in life more seriously, and Gigi had helped him settle down in a dozen different ways. She had a calming effect on Ian much the way Simon did with Ayden; as different as he and his brother were, it turned out they each needed someone to help keep them balanced and focused. Ayden was grateful every day that Simon had fallen into his lap and into his life.

The matching silver-and-garnet bands they each wore on their left hands were outward testaments to their love and devotion.

“It shouldn’t be much longer.” Simon lifted Ayden’s hand and kissed it. “And then we can see Miss Abigail Diana.”

“I really love that name.”

“I know. I’m glad Anya suggested using your mother’s name.”

“God, Si, we’re gonna be parents.” Ayden grinned. “Is that insane? We’re about to have a little person in our lives.”

“Between the four of us, I think we can manage it.”

“I hope so. I hope I’m a better father than Spencer was.”

“Oh, Ayden, there is no doubt in my mind that you will be wonderful, so just put any fear you have aside.”

The confidence that Simon had in him was reassuring, and Ayden held to it as he glanced at Ian, who was deep in conversation with Gigi. “Did I tell you that he heard from Rachel? She’s in England. She called to tell him she’s getting remarried.”

“Seriously? Should we send the guy some kind of warning?” Simon was only half kidding, and Ayden knew it.

“I think I’ll stay out of that hornet’s nest, if it’s all the same to you.”

“True. Rachel’s not around to bother us. No need to borrow trouble.”

“Exactly. And who knows? Maybe she’ll be happy. I know she and I will never be friends or close to it, but she really cleaned up her act.” Not that she’d had a choice. Ayden hadn’t really given her one when it came to her gambling addiction. “I just know I’m glad she’s moved on and

we have a life that is all ours.” They were happy, happier than Ayden had ever thought he could or would be; he had Simon and his extended family, and Ja’Von was still a success. Soon he could add father to the list of accomplishments. He was truly blessed. Maybe more so than he deserved, but he wasn’t going to question it; he was just going to thank his lucky stars and never lose sight of what he had and how far he had come. From famine to feast. Funny how his life had completely changed thanks to turbulence literally knocking Simon off his feet and into Ayden’s lap.

He was lost in the memory of that first incredible encounter when Katie charged into the waiting room.

“Eight pounds and four ounces!” she shouted. “You’ve got to see her. She’s a beauty! She has to be the most beautiful baby ever born.” Not waiting for anyone to react, Katie was gone again, presumably returning to Anya’s side as the four that had been waiting jumped to their feet and Ayden threw himself into Simon’s arms.

Relief swept through Ayden that the labor was over and both Anya and the baby were obviously okay.

“Oh God, Simon....” Ayden didn’t hide his tears as Simon kissed him.

“I know. I know. I’m excited too. I can’t believe this.”

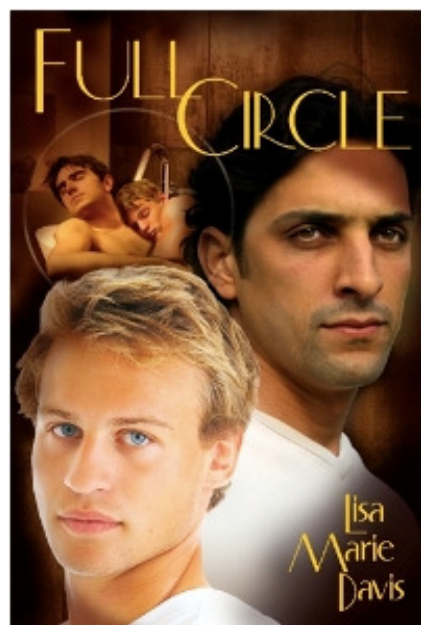
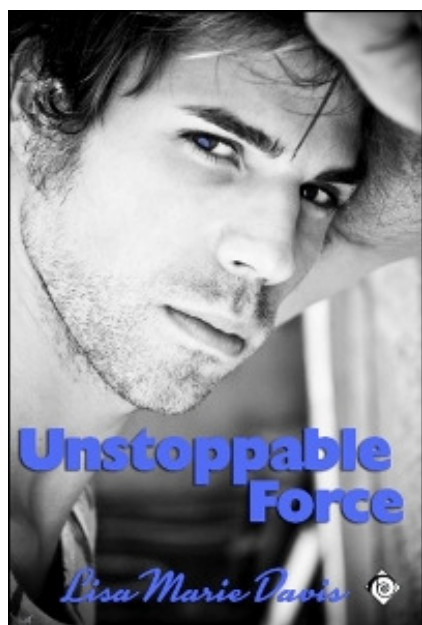
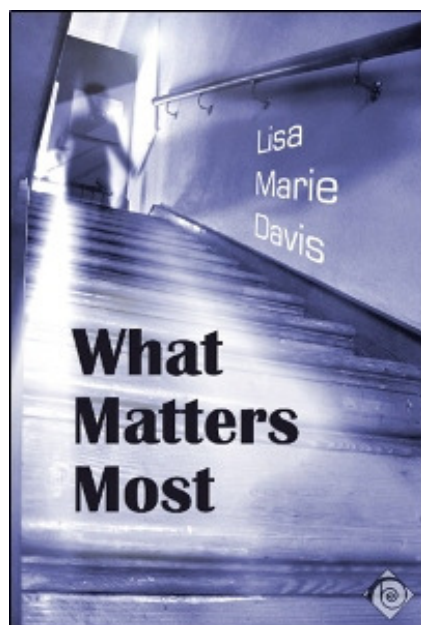
“We should—”

“Go see this stunning little girl.” Simon smiled. “We should. Ian and Gigi have already left, so we better hurry if we want a chance to hold our daughter.” He squeezed Ayden’s hand, and together they left the small waiting room, both of them grinning, filled with happiness and love.

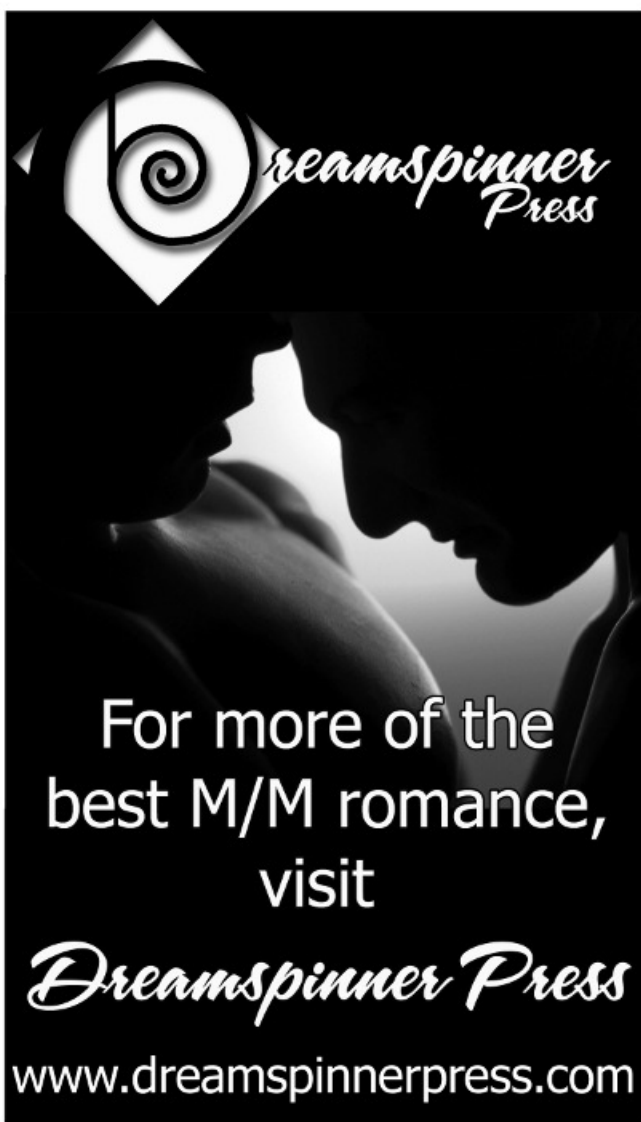
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